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978-0-521-88412-9 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Excerpt

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Thoughts on the Occasion of  
Mr. Johann Friedrich von Funk's Untimely Death

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## Thoughts on the Occasion of Mr. Johann Friedrich von Funk's Untimely Death

Highborn wife of the cavalry captain,  
Gracious Lady!

[2:39]

If people living amidst the turmoil of their practical affairs and diversions were occasionally to mix in serious moments of instructive contemplation, to which they are called by the daily display of the vanity of our intentions regarding the fate of their fellow citizens: thereby their pleasures would perhaps be less intoxicating, but their position would take up a calm serenity of the soul, by which accidents are no longer unexpected, and even the gentle melancholy, this tender feeling with which a noble heart swells up if it considers in solitary stillness the contemptibleness of that which, with us, commonly ranks as great and important, would contain more true happiness than the violent merriment of the flippant and the loud laughing of fools.

But thus the greatest crowd of human beings mixes very eagerly in the throng of those who, on the bridge that Providence has built over a piece of the abyss of eternity and that we call **life**, run after certain bubbles and do not trouble to take caution for the planks, who allow one after another to sink beside each other into the depths whose extent is infinity and by which they themselves, in the midst of their impetuous course, are eventually engulfed. In the portrayal of human life, a certain ancient poet brings forth a stirring breath by describing the newly born human being. The child, he says, at once fills the air with sad whimpers,

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[2:40] as befits someone who must enter into a world where so many hardships await him. Only in the sequence of years does this human being connect with the art of making himself miserable the art of hiding it from himself with a blanket that he throws on the sad elements of life, and cultivate a flippant carelessness about the amount of ill that surrounds him and as it were inexorably finally drives him back to a much more painful feeling. Although he dreads death most of all ills, he still seems to pay very little attention to the example of it among his fellow citizens, unless closer ties particularly wake his heedfulness. At a time when a raging war opens the bolts of the dark abyss, so as to allow all affliction to break forth over the human race, one sees very well how the common sight of hardship and death instills a cold-natured indifference into those who have been threatened by both, so that they have little heed for the fate of their brothers. Only when in the quiet stillness of civic life, out of the circle of those who either closely concern us or whom we love, who had as many or more promising hopes as we have, and who have been attached to their intentions and plans with the same zeal as we are, only when these, I say, according to the decision of God, who omnipotently rules over all, are taken in the midst of the course of their endeavors; when death in peaceful stillness nears the sickbed of the infirm; when this giant, before which nature shudders, reaches the sickbed with slow steps, to embrace him in iron arms; only then is the feeling of those who otherwise dampen it with diversions truly awakened. A melancholy feeling speaks out of the interior of the heart that which in an assembly of Romans was once heard with so much applause because it is so in accordance with our common perception: **I am a human being, and what befalls human beings can also happen to me.** The friend or relative says to himself: I find myself in the turmoil of business and in the throng of life's duties, and my friend just recently also found himself in the same, I enjoy my life quietly and without worry, but who knows for how long? I amuse myself with my friends and seek him among these same friends,

Yet he is held fast in that cheerless place  
 By him who lets nothing remain [to us]  
 In eternity's powerful arms.

– Haller<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Albert von Haller (1708–77), from his “Uncompleted Poem on Eternity” (1736), lines 14–16. This translation is taken from the complete translation of this poem by Arnulf Zweig in *Philosophical*

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These serious thoughts arise in me because of the early death of your dignified son, gracious woman, which you now so rightly mourn. As one of his former teachers, I feel this loss with grievous sympathy, although I can, surely, hardly express the extent of the sadness that must affect those who were linked with **this hopeful young man** through closer bonds. Your grace will allow me to add to these few lines, through which I strive to express the respect that I have entertained for my former pupil, some thoughts that arise in me in my current state of mind. [2:41]

Every person forms his own plan of his destiny in this world. Skills that he wants to gain, honor and leisure in the future that he expects from them, lasting happiness in married life, and a long line of joys or of ventures constitute the images of the magic lantern that he ingeniously draws and plays in vivid succession in his imagination; death, which puts an end to this shadow play, appears only in the dark distance and is made obscure and unrecognizable by the light that is shed over the more pleasant places. During these reveries our true fate leads us along completely different ways. The lot that will really be granted to us seldom looks similar to what we promised ourselves, in every step that we take we find ourselves deceived in our anticipation; nevertheless the imagination goes about its business and does not tire of drawing up new plans, until death, which still seems to be far away, suddenly brings the whole game to an end. If the person is brought back by understanding from this world of fables, of which he is himself creator through imagination and in which he so gladly resides, to that which providence has truly designed for him, he is thereby put into confusion by a wondrous contradiction that he encounters there and which brings his plans entirely to naught, by presenting to his comprehension insoluble riddles. Budding merits of hopeful youth often fade prematurely under the weight of serious illnesses, and an unwelcome death strikes down the entire plan of hope on which one had counted. The man of skill, of merit, of wealth is not always the one to whom providence has set the farthest end to his life in order fully to enjoy the fruits of all of these. The friendships that are most fond, the marriages that promise the most happiness, are often mercilessly torn by premature death; meanwhile poverty and misery together pull a long thread on the dress of the Fates and many only appear to torment [2:42]

*Forum* 33.3 (2002): 304–11. The addition of “to us” is from the original version of Haller’s poem. Kant misremembers “Der nichts zu uns zurücke läßt” as “Der nichts zurücke läßt.”

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themselves or others by living so long. In this apparent contradiction, the supreme ruler nevertheless distributes his fortune to each with a wise hand. He conceals the end of our destiny in this world in inscrutable darkness, makes us busy with drives, consoled by hope, and, by the happy ignorance of the future, [keeps us] just as constantly thinking of aims and plans when they will soon all come to an end as if we stood at their beginning:

That each may fill the circle mark'd by Heav'n.  
 – Pope<sup>2</sup>

Among these considerations the wise (although how seldom one such is found!) directs attention primarily to his great destiny beyond the grave. He does not lose sight of obligation, which is imposed by his position, which Providence has designed for him. Rational in his plans, but without obstinacy; confident of the fulfillment of his hope, but without impatience; modest in wishes, without dictating; trusting, without insisting; he is eager in the performance of his duties but ready in the midst of all these endeavors to follow the order of the Most High with a Christian resignation if it is pleasing to Him to call him away from the stage where he has been placed, in the middle of all these endeavors. We always find the ways of Providence wise and worthy of worship in those parts where we can understand it to some extent; should they not be more so, where we cannot understand? A premature death of those for whom we had much flattering hope gives us fright; but how often this can be, rather, the greatest grace of heaven! Wasn't the misfortune of many a person primarily in the delay of death, which was much too belated to make an end at the right time, after the most laudable performances of life?

The **hopeful youth** dies, and how much do we believe to be lost through such an early loss? Only in the book of destiny does it perhaps read differently. Seductions that have already arisen from afar in order to dash a not yet well-established virtue, afflictions and tribulations, which the future threatened, this blissfully happy one, whom an early death led away in a blessed hour, has escaped all of these; meanwhile friends and relatives, not knowing the future, mourn the loss of those years that they themselves imagine would have someday crowned the life of this family member with glory. Before I close these few lines, I want to draw a small

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Pope (1688–1744), from his *Essay on Man* (1733–4), l.i.85.

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sketch of the life and character of the **blessedly deceased**. That which I cite is known to me by the communication of his trusted tutor, who mourns him fondly, and from my own acquaintance with him. Yet how many are the good characteristics that are nobler the less they strive to fall openly on the eyes and that are known only to him who sees into the core of the heart!

Herr **Johann Friedrich von Funk** was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, 1738 into a distinguished noble family in Kurland. From childhood, he never enjoyed full health. He was brought up with great care, showed much diligence in study, and had a heart that was created by nature to be formed to noble qualities. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1759, he came, with his younger brother, to this academy under the guidance of their private tutor. He submitted himself with all willingness to the exams of the then dean and brought honor to his diligence and the instruction of his tutor. He attended the lectures of the counselor of the consistory and Professor Teske, who is at the present time Rectoris Magnifici of the university, and likewise attended the lectures of Doctor of Jurisprudence Funck and my own, with an exemplary sedulousness. He lived withdrawn and quietly, through which he still also retained the little strength of his body, which was inclined to emaciation, until near the end of February of this year when he was gradually so weakened that neither the nursing and care that were given him nor the diligence of an adept doctor could any longer preserve him; so weakened that on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May this year, after he had prepared himself for an uplifting end with the fortitude and ardent devotion of a Christian, with the attendance of his trusted pastor he gently and blessedly passed away and was fittingly buried at the cathedral here.

He was of gentle and calm character, affable and modest toward everyone, kind and inclined toward universal benevolence, zealously solicitous in order to cultivate himself properly to the advantage of his house and his fatherland. He had never grieved anyone except through his death. [2:44] He was eager to have unfeigned piety. He would have become an upright citizen of the world, except that the decree of the Most High willed that he should become one in heaven. His life is a fragment that leaves us much to have wished for, of which we have been deprived by early death.

He would deserve to be represented as an exemplar to those who want to honorably leave behind the years of their upbringing and youth, if emulating a silent service appeals to those of fickle mind as much as

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the falsely shimmering qualities of those whose conceit pursues only an illusion of virtue without minding the essence of it. He is much mourned by those to whom he belonged, by his friends and everyone who knew him.

These, **gracious lady**, are the traits of the character of your formerly in life rightly so **beloved son**, which, so poorly they may be drawn, nevertheless renew the melancholy that you feel far too much over his loss. But these very bemourned qualities are those that bring no small solace; for only to those who carelessly place the most important of all intentions out of sight can it make no matter in which condition their family is consigned into eternity. I strain myself with the effort to set forth to **your grace** the extensive reasons for solace in this grief. The humble renunciation of our own wishes, when it pleases the wisest Providence to make a different decision, and the Christian longing for the one blessed goal which others before us have reached, are capable of calming of the heart more than all reasons of a dry and feeble eloquence.

I have the honor with the greatest respect to be,

Highborn Lady,  
 Gracious wife of the captain of cavalry,

Your Grace's

Königsberg,  
 The 6<sup>th</sup> of June, 1760.

Most obedient servant  
 I. Kant.

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## Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime



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Observations  
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[2:205]

By M. Immanuel Kant

Königsberg, by Johann Jakob Kanter, 1764

[first edition]

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*Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*

**First Section**

[2:207]

On the distinct objects  
 of the feeling for the sublime and  
 the beautiful

The different sentiments of gratification or vexation rest not so much on the constitution of the external things that arouse them as on the feeling, intrinsic to every person, of being touched by them with pleasure or displeasure. Hence arise the joys for some people in what is disgusting to others, the passion of a lover that is often a mystery to everyone else, or even the lively repugnance that one person feels<sup>1</sup> in that which is completely indifferent to another. The field for observations of these peculiarities of human nature is very extensive and still conceals a rich lode for discoveries that are as charming as they are instructive. For now I will cast my glance only on several places that seem especially to stand out in this region, and even on these more with the eye of an observer than of the philosopher.

Since a human being finds himself happy only insofar as he satisfies an inclination, the feeling that makes him capable of enjoying a great gratification without requiring exceptional talents is certainly no small matter. Stout persons, whose most inspired author is their cook, and whose works of fine taste are to be found in their cellar, get just as lively a joy from vulgarities and a crude joke as that of which persons of nobler sentiment are so proud. A comfortable man, who likes having books read aloud to him because that helps him fall asleep; the merchant to whom all gratifications seem ridiculous except for that which a clever man enjoys when he calculates his business profits; he who loves the opposite sex only insofar as he counts it among the things that are to be enjoyed; the lover of the hunt, whether he hunts fleas, like Domitian,<sup>2</sup> or wild beasts, like A—: all of these have a feeling which makes them capable of enjoying gratification after their fashion, without their having to envy others or even being able to form any concept of others; but for now I do not direct

[2:208]

<sup>1</sup> *empfindet*

<sup>2</sup> Domitian was Emperor of Rome from 81 to 96 CE. According to Suetonius, “[a]t the beginning of his reign he used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catch[ing] flies and stab[bing] them with a keenly sharpened stylus”; *The Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, rev. edn London: Loeb Classical Library, 1930, Book VIII, vol. II, p. 345.