

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



IMMANUEL KANT
*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and
Sublime and Other Writings*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Series editors

KARL AMERIKS

Professor of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame

DESMOND M. CLARKE

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University College Cork

The main objective of Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy is to expand the range, variety, and quality of texts in the history of philosophy which are available in English. The series includes texts by familiar names (such as Descartes and Kant) and also by less well-known authors. Wherever possible, texts are published in complete and unabridged form, and translations are specially commissioned for the series. Each volume contains a critical introduction together with a guide to further reading and any necessary glossaries and textual apparatus. The volumes are designed for student use at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and will be of interest not only to students of philosophy but also to a wider audience of readers in the history of science, the history of theology, and the history of ideas.

For a list of titles published in the series, please see end of book.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

IMMANUEL KANT

*Observations on the Feeling of the
Beautiful and Sublime and
Other Writings*

EDITED BY

PATRICK FRIERSON

Whitman College

PAUL GUYER

University of Pennsylvania

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

PATRICK FRIERSON



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521711135

© Cambridge University Press 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-88412-9 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-71113-5 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings
Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	page vii
<i>Chronology</i>	xxxvi
<i>Further reading</i>	xxxviii
<i>Note on the texts</i>	xlii
“Thoughts on the Occasion of Mr. Johann Friedrich von Funk’s Untimely Death” (1760)	3
Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1764)	11
Remarks in the <i>Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime</i> (1764–65)	65
“Essay on the Maladies of the Head” (1764)	205
Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality (1764)	221
M. Immanuel Kant’s Announcement of the Program of his Lectures for the Winter Semester, 1765–1766 (1765)	251
Herder’s Notes from Kant’s Lectures on Ethics (1762–64)	263
Selected notes and fragments from the 1760s	305
<i>Index</i>	338

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

Kant in the 1760s

On April 22, 1764, Immanuel Kant turned 40 years old, reaching what would turn out to be the midpoint of his life. From his humble beginnings as the son of a father who was a harness maker and a mother who was a devoted Pietist, Kant had risen through school to graduate in philosophy from the University of Königsberg; and 1764 marked the year in which Kant was first offered a professorship, the highest honor of his academic guild. By the end of his life, forty years later, Kant had become the most influential philosopher in Europe. This influence was due primarily to a series of *Critiques*, the first of which – Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* – was not published until 1781, when Kant was already 56 years old. In the wake of that “all-crushing” book, Kant developed a philosophical system to make sense of our understanding of the world and moral obligations, an a priori system within which pure reason held sway.

But in 1764 Kant was not offered a professorship in metaphysics or logic, but in rhetoric and poetry. In this year he published a short book – *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* – and an essay (“Maladies”), both written in a playful and entertaining style that one would expect from a teacher of rhetoric. He also published an elegant though more analytical *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality*, conceived as a potential “Prize Essay” for the Berlin Academy. These works take up the study of the world “more with the eye of an observer than of the philosopher”

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

(2:207).¹ They show a Kant who is younger, more empirical, more playful, and more romantic than the Kant who would emerge over the next several decades. In fact, starting with the Russian occupation of Königsberg in 1758, Kant attended regular dinner parties, and his elegance and wit earned him the title “the life of the party.”² Kant had friends from a wide variety of social classes and regularly attended dinners and parties with military officers, bankers, merchants, noblemen and noblewomen. During this period he even warns his young student Herder “not [to] brood so much over his books, but rather follow his own example.”³

Nonetheless, Kant did not *wholly* give up brooding over books. In the 1760s he was immersed in the latest philosophical developments in Germany and beyond. He was intensely engaged in debates between religious Pietist followers of Augustus Crusius and rationalist “Wolffians” (heirs of Leibniz). He was sympathetic with a growing movement of *Popularphilosophie* that sought a less abstract and more applicable philosophy, a movement exemplified by Christian Thomasius, who advocated philosophy conducted in “an easy manner, comprehensible to all rational persons of whatever station or sex.”⁴ British philosophers were also increasingly important: David Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* was first translated into German in 1755; Francis Hutcheson’s *A System of Moral Philosophy* in 1756; and Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* was made popular through a review written by Moses Mendelssohn in 1758. Kant personally knew a translator of Locke’s works, and one of his closest friends in Königsberg was an English merchant who kept Kant up to date on the latest gossip about British philosophers. Of these, Hume was to have the most lasting influence on Kant. In his *Prolegomena* (1783), Kant writes, “the remembrance of David Hume was the very thing that many

¹ Throughout, references to Kant’s works are to the Academy Edition volume and page number. These page numbers are available in the margins of the present volume (and in the margins of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, from which many of the selections in this volume are taken). Consistent with this overall practice, throughout this introduction I cite *Remarks* in accordance with the Academy Edition pagination. Marie Rischmüller’s 1991 edition of *Remarks* is a preferable scholarly source but is not as widely available as the Academy Edition. The translation of *Remarks* in this volume includes both Academy Edition and Rischmüller pagination.

² Quoted in John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 85–6.

³ Quoted in Manfred Kuehn, *Kant*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 116.

⁴ Quoted in Zammito, *Kant, Herder*, p. 9, translation revised.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

years ago first interrupted my *dogmatic slumber* and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy” (4:260). With respect to moral philosophy, Hutcheson and Shaftesbury had a significant influence on Kant (see *Inquiry* 2:300). And British *philosophy* was not all that Kant was reading. His notes contain references to British novels by Fielding and Richardson, Alexander Pope’s poetry, and the English *Spectator*, a daily magazine written in England by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele during the years 1711–12.

More important than these British influences, however, was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau’s novel *Julie* was published in 1761 and both *Emile* (a book tracing the moral and intellectual development of a boy from childhood to adulthood) and *The Social Contract* (laying out Rousseau’s political philosophy) were published in 1762. Kant certainly read these works by the time he published *Observations* (see 2:247). But when Kant writes his *Remarks* in 1764–5, we find his most sustained and explicit engagement with Rousseau. He refers explicitly to Rousseau or his works (especially *Emile*) over twenty times, and infuses his discussions of human nature with Rousseauian themes and insights. In these *Remarks*, Kant also explains the profound effect Rousseau had upon his conception of himself as a philosopher:

I myself am a researcher by inclination. I feel the entire thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed further in it, as well as the satisfaction at every acquisition. There was a time when I believed this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. *Rousseau* has set me right. This blinding prejudice vanishes, I learn to honor human beings, and I would feel by far less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration could impart a value to all others in order to establish the rights of humanity. (20:44; see, too, *Herder Lectures* 27:39)

In addition to reading and socializing, Kant spent much of his time during the 1760s teaching. Although he was not a “Professor,” Kant was a “Magister” at the University of Königsberg; he was permitted to teach university courses, but received no salary from the university. Kant collected fees from students, and so his income depended wholly upon the frequency and popularity of his lectures. As a result, he devoted extensive time to preparing lectures. He taught between sixteen and twenty-four

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

hours a week, in courses ranging from physical geography and ethics to mathematics and metaphysics. Kant was an excellent lecturer. Herder, Kant's student during these years, writes: "Jest, wit, and caprice were at his command – but always at the right time so that everyone laughed. His public lecture was like an entertaining conversation. He spoke about his author, thought on his own, and often beyond the author . . . I never noticed the smallest trace of arrogance."⁵ Kant's teaching was not merely a way of earning money. In his "Announcement" – a sort of advertisement for courses, printed at Kant's expense – Kant articulates a vision for teaching, in which pupils first exercise their judgment and only gradually "learn to philosophize" (2:306). Heavily influenced by *Popularphilosophie*, Kant first and foremost promises to teach each student "something which he can understand, on account of its easiness; . . . and . . . something which he can use, because of the frequency with which it can be given application to life" (2:309–10). Kant offered his students the world-wisdom (*Weltweisheit*)⁶ necessary for becoming a good world citizen in such a way that "elegance and appreciation of the beautiful in nature and literature were more important . . . than dry book knowledge."⁷

The Kant of the 1760s, in his breadth of reading, his style of teaching, and his published work, was well suited for a professorship in rhetoric. But Kant turned down this position, waiting six more years before finally being awarded the professorship in logic and metaphysics that he held for the rest of his life and that enabled him to found the "Critical Philosophy" for which he is now famous. We cannot be certain why Kant held out for a professorship in metaphysics and logic when the position in rhetoric and poetry was offered, but it clearly reflects his ambivalence, even during this period of elegance and appreciation for literary pursuits, about his own proper role as a philosopher. This ambivalence appears most strikingly in Kant's teaching throughout this period. On the one hand, his emphasis on practical world-wisdom led him to develop a new course in physical geography (see "Announcement"), to which he eventually added pragmatic anthropology. On the other hand, Kant taught traditional philosophical disciplines such as logic or metaphysics in a

⁵ See Kuehn, *Kant*, pp. 129–30.

⁶ On the term *Weltweisheit*, see Zammito, *Kant*, Herder, pp. 18–23.

⁷ Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 133.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

rationalist way, while seeking even in these courses to instill independent philosophical thinking. Kant's publications show a similar ambivalence, including both rigorous philosophical treatises in metaphysics, physics, and logic,⁸ and popular works, such as *Observations*. Kant would later identify the age of 40 as the earliest age at which one might establish a "character" (7:294), a fixed way of living in the world. The writings in this volume show that by age 40, Kant had not yet established the character that would eventually define him. Instead, these are years of Kant's greatest philosophical vacillation and ambiguity, but they are the years out of which his character would be born.

The texts

The texts collected in the present volume hint at what Kant might have become had he embraced the more elegant and popular style of philosophizing that clearly attracted him during the 1760s. *Observations* is a text written "more with the eye of an observer than of a philosopher" (2:207). Kant's "Essay on the Maladies of the Head," like *Observations*, is light-hearted and elegant, aimed for the general audience of the *Königsberg Scholarly and Political Newspaper* in which it was published. The "Announcement" and lecture notes from Kant's course in moral philosophy show the manifestation of this popular emphasis in his teaching, and *Inquiry*, while more rigorous than *Observations*, shows a similar concern. Finally, the *Remarks* and *Notes* help to show both the directions in which Kant's popular philosophy was taking him and his own struggle from this popular emphasis towards what would eventually become his identity as a Critical philosopher.

Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime represents the pinnacle of Kant's popular writing.⁹ While all of the writings collected in this volume were written by Kant during a period in which he aimed at popularity and accessibility, *Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime* is

⁸ See, for example, the works collected in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770* (translated and edited by David Walford in collaboration with Ralf Meerbote), Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁹ This paragraph and the next borrow from Paul Guyer's introduction to this work from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, Pedagogy*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

the most polished. Kant starts with a general discussion of the distinction between feelings for the sublime and for the beautiful. To anyone familiar with either Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* or Kant's own later treatment of the beautiful and sublime in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, it will be clear why Kant entitled his book *Observations* rather than *Philosophical Enquiry*. Kant's observation that "the sublime *touches*, the beautiful *charms*," or his distinction between "the terrifying sublime, . . . the noble, and . . . the magnificent" hardly measure up to the standards of a worked-out aesthetic *theory*. But Kant *uses* these distinctions between the beautiful and the sublime to offer up a set of observations about human nature that fits well into the tradition of empirical reflections on human nature that includes such works as Hume's "Of National Character."

Observations has four parts. The short first section uses examples to distinguish the beautiful from the sublime. The second applies this distinction to human beings, both in general and with respect to different "temperaments" or personalities. In this second section, Kant develops his account of "true virtue" as "the feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature" (2:216). The third section focuses on differences between the sexes, emphasizing that although "each sex will unite both" beauty and sublimity, "the fair sex . . . [is] characterized by the mark of the *beautiful*" while men "could lay claim to the designation of the *noble sex*" (2:228). The fourth and final section distinguishes between different "national characters" in terms of beauty and sublimity, claiming, for example, that "the *Italians* and the *French* . . . most distinguish themselves in the feeling of the *beautiful*, but the *Germans*, the *English*, and the *Spaniards* . . . in the feeling of the *sublime*" (2:243). This is also the section (see more below) in which Kant includes reprehensible generalizations about non-European races.

During the period in which he worked on his *Observations*, Kant wrote his *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* in response to a contest announced in June of 1761 by the Berlin Academy, asking whether

the metaphysical truths in general, and the first principles of *theologiae naturalis* and morality in particular, admit of distinct proofs to the same degree as geometrical truths; and if they are not capable of such proofs, one wishes to know what the genuine nature of their

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

certainty is, in what degree the said certainty can be brought, and whether this degree is sufficient for complete conviction.¹⁰

Kant did not win the prize (that honor went to Moses Mendelssohn), but his entry was judged to be “extremely close to winning.”¹¹ *Inquiry* shows both the range of influences on Kant’s thinking and the direction of Kant’s thought at this time. The issue at stake in the Berlin Academy’s question was of fundamental importance in the eighteenth century, both on the Continent and in Britain. In Germany, Wolffian rationalist moral philosophy proposed an affirmative answer to the Academy’s question. In Britain, the debate between moral rationalists such as Samuel Clarke and sentimentalists such as Francis Hutcheson and David Hume was raging fiercely. In his essay, Kant does not – as Mendelssohn did – come down solidly on Wolff’s side. With respect to morals, for example, he affirms the “formal ground of obligation” (2:299) of Wolff’s perfectionist and rationalist ethical theory, while also claiming that Hutcheson’s “moral feeling” provides “a starting point” for working out the “material principles of obligation” (2:300). In the end, *Inquiry* does not resolve the fundamental issue between rationalists and sentimentalists, but it does show the struggle that reappears in Kant’s attempt to balance principles and feeling in *Observations*.

Kant’s unpublished reflections during this period, many of which are found in *Remarks in the Observations*, show the evolution of this struggle towards the rationalist moral theory that will eventually be formulated in *Groundwork*. In 1764, when Kant published his *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*, he had his own copy of this work published with interleaved blank pages. During 1764–5 Kant used this copy to write down an unedited, unpolished record of his emerging thoughts in aesthetics, ethics, anthropology, and even metaphysics, physics, and cosmology. Kant seems to have intended to publish some *Remarks* in some form (see, e.g., 20:116), but as a whole they are fragmented and unorganized. One fortunate result of this is that one sometimes gets striking insight into the way in which Kant thinks through multiple issues at once (see 20:178–79 for an example of the range of material that can be collected on a single page). What is more, *Remarks* records Kant’s *evolving* thought, not only in shifts from earlier to later remarks, but in

¹⁰ Walford, *Theoretical Philosophy*, p. lxii.¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. lxiii.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

frequent places where he writes and then crosses out something or where he inserts later notes in the midst of earlier ones. (One of the most striking examples of this is Kant's struggle at 20:162 to find the right terminology for what will eventually become the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives.) Overall, these *Remarks* are sufficiently rich to reward study not only for the detailed positions worked out in them but also because they show Kant's movement from the popular *Observations* to a more systematic philosophy. Moreover, these notes reflect the most developed record available of Kant's engagement with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and they include some of Kant's most extensive reflections on the relationship between men and women.

While *Observations* and *Inquiry* were meant for a wider scholarly public and *Remarks* was a set of purely personal reflections, the Herder lecture notes reflect Kant's semipublic working-out of moral philosophy in the context of his classroom teaching. As Kant explains in his "Announcement," his course in moral philosophy was based on a textbook by the rationalist Alexander Baumgarten, but Kant supplemented this textbook with his own observations, drawn largely from Hutcheson and others. It provides a structured context for Kant to offer remarks on a variety of topics in moral philosophy, from piety and religious tolerance to friendship, sexual ethics, and lying. Johann Gottlieb Herder (1744–1803), the transcriber of these lecture notes, studied medicine in Königsberg between 1762 and 1764. During this time, he was an admirer of Kant and one of his best students, but precisely because Herder was such an original thinker during this time, his notes are not entirely reliable. He revised these notes at home and thus may have introduced ideas of his own that vary from Kant's own teachings. Nonetheless, this text provides a glimpse of Kant's teaching and covers topics discussed in *Remarks* and elsewhere. The notes also provide more details about topics on which Kant only briefly touches in other works of this period, especially the proper role of God in moral philosophy.¹²

In addition to these major works, this volume also contains several shorter texts. "Thoughts on the Occasion of Mr. Johann Friedrich von Funk's Untimely Death" (1760) is a letter that Kant wrote to the mother of

¹² This paragraph borrows from J. B. Schneewind's "Introduction" to Herder's lecture notes from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

one of his students. It shows Kant applying his philosophical reflection in one of the most intimate and difficult of situations, comforting a mother in the death of her son. Kant's "Essay on the Maladies of the Head" (1764), written for publication in the *Königsberg Scholarly and Political Newspaper*, is in part a response to the increasing popularity of a Polish religious fanatic who had recently appeared outside of Königsberg. Kant uses this occasion to develop a general but popularly accessible taxonomy of mental illness and an apologia for life in the state of nature. Kant's "Announcement" is one of many short pamphlets printed at his own expense to drum up students for his classes. Finally, several Notes and Fragments from the 1760s show the continuing development of Kant's reflections, especially in ethics and anthropology.

Kant's early ethics

The ethics that Kant developed throughout the 1760s is not identical to the moral theory developed twenty years later, but it will prove helpful to look first at that more famous moral theory before turning back to Kant's early ethics. In the moral theory laid out in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant defends the notion of a "categorical imperative" according to which one must "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (4:421) or "act so that you use humanity . . . always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (4:429). Kant develops this categorical imperative in the context of "a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical" (4:389), and insists in *Groundwork* that to carry out "an action from duty is to put aside entirely the influence of inclination" (4:400). When under moral laws, we are not compelled to act by contingent inclinations, and thus "we take ourselves as free" (4:450). The moral theory that Kant developed in the 1780s thus has an a priori foundation, precludes inclination from a determining influence in morality, and emphasizes freedom and autonomy.

This Kantian morality has had a profound impact. J. B. Schneewind has called the ethics of *Groundwork* "one of the two or three most important contributions that moral philosophers have made to our culture."¹³ Even

¹³ J. B. Schneewind, "Why Study Kant's Ethics?," in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Allen Wood, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 83.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

if Kant's emphasis on a priori moralizing is primarily of interest to moral philosophers – where it continues to be of substantial interest – this emphasis brought with it a conception of morality that freed morality from dependence upon religious revelation and hedonistic calculation and thereby opened up a new sense of the inestimable dignity of human beings. The notion that human beings are and ought to be *autonomous* – Kant's term for the self-governance involved in all moral action – is not merely an important philosophical option in ethics, it has impacted more down-to-earth discussions in such areas as medical ethics, human rights, and contemporary political theory.

But the ethical theory of Kant's *Groundwork* has never been without detractors. The range of criticism of this work is broad, but for the purposes of introducing Kant's early ethics, two criticisms of his *Groundwork* are particularly apt. First, *Groundwork*'s rationalism quickly came under fire as insufficiently attentive to the fullness of human nature, and in particular, to the importance of social feelings. Schiller, a romantic critic of Kant who saw his own aesthetic philosophy as following through on the spirit if not the letter of Kant, sought to combine *Groundwork*'s emphasis on the dignity of humanity and of morality with an attention to beauty and grace and thereby to attend more adequately to the *entirety* of the human condition. Second, and relatedly, the morality of *Groundwork* was criticized – most famously by Hegel – as an “empty formalism” incapable of generating concrete ethical duties. Since these early criticisms, Kant's ethics has continued to be criticized for being overly rationalist and abstract. And Kant and his followers continued to respond to these objections.¹⁴

In many respects, however, Kant's ethical reflections in 1762–63 are closer to those of critics such as Schiller and Hegel than to those of *Groundwork*. In his *Inquiry*, Kant takes up the question of how much “distinctness and certainty” morality is capable of. There he raises “obligation” as a key ethical concept and aims for “fundamental principles” and moral certainty (2:298). Kant insists, as in his later ethics, that the “principle chosen must, if it is to be a rule and ground of obligation, command the action as being immediately necessary and not conditional

¹⁴ For Kant's most focused response to Schiller, see *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (6:23n).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

upon some end" (2:298). But *Inquiry* shares with later critics a concern with empty formalism. Kant insists that the "supreme rule of all obligation must be absolutely indemonstrable" because "in the absence of material first principles, nothing flowed from the first formal principles" (2:299). Moreover, these necessary material principles of morals are tied, in *Inquiry*, to *feeling*: "The faculty of experiencing the good is . . . an unanalyzable feeling of the good" (2:299; see too 27:16). Kant ends with both an injunction – "The ultimate fundamental concepts of obligation need to be determined more reliably" – and a clue as to how he will fulfill that injunction: "Hutcheson and others have, under the name of moral feeling, provided us with a starting point from which to develop some excellent observations" (2:300).

Unsurprisingly, then, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* explicitly ties morality to "feeling." Moreover, this feeling is not the purely abstract feeling of respect for the moral law on which Kant focuses in *Groundwork*, but a feeling for both beauty and dignity (2:217). Unlike the narrow focus of *Groundwork*, *Observations* discusses ethics in the context of human nature, and in particular of "feeling of the finer sort" (2:208). Kant uses this fine feeling for the beautiful and sublime to discuss "moral qualities," among which "true virtue alone is sublime," though other moral qualities can be "beautiful" (2:215).

For this early Kant, there are four basic motivations for human actions: self-interest, the love of honor, "goodhearted drives" such as sympathy and complaisance, and action in accordance with "principles" (2:227). Kant hardly discusses self-interest in the context of morality, since it has little place in establishing moral worth. In itself, the love of honor is a mere "simulacrum of virtue" and "not in the least virtuous" (2:218), though it "is most excellent" as "an accompanying drive" (2:227; cf. 27:44). Sympathy and complaisance are "beautiful and lovable" moral qualities, but not true virtue. True virtue "can only be grafted upon principles, and it will become the more sublime and noble the more general they are" (2:217; cf. 27:14, 46). Only such *principled* virtue counts as "genuine virtue" (2:218), though sympathy and complaisance are "adopted virtues" insofar as they "have a great similarity to the true virtues" and, when properly subordinated to principles, contribute to "the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue" (2:217). Even principled virtue, moreover, is a kind of feeling. In the closest he comes to invoking a categorical

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

imperative in his early ethics, Kant claims that true virtue “is the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*,” which grounds “universal affection” and “universal respect” for human beings (2:217).

Many key elements of the moral philosophy of *Groundwork* are already present here. As in *Groundwork*, virtue takes place “only when one subordinates one’s own particular inclination” to principles (2:217). And Kant’s insistence that neither sympathy nor complaisance constitute “true virtue” anticipates his infamous claim in *Groundwork* that actions based on “an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them” have “no true moral worth” (4:398). Kant’s descriptions of the nature of moral principles in *Observations* even anticipate his later formulations of the categorical imperative. The most sublime virtue is based on general principles (2:217), a claim echoed later in Kant’s “universal law” formulation of the categorical imperative. And the feeling for the dignity of human nature that manifests itself in a universal respect anticipates the formula of humanity, which is based on the fact that “humanity . . . is that which alone has dignity” (4:435).

But *Observations* also differs from *Groundwork* in many of its central points: the ethics of *Observations* is *not* a priori; feeling and inclination *do* play a role in grounding ethics; and freedom is not a central concept. The empirical nature of ethics is clear not only because Kant discusses ethics in the context of “observations” about human beings, but also in the account’s overall structure, where virtue is defined in terms of moral qualities that human beings in fact find sublime. Like British moral philosophers such as Hume and Smith, Kant analyzes moral responses that people *actually* have. This empirical dimension becomes clear in Kant’s discussion of the sexes, where a difference in the moral qualities that each sex finds appealing in the other dictates a different set of moral demands for each (2:228).¹⁵ The empirical nature of ethics in *Observations* also finds expression in Kant’s failure to distinguish between explaining the content of ethical principles and accounting for their motivational force, between what he would later call pure moral philosophy and moral anthropology (4:388; 6:217). One result of pulling those two disciplines together is that feeling is more prominent in the ethics of *Observations*

¹⁵ I thank Brian Cutter for bringing to my attention the implications of Kant’s account of the differences between the sexes for assessing the empirical nature of Kant’s method in this early work. I discuss Kant’s account of women in more detail below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

than in *Groundwork*.¹⁶ True virtue is not only identified in terms of the moral quality that is *felt* to be the most sublime in human nature, but is itself a “feeling” or an “inclination” (2:217). And other, less general feelings (like sympathy) play a necessary but subordinate role in “the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue” (2:217).

Even the similarities between *Observations* and *Groundwork* are not as similar as they initially appear. The emphasis on principle is belied by the fact that the principles “are not . . . rules, but the consciousness of a feeling” (2:217). And while *Observations* agrees with *Groundwork* that sympathy and complaisance are not equivalent to true virtue, *Groundwork* adds that they are “on the same footing with other inclinations” (4:398), while *Observations* describes these feelings as different in kind from and *closer* to true virtue than other merely selfish inclinations (2:218–19). Even “true virtue,” in *Observations*, comes in *degrees*: it is “more sublime” the “more general it is” (2:217). Unlike the all-or-none account of virtue in *Groundwork*, *Observations* allows for different types and degrees of moral “worth.” And Kant’s insistence in *Observations* that true virtue involves both respect *and love* for both the dignity *and beauty* of human nature goes beyond *Groundwork*’s exclusive focus on respect. Finally, the emphasis on abstract principle that *Groundwork* highlights as the essence of morality comes under suspicion in *Observations* (2:227). While important elements in Kant’s early ethics are continuous with his *Groundwork*, the overall thrust of *Observations* treats human nature as fundamental to ethics in a way that privileges feeling and gives equal weight to the beauty and the dignity of human beings. In many respects, this more balanced conception of ethical life fits better with critics of Kant’s later ethical thought than with the picture that many have found in *Groundwork*.

Given the differences between *Groundwork* and his early ethics, it is clear that Kant’s ethical thought underwent change. The *Remarks*, a set of private notes written shortly after *Observations*, offers important insights into *how* that change took place. Naturally, many remarks are

¹⁶ Feeling is not absent from Kant’s mature moral philosophy (see e.g. 4:401–2, 5:73–89). But the role of feeling in *Observations* is significantly different from its role in Kant’s later moral philosophy. Morally relevant feelings in *Observations* are not limited to respect for the dignity of human nature, but also include love for what is beautiful. Moreover, feelings of sympathy and complaisance, while not strictly moral, still have distinctively moral worth (2:215, 218) and are thereby fundamentally different from self-interested or honor-seeking inclinations. And feeling in *Observations* is at least a potential *basis* for moral content, not merely a motivator of moral action.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

consistent with *Observations* and *Inquiry*. Kant makes extensive use of the notion of moral feeling (see 20:26, 85, 135, 168), and *Remarks* is, like *Observations*, focused on specifically *human* ethics (see 20:22, 24, 46–48, 153; see too 27:13, 45, 62). But Kant also used these unpublished remarks to experiment with different ways of thinking through the implications of his ethical reflections, and one can already find the beginnings of his later moral theory in these experiments. Perhaps most importantly, in *Remarks* Kant begins to explicitly *contrast* moral obligation with the aesthetic categories of beauty and nobility (see 20:119, 127) and to emphasize a conception of obligation in terms of universality and necessity (20:117, 146, 173).

One key theme that permeates both *Observations* and *Remarks* and that becomes central to *Groundwork* is Kant's abhorrence of consequentialism. This shows up briefly in *Observations* (see 2:226–27) and even more explicitly in the *Inquiry* (2:298), but it is a consistent theme in *Remarks* (e.g., 20:65, 118, 138, 146, 155–56, and 168). As Kant experiments with different approaches in *Remarks*, he never entertains the possibility of ethics as merely a means to happiness (either personal or societal).¹⁷ Moreover, *Remarks* gives important clues regarding motivations for Kant's later emphasis on the idea of a will as “good in itself” (20:150). Kant worries that “everything passes by us in a river,” laments “changeable taste,” and asks, “Where do I find fixed points of nature that the human being can never disarrange, and that can give him signs as to which bank he must head for?” (20:46). Kant aims for a “certainty in moral judgments . . . [that] is just as great as with logic” (20:49), in sharp contrast to his emphasis on the indemonstrability of ethics in *Inquiry* and the Herder lecture notes (2:298–99; 27:5, 16). The concern with certainty and stability helps Kant to see the importance of a good will that is “absolute perfection, whether something is effected by it or not” (20:148). And this fits with Kant thinking of “the objective necessity of actions” themselves as “either conditional or categorical” (20:156),¹⁸

¹⁷ This is not to say that moral virtue will not be conducive to well-being, but only that such well-being is not a criterion of it (cf. 20:150). For a fuller discussion of Kant's (shifting) anti-consequentialism in the 1760s, see Patrick Frierson, “Two Kinds of Universality in Kant's Early Ethics,” in *Critical Guidebook to Kant's Observations and Remarks*, ed. Susan Meld Shell and Richard Velkley, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Elsewhere, Kant moves even closer to the language of *Groundwork*. In one telling remark, he first writes, “The necessity of an action as means to a possible end is *problematic*, [as a means] to an actual end it is a necessity of *prudence*, the categorical necessity is *moral*” (20:168). Struggling to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

with only the latter constituting true obligation. *Remarks* thus provides the rudiments of Kant's eventual argument that a will that is good without qualification must act in accordance with a categorical imperative (*Groundwork* 4:402–03). Kant even gives the example of a lie as an action the permissibility of which is hard to settle in terms of “conditional” goodness, but easy to settle in terms of judging what is “categorically good” (20:156), an example that he uses to the same purpose in *Groundwork* (4:402–03).

A second key theme that shows the transition towards *Groundwork* lies in the universal nature of morality. In *Observations*, Kant insists that one's conduct is more sublime (and thus more virtuous) the more general its principles (2:217). But whereas *Observations* primarily conceived of this universality in terms of the “application” of “benevolence” to all human beings (2:221), *Remarks* begins to conceive of universality in terms of avoiding “contradiction” when one supposes “the same action in others” (20:156; see too 20:67, 145–46, 161). In seeing the universality involved in having a good will in terms of whether that will would “invalidate itself if . . . taken universally” (20:67), Kant leaves behind the vague generality of *Observations* and moves considerably closer to the rigorous a priori Formula of Universal Law¹⁹ that he articulates in *Groundwork*. Moreover, Kant's interest in universality forces him, in *Remarks*, to follow up on a concern raised in *Observations* in a way that begins to lead him away from moral feeling as a basis for ethics. In *Observations*, Kant noted that “as soon as feeling is raised to its proper universality, it is sublime, but also colder” (2:216). He reiterates that concern in *Remarks* (20:22, 25, 173; see too 27:64–67), but begins to resist grouping moral feeling in the same category with other feelings, and ascribes to it a “kind of joy . . . entirely different” from other pleasures (20:145). Kant even suggests that the “feeling” could be a kind of intellect: “Moral position. Either through instinct, sympathy or pity. Or through intellect” (20:169, emphasis added; see too 27:42).

A third key theme introduced in *Remarks* is the importance of human freedom. In *Observations*, the word “choice” (*Willkühr*) does not even

find the right terminology, he then adds “hypothetical” to refer to the necessity of the problematic end, but then crosses it out and adds “conditional” instead.

¹⁹ “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (*Groundwork* 4:402).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

occur, and “freedom” plays no significant role.²⁰ In *Remarks*, by contrast, Kant goes so far as to call freedom the “topmost principium of all virtue” (20:31), and Kant’s account of freedom anticipates at least two key roles that it plays in his later philosophy. First, Kant conceives of morality as fundamentally a matter of acting freely. Moral feeling is defined as a “feeling of pleasure . . . with respect to . . . ourselves as an active *principium* of good and evil through freedom” (20:145) or a “feeling of the perfection of the [free] will” (20:136). Anticipating his later “Formula of Autonomy,”²¹ Kant explains that “the greatest perfection” is “to subordinate everything to the free faculty of choice” (20:144), and he identifies perfection of the will with being “in accordance with the laws of freedom” (20:136). Moral perfection is complete freedom, both in that only by being morally perfect can one be truly free and in that what it is to be morally perfect is to follow the laws of freedom. Second, Kant connects freedom to the dignity of human nature, such that what one respects when one respects another is precisely their freedom of choice. As he explains, “The human being has his own inclinations, and in virtue of his power of choice he has a hint from nature to arrange his actions in accordance with these. Now, there can be nothing more horrendous than that the action of a human being shall stand under the will of another” (20:88; see too 20:66–67, 93). Not only is such subordination “horrible,” but it involves “a contradiction that at the same time indicates its injustice” (20:93; see too 20:66). The logical certainty Kant sought in morality was found in the contradiction implied by treating another person as a thing. As Kant later argues in articulating the Formula of Humanity,²² human beings have dignity because they have freedom.

A fourth important theme in *Remarks*, one that gets no attention in *Observations* and very little in *Inquiry*, is the relationship between ethics and religion. In both *Remarks* and the Herder lecture notes, Kant struggles with the role of God in determining the content of morality (see 20:68, 136; 27:9–10), the issue of whether religion is needed as a supplementary motive for good actions (see 20:12, 16–19, 57, 104; 27:11, 18, 75), the problem of how to deal with what, in the *Religion*, Kant would later

²⁰ The closest it comes is that the melancholic temperament, which is the temperament best suited to virtue, “breathes freedom in a noble breast” and has a “fervor for freedom” (2:221).

²¹ “The idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law” (*Groundwork* 4:429).

²² “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (*Groundwork* 4:429).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

call “radical evil” in human nature (see 20:15, 25; 27:16) and the issue of religious tolerance (see especially 27:73–8). In these texts, Kant increasingly rejects any theological voluntarism that would base the content of morality on God’s arbitrary will, but also seems to see an important role for religion in providing motivational support for morals, especially for those corrupted by the luxuries of the civil condition. Moreover, Kant’s concern with developing a specifically *moral* religion strikingly anticipates the rationalist moral theology developed in his later *Critiques*: “The cognition of God is either *speculative*, and this is uncertain and liable to dangerous errors, or moral through faith, and this conceives of no other qualities in God except those that aim at morality” (20:57).

Already in *Remarks*, Kant sees that morality involves categorical necessity and even that this necessity comes from a universal principle tied to human freedom rather than from the arbitrary will of God. He has the rudiments of his most famous formulations of the categorical imperative, though he does not articulate how universality, human dignity, and freedom fit together into a single overarching moral principle. Moreover, he has not yet seen the extent to which this moral theory will depend upon a transcendental idealism that makes room for a radical, nonanthropological conception of freedom (though see 20:181). And his ethics is still fundamentally a *human* ethics (20:22–23, 41, 45, 47; see too 27:13, 45, 62), far from the ethics of *Groundwork* that “does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it” (4:389).

Observations and the origin of Kantian anthropology

When Kant wrote his *Groundwork*, he insisted on a strict distinction between pure “moral philosophy” and any empirical study of human beings. But even as Kant insisted upon this distinction, he added that moral philosophy “still requires a judgment sharpened by experience” (4:389) and “moral anthropology” is a needed “counterpart of a metaphysics of morals” (6:217). What is more, Kant developed an important course in “Anthropology” that he taught every year from its inception in 1772 until his retirement from teaching. For Kant, “anthropology” was a broad concept, used for the study of human beings as a whole. Thus it included what we would currently group under all of the human sciences: psychology, sociology, anthropology in the narrow sense, and even certain aspects of biology and economics. But Kant’s anthropology

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

emphasized a “pragmatic point of view,” a focus on popularly accessible insights into human beings that could be put to practical use.

In his own life, Kant’s interest in anthropology was not merely peripheral. His *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, one of the last two books that he published before his death, was, like *Observations*, one of his most popular works when it was published. This published work grew out of Kant’s long-standing commitment to teaching anthropology. In a letter about this anthropology course, Kant explains that moral anthropology not only supplements pure moral philosophy, but is also an essential and “entertaining” part of cultivating world-wisdom through learning “everything that pertains to the practical” (10:145–46). In the same letter, he gives clues as to the origin of his anthropology, describing anthropology alongside “Physical Geography,” a course Kant had taught since 1756. The *Announcement of . . . Lectures for the Winter Semester, 1765–1766* describes this physical geography course and shows the origin of the pragmatic concerns that would develop into Kant’s anthropology. He explains the need for “an entertaining and easy compendium of the things which might prepare [students] and serve them for the exercise of practical reason” (2:312), much as he will later refer to his anthropology as “entertaining and never dry” (10:146). The *motive* for developing a course in anthropology is thus well formed during the 1760s, and from this seed an anthropology grew that eventually became central in Kant’s teaching and that supplemented his a priori philosophizing.

Like its motive, the content for Kant’s eventual anthropology is also present during the 1760s. Much of this content is in Kant’s lectures on metaphysics,²³ a substantial portion of which focuses on “empirical psychology.” This psychology largely structures the first part of Kant’s published *Anthropology* and the bulk of his early lectures on anthropology. But in both, the material drawn from Kant’s empirical psychology gives way, in the concluding portion of the book (and the lectures), to extended discussions of the “character” of human beings, both in general and in their diversity. The transitions to this discussion of character often highlight the importance of character for Kant’s overall understanding of

²³ Selections from these lectures are available in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Metaphysics* (edited and translated by Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon), Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

human beings, and Kant seems to have devoted more and more attention to character over time. But the lectures on empirical psychology include little to nothing regarding human character. To find the early seeds of *this* aspect of Kant's anthropology, one must turn to *Observations* and *Remarks*.

In similar fashion to the division of sections in *Observations*, Kant's discussion of character in *Anthropology* begins with an account of human character in general, an account that includes his treatment of different temperaments; then the book turns to a discussion of the character of the sexes, then to an account of the character of the nations. Both the specific content and the general tone of these sections are strikingly similar to those in *Observations*. In some cases, the published *Anthropology* directly contradicts the earlier *Observations*, most strikingly in a reversal in Kant's assessments of different temperaments of human beings.²⁴ When it does not contradict *Observations*, Kant's later published *Anthropology* often shows substantial development from or elaboration of points that are found in primitive form in these earlier works; for example, the sublimity of action in accordance with principle that Kant highlights in *Observations* (2:217) develops into a theory of "character as a way of thinking" in *Anthropology* (7:292). And Kant adds, in *Anthropology*, a crucial discussion of "the character of the species," in which he lays out "the sum total of pragmatic anthropology, in respect to the vocation of the human being" as a whole species (7:324). Elsewhere, the freshness and excitement of Kant's early work results in a richer and better developed treatment of topics that are discussed only briefly in Kant's later *Anthropology*. Kant's account of the character of the sexes in *Observations*, for example, says little about nature's end in establishing womankind, but says much more *to* women about the sorts of excellences that are distinctive for women as such. And the discussions of the nature of luxury and simplicity in *Remarks* far outstrip the *Anthropology's* very compressed account of the impact of luxury on the faculty of feeling (7:249–50).

²⁴ In *Observations*, Kant clearly favors the melancholic temperament (2:219) and sees the apathetic phlegmatic as virtually unworthy of consideration (2:224). In *Anthropology*, by contrast, the melancholic temperament has a more negative characterization (7:288), while the phlegmatic is a "fortunate temperament" that "will . . . proceed from principles and not from instinct" and that "takes the place of wisdom" (7:290). In Kant's later work, the apathetic phlegmatic temperament becomes a natural approximation to Kant's increasingly apathetic moral ideal rather than a boring tangent with respect to aesthetic qualities.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

More important than these differences in detail, however, is the central difference between the systematic place of anthropology in these early writings and in Kant's later philosophy. By the time he publishes *Anthropology*, Kant has made it clear that empirical anthropology is systematically (even if not pedagogically) secondary to the a priori epistemology and moral philosophy developed in his *Critiques* of pure and practical reason. But the anthropological insights of *Observations* and *Remarks* are not insulated from the rest of Kant's philosophical project in this way. And that opens a different sort of relationship between anthropology and philosophy. As already noted, the moral project of *Observations* is largely an anthropological project, explaining what is beautiful and sublime in human nature. *Remarks* makes even clearer Kant's emphasis on *human* ethics (see e.g. 20:22–23, 41, 47), and even human *freedom* is discussed in these early works as a property discernible in human beings through careful empirical anthropology, more like the role it plays in Rousseau than in Kant's eventual Critical philosophy (see, e.g., 20:55–56, 91–93). All of this suggests that however conceptually independent Kant's later moral philosophy is from anthropology, such anthropology lies at the origin of his *thinking* about that morality and even its connection to freedom.

Different nations and races

Central to Kantian anthropology is taxonomy, wherein Kant aims for a “completeness of the headings under which this or that observed human quality of practical relevance can be subsumed” (7:121). Even in his *Critiques*, Kant is a perennial taxonomist, seeking to “exhaustively exhibit the functions of unity in judgment” (A69/B94) in the first *Critique* and classifying all moral theories prior to his own into one of four different categories of heteronomy in the second. *Observations* is similarly taxonomic, beginning with distinctions between different sorts of pleasure, moving to distinguish motives for human behavior to isolate true virtue, and including a classic eighteenth-century taxonomy of human temperaments.

Generally, Kant's taxonomic schemes are treated with bemused indifference. But Kant's desire to characterize individuals by reference to clear categories looks more dangerous from our twenty-first-century

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

perspective when this categorization falls along lines of sex and race. Kant is not bashful about dividing the world in terms of a fundamental “contrast between the sexes” (2:228), various different “national characters” (2:243), and even “different human races” (2:429–43), and insists that “difference[s of aesthetic and moral feelings] in sex, age, education and government, race and climate is to be noted” (20:50). In *Observations*, these differences involve classifying types of beauty and sublimity in humans, but because “the characters of mind of the peoples are most evident in that in them which is moral,” Kant considers “their different feeling in regard to the sublime and beautiful from this point of view” (2:245).

Kant’s account of “national characters” reads almost like a travel guide, unsurprisingly, since one of his goals during this period is “to make a more certain knowledge of believable travel accounts and to make this into a legitimate course of study.”²⁵ Just as good travel guides describe differences between behaviors and expectations of different peoples, so Kant aims to “make good the lack of *experience*” of his young students (2:212) through characterizing different people with whom they may interact. Thus Kant’s reflections during this period focus on different European nations: “the *Italians* and *French* . . . most distinguish themselves in the feeling of the *beautiful*, but the *Germans*, the *English*, and the *Spaniards* . . . are most distinguished . . . in the feeling of the *sublime*” (2:243; see too 27:41).

Kant does not limit his observations to differences between European nations, however, and his discussion of non-European peoples contains some truly horrific mischaracterizations. Regarding Asians, Kant seems to have a level of respect, comparing different Asian peoples with European ones, such that “Arabs are as it were the Spaniards of the Orient . . . Persians are the Frenchmen of Asia . . . [and] the Japanese can be regarded as it were as the Englishmen of this part of the world” (2:252). North American natives are viewed by Kant with ambivalent esteem; they have “little feeling for the beautiful in the moral sense” but “demonstrate a sublime character of mind” (2:253). When Kant turns to “the *Negroes* of Africa,” his descriptions are truly reprehensible: “*Negroes* . . . have by

²⁵ Holly Wilson, *Kant’s Pragmatic Anthropology: Its Origin, Meaning, and Critical Significance*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006, p. 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous” and “not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great” (2:253). In a particularly infamous remark, Kant dismisses the opinion of a “Negro carpenter” by saying, “There might be something here worth considering, except for the fact that this scoundrel was completely black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid” (2:224–25). In these comments, especially about Black Africans, Kant reflects the worst prejudices of his time and even enlists the support of philosophers such as David Hume (see 2:253). Moreover, unlike Kant’s later published essays on race, which focus almost exclusively on the physical, this early discussion provides a context for the sorts of moral and intellectual characterizations of other races now so closely tied to racism.

Fortunately, *Observations* is also unlike Kant’s later published essays on race in that it avoids or at least mitigates racial and ethnic essentialism. In a crucial footnote to the title of this section, Kant explains,

[N]o nation is lacking in casts of mind which unite the foremost predominant qualities of this kind. For this reason the criticism that might occasionally be cast on a people can offend no one, as it is like a ball that one can always hit to his neighbor. (2:243n)

Later, he reiterates,

It is hardly necessary for me to repeat my previous apology here. In each people the finest portion contains praiseworthy characters of all sorts, and whoever is affected by one or another criticism will, if he is fine enough, understand it to his advantage, which lies in leaving everyone else to his fate but making an exception of himself. (2:245n)

Kant does not, at least in this work, see the different characters of nations as deterministic for the possibilities of individuals, and he encourages readers to read negative characterizations of their nation as exhortations to moral strength rather than as signs of inherent inferiority.

Unfortunately, Kant’s negative characterizations of non-European races in *Observations* presage the more essentialist racial theory that he develops thirteen years later in “On the Different Human Races” (1775) and lend support to suggestions that this race theory implies a principled basis for the inferiority of other races. It is beyond the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

scope of this introduction to provide an overview of those texts, but even in *Observations* itself, Kant seems to exclude Negroes from his crucial “apology,” in which he insisted that “no nation is lacking” in finer qualities, not only by taking blackness as a universal sign of stupidity but also by describing the inferiority of Negroes to whites as an “essential difference between these two human kinds” (2:253). Seeds of Kant’s later theory of race, within which racial characteristics are heritable and relatively fixed, are regrettably already found in *Observations*.

Women

Kant devotes a substantial section of *Observations* – Section 3 – to “the contrast between the two sexes” (2:228). Similar discussions persist throughout his lectures on anthropology and culminate in his discussion of the “character of the sexes” in *Anthropology* (1798). These discussions also provide background for Kant’s claims about women’s political status (see 6:314–15, 8:295) and the importance of marriage (6:278f). Some comments in *Observations* are perfect sound bites of Kantian misogyny: “A woman who has a head full of Greek . . . might as well have a beard” (2:229). Others seem to be models of egalitarianism: “the fair sex has just as much understanding as the male” (2:229). In fact, the attitude towards women in *Observations* is more subtle than these sound bites suggest; this attitude *both* feeds into more misogynistic positions in Kant’s later work *and* anticipates feminist critiques of and alternatives to Enlightenment philosophies such as the later Kant’s.

The core of Kant’s account of the sexes is that women are primarily characterized by the beautiful, while men are primarily characterized by the sublime. However,

it is not to be understood that woman is lacking noble [sublime] qualities or that the male sex must entirely forego beauties; rather one expects that each sex will unite both, but in such a way that in a woman all other merits should only be united so as to emphasize the character of the **beautiful**, which is the proper point of reference, while by contrast among the male qualities the **sublime** should clearly stand out as the criterion of his kind. (2:228)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings

Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

This distinction is both descriptive – women *are* generally more characterized by the beautiful and men by the sublime – and normative: “To this [distinction] must refer all judgments of these two sexes, those of praise as well as those of blame” (2:228).

Unless one keeps both descriptive and normative dimensions of Kant’s distinction in mind, Kant’s account might seem to preclude virtue in women. Kant says both “It is difficult for me to believe that the fair sex is capable of principles” (2:232; see too 27:49) and “true virtue can only be grafted upon principles” (2:217). This might require, as Jean Rumsey claims, that “women . . . are in Kant’s view less than . . . full moral agents.”²⁶ But such attention to the merely descriptive aspect of Kant’s distinction misses Kant’s insistence in *Observations* that women *are* capable of virtue, but “The virtue of the woman is a **beautiful virtue**” (2:231; see too 27:49–50). Following through on his sexual distinction, Kant insists that women are capable of distinctively feminine virtue. And whereas the principles of which women are not capable “are also extremely rare among the male sex” (2:232), the “love [of] what is good” that serves as the foundation of beautiful virtue is grounded in “goodly and benevolent sentiments” that “providence has implanted . . . in [women’s] bosom” (2:232). The impossibility of fulfilling *male* virtue is actually a moral advantage: whereas few men will attain sublime virtue, women are well equipped for beautiful virtue.

Kant’s account of beautiful virtue thus invites developing a Kantian feminist (or feminine) ethics. Ever since Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, many feminist moral philosophers have explored more “feminine” approaches to ethics.²⁷ Such approaches often emphasize, with the Kant of *Observations*, the importance of “broaden[ing one’s] entire moral feeling . . . and not, to be sure, through moral rules, but rather through individual judgment of the conduct that she sees around her” (2:230). This Kantian ethic of “beautiful virtue,” which Kant (like Carol Gilligan and Nell Noddings) sees as a more feminine alternative to the principle-based rationalist ethics of “noble virtue,” could be seen as an important

²⁶ Jean Rumsey, “Re-Visions of Agency in Kant’s Moral Theory,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p. 131.

²⁷ The literature exploring the ethics of care is vast. For one popular example, see Nell Noddings’ *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-71113-5 - Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings
 Edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

historical precursor to recent ethics of care and, more broadly, to virtue ethics.²⁸

Unfortunately, when Kant describes the sexes later in his *Anthropology*, all hope is gone of a feminine Kantian virtue ethics of the sort suggested by *Observations*. Although feelings and sensitive judgments about particulars play some role in the moral philosophy that Kant articulates starting in his *Groundwork*, that moral philosophy shifts to emphasize rational choice to the point that the “beautiful virtue” of *Observations* is merely a sham. So even when Kant admits a distinctive “feminine virtue” in *Anthropology* (7:307), the use of the term “virtue” rings hollow when such virtue falls far short of the “good will” that is the only thing “good without limitation” (4:393). This later Kantian ethics might have suggested another sort of Kantian *feminist* (but now *not feminine*) ethics, one within which differences between the sexes are seen *not* to be essential, where both women and men are equally capable of rising to the high standards of the categorical imperative. Were it not for his strong insistence that “What is most important is that the man become more perfect as a man and the woman as a woman” (2:241–42), one might even read Kant’s admonition regarding nations as applying to sexes as well: “In each people the finest portion contains praiseworthy characters of all sorts, and whoever is affected by one or another criticism will . . . understand it to his [or her] advantage, which lies in . . . making an exception of [one]self” (2:245n). Unfortunately, Kant’s anthropological claims about the differences between the sexes change little between *Observations* and *Anthropology*, despite the shifts in his moral philosophy. As a result, in Kant’s later moral philosophy the noble ideal of a perfect rational man governed by principles is the *only* unconditionally good will, but women’s nature precludes them from such a will.

²⁸ Moreover, Kant’s emphasis on feeling in *Observations* fits into his ambivalence about rationality during this period and anticipates feminist critiques of overemphasis on rationality. And Kant’s observational approach to knowledge, evidenced in *Observations* and “Maladies” as well as in his teaching during this period, emphasizes knowing human beings in all of their diversity. Kant’s focus on human beings with a particular eye to sentiments is precisely what many find to be missing from Kant’s later (and, some argue, more masculine) ethics, and it is precisely what Kant describes as women’s “philosophical wisdom,” “the content of the great science of woman, [which] is the human being” and “sentiment” (2:230). In this early work, moreover, both Kant’s anthropology and his ethics are fluid, such that “each sex will unite both” beauty and nobility, and feminine traits are incorporated into Kant’s account of true (masculine) virtue.