

Beautiful Mind, Unconquerable Soul: Productive Imagination and the Unity of Kant's System

MONIKA JOVANOVIĆ*
University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

In this paper, I examine the scope and relevance of Lara Ostaric's thesis on "The 'Moral Image' of the 'Supersensible within'" and the productive imagination that generates schema-analogues, as presented in her book The Critique of Judgment and The Unity of Kant's Critical System. In the first part, I argue that this thesis represents a kind of a missing link connecting the first and the second of Kant's Critiques, but also unites two aspects of Kant's aesthetics: the one I call analytic and the one I call speculative. I further argue that productive imagination, in this way, allows us to glimpse beyond the limits of possible experience. In the second part, I argue that, starting from here, one could defend the view that Kant was an aesthetic cognitivist in a strong sense of the word. In the third part, I apply Ostaric's thesis to Kant's concept of the dynamically sublime.

Keywords: Kant; productive imagination; moral image of the supersensible; aesthetic cognitivism; dynamically sublime.

1. The missing link

In her book on Kant's critical system, Lara Ostaric connects the free play of understanding and imagination with what she calls "The 'Moral Image' of the 'Supersensible within'" (Ostaric 2023: 123). According to

* The realization of this research was financially supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia as part of funding for scientific research work at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy (contract number 451-03-137/2025-03/ 200163).

her view, the free play, by generating schema-analogues, leads us to a kind of insight into the supersensible ground of freedom:

The view that aesthetic reflection in Kant is “an action of the power of imagination” entails the view that the imagination, following its own law, provides, as it were, a schema of a universal that goes over and above the formal conditions of the possibility of empirical cognition while still being consistent with the latter. In schematizing independently of the understanding while at the same time contingently harmonizing with its discursive demands, the imagination intimates the supersensible “ground” (Grund) of freedom (KU, §59, 5:353) that manifests itself as the “feeling of life” (Lebensgefühl), or the feeling of the “power [Vermögen] of a substance to determine itself” (MAN, 4:544). (Ostarić 2023: 125–126).

In other words, aesthetic experience enables a cognitive or quasi-cognitive understanding of the noumenal foundation of freedom or, as Ostarić says later, the soul: “The free synthesizing activity of the imagination in aesthetic experience indirectly exhibits the Idea of the soul...” (Ostarić 2023: 147). At the first sight, this standpoint could seem controversial: the questions about noumenal aspect of reality is a *par excellence* metaphysical question, one about which, according to Kant’s stance in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we cannot know anything except the fact that phenomenal reality, the nature, (ultimately) rests on the unconditioned, underlying thing-in-itself.¹ As Ostarić puts it: “The principle of life is thus to be found in the noumenal realm, in the immaterial soul, which, in his Critical period, Kant claims, cannot be the object of our theoretical cognition” (Ostarić 2023: 145).

When we speculate about God, immortality of the soul, and the metaphysical features of the world, we move, for Kant, beyond “the limits of possible experience”² (Kant 1998, A296/B352); as ideas of reason, they can only lead us to antinomies.³ However, Kant moderated his view in his later writings. Thus, in the second *Critique*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant 2000), he gave us different arguments showing that we have reason to presuppose that our will is free, that our soul is immortal and that God exists.⁴ The latter two are no longer treated as ideas of theoretical reason but as the postulates of the practical reason. Talking about the immortality of the soul, Kant offers the following argument:

Complete conformity of the will with the moral law is, however, holiness, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment’ of his existence. Since it is nevertheless required as practically

¹ See, e.g. Kant 1998, A250: “All our representations are in fact related to some object through the understanding, and, since appearances are but representations, the understanding thus relates them to a *something*, as the object of sensible intuition: but this something is to that extent only the transcendental object.”

² For Kant, going beyond these limits leads us to “transcendental illusion.”

³ Of the antinomies, especially relevant is the third antinomy. See Kant 1998: A445/B473–A451/B479.

⁴ See, for instance, Kant 2000: 5:46.

necessary, it can only be found in an endless progress' toward that complete conformity, and in accordance with principles of pure practical reason it is necessary to assume such a practical progress as the real object of our will. (Kant 2000: 5:122)

This, of course, is not a deductive, theoretical proof of the soul's immortality, but it is a form of an argument for having a reason to presuppose it. As Kant shortly after notes (5:122), that something is a postulate means it is: "a theoretical proposition, though not one demonstrable as such". The same applies to the postulate of the existence of God. The more moral a person becomes, the stronger their conviction that one day there will be some sort of alignment between our actions (the way we have led our lives) and corresponding rewards or punishments. The idea of God as „belonging necessarily to the possibility of the highest good“ – where merit and reward align – becomes something that we have to assume (Kant 2000, 5:124).⁵ Thus, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the ideas of God and the soul's immortality gain the status of regulative ideas, something we only approximate in both moral and cognitive sense.⁶

It appears, therefore, that the ideas of God and the immortality of the soul are not the best candidates for the "moral image of the supersensible". However, unlike the idea of immortal soul and the idea of God, the idea of freedom has a completely different status. For Kant, morality requires freedom (Kant 2000: 5:47).⁷ Freedom is, namely, the condition for the possibility of morality, i.e., acting in accordance with the categorical imperative or against it. If I ought to do something, Kant claims, then I must be able to do it.⁸ Hence, the idea of freedom is, to put it that way, closer to true knowledge than the ideas of the soul's immortality and God.

But how is this related to the free play of understanding and imagination? As I understand Ostarić's view, the free play either constitutes or offers the moral image of the supersensible. We have just seen how one might defend the claim that the idea of freedom is the moral image of the supersensible. Perhaps by connecting these two theses, we could claim that the free play of understanding and imagination corresponds to the idea of freedom from the postulates, leads us to it, or is

⁵ For Kant, "it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God". Immediately, though, Kant adds: It is well to note here that this moral necessity is subjective, that is, a need, and not objective, that is, itself a duty; for, there can be no duty to assume the existence of anything (since this concerns only the theoretical use of reason). Moreover, it is not to be understood by this that it is necessary to assume the existence of God as a ground of all obligation in general (for this rests, as has been sufficiently shown, solely on the autonomy of reason itself). (Kant 2000: 5:125-126).

⁶ See, e.g. Kant 2000: 5:135.

⁷ Ostarić discusses this in section 1.5. of her book.

⁸ That for Kant "ought implies can" is quite clear, as for instance his observation in "On the common saying" shows. See Kant 2000: 8:309. See also Kohl 2015.

even equivalent to it, depending on how we understand the ontological status of the idea of freedom and the free play.

How this is possible becomes clearer when we start from Ostarić's thesis that "aesthetic judgment completes the system of the powers of the mind in its 'vocation' (*Bestimmung*) of relating the sensible to the supersensible," while "epistemological aspects of aesthetic experience and the logical structure of aesthetic judgment cannot be considered in isolation from what Kant understood to be human beings' ultimate vocation, that is, morality, together with the supersensible conditions of its realization" (Ostarić 2023: 123).

As Ostarić further develops this thesis, the thesis can be, as she says, broken into two claims: "(a) at the core of aesthetic judgment's connection to morality is the relationship between the sensible and the supersensible; and (b) the connection of aesthetic experience to the supersensible should be sought in the logical structure of aesthetic judgment, namely, the free harmony of the faculties and the universal that is schematized in this free harmony." While some authors defend one version of these claims, Ostarić supports both (Ostarić 2023: 124). The connection between the ethical and the aesthetic, the beautiful and the moral, she does not find in psychological or phenomenological similarities, which undeniably exists between aesthetic experience and moral judgment (as Paul Guyer argues),⁹ but rather in the logical characteristics of aesthetic judgment (as defended by Allison and Longuenesse).¹⁰ However, Ostarić differs from these thinkers by assigning the central role in judgment, i.e., reflection, to productive imagination rather than, as they do, to understanding.

By defending these two claims, Ostarić connects the sensible and the supersensible, nature and freedom, in an essential and internal way. Her thesis that the free play of understanding and imagination constitutes the moral image of the supersensible within—or, in another reading, that this moral image is a product of the free play—offers a solution for more firmly unifying Kant's *Critiques* into a single, organic whole. This thesis thus complements Kant's idea of the system of human cognitive faculties; it is the missing link. Furthermore, this thesis has the potential to explain another gap: the divide between two parts or aspects of Kant's aesthetics—the considerations of the logical-epistemological characteristics of the judgment of taste, whose core is the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, and the metaphysical reflections on the relationship between the beautiful and the moral.

The first part of Kant's aesthetic standpoint, at least if we understand it in this way, could be portrayed as the first meta-aesthetic approach in the history of aesthetics. While in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant poses the

⁹ Ostarić references several of Guyer's relevant works, esp. Guyer 1996 and 1997: 124 at f. 3.

¹⁰ Ostarić references Allison 2001 and Longuenesse 2006: 124 at f. 3.

question of what the criterion of moral correctness is (on the object-level), in aesthetics, he asks what is distinctive for judgments of taste, that is, what distinguishes them from other classes of judgments (on the meta-level). This reasoning also includes the deduction of judgments of taste, parts of the dialectic and the analytic of the sublime.

The second part of Kant's standpoint, which includes §17 of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, positions the consideration at the object level: how to define the ideal of beauty, what is the relationship between the beautiful and the moral, how artistic creation functions, etc. Since it contains enigmatic theses, such as the idea that the ideal of beauty is an expression of morality on the human face, that beauty (both in art and nature) is a symbol of morality, as well as difficult-to-understand theses about aesthetic ideas and attributes, this part of Kant's aesthetic standpoint could be called speculative. Alternatively, the first part of his standpoint could be called semantics, and the second, metaphysics of beauty. Reading Kant's text and secondary literature on Kant's aesthetics, we get the impression that there is a certain tension between these two parts or aspects of Kant's aesthetic doctrine. If we do not acknowledge the fact that the first consideration is positioned at the meta-level and the second at the object-level, it might even seem that Kant's standpoint is incoherent: as much as he tries to separate the aesthetic issue from the ethical one, here he is trying to connect them.

When we set things up in this way, it is clear that the solution proposed by Ostarić can help us answer the question of what the relationship is between the two aforementioned aspects of Kant's aesthetics, analytic and speculative, and that it has something to offer even to those who are not historians of philosophy but are only interested in aesthetics. If we connect her standpoint on the moral image of the supersensible with the thesis on the relationship between the free play of understanding and imagination, and the idea of freedom, which we presented at the beginning, we get one possible explanation of the relationship between the aesthetic experience and judgment, on one hand, and the metaphysical theses on the relationship between the beautiful and the moral, on the other. Besides participating in aesthetic judgment, productive imagination, according to Ostarić, generates the schema-analogues with which we can understand beauty in both nature and art as a symbol of morality (Ostarić 2023: ch. 4). This thus closes another gap, and the link that connects the two parts of Kant's system (the relationship between the first two critiques, nature and freedom) fully corresponds to the link that connects the two aspects of Kant's aesthetics.

2. *Aesthetics of the supersensible*

Ostarić's thesis on the moral image of the supersensible could also find its application in contemporary aesthetics. Ongoing debates about the cognitive value of art between proponents of aesthetic cognitivism and

those who consider art, more or less, cognitively trivial, as well as other debates in contemporary aesthetics, are increasingly returning to great philosophical figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant.¹¹ So, it seems that Kantian view of aesthetic experience proposed by Ostaric, could be highly relevant. Since, according to her, “the experience of beauty receives a cognitive element that is best interpreted in connection to practical cognition.” (Ostaric 2023), it seems that she would find the aesthetic cognitivism more favorable than aesthetic autonomism.

Based on this thesis, one could, in fact, formulate a completely original standpoint, which has not appeared in these debates in any form. According to this standpoint, the free play of understanding and imagination (as one way to understand the aesthetic experience) that occurs when we are acquainted with beautiful (or aesthetically valuable) works of art results in appropriate insights into the nature of reality, cognitive or quasi-cognitive non-discursive insights into that which transcends the limits of possible experience. Just as the fact of morality (the categorical imperative is a fact of reason) normatively “ought” to lead us, through the transcendental argument, to the idea of freedom, the experience of art leads us, in a less syllogistic and more intuitive and imaginative way, to the same insight. The moral image of the supersensible is thus an image in the imagination, a quasi-sensory imaginative manifestation of the idea of freedom, its phenomenal form.

This shows us that within Kant’s system of cognitive faculties, we can understand productive imagination as a generative ability not only from the perspective of the artist but also from the perspective of the recipient. A synoptic view of Kant’s aesthetics, which equally takes into account all elements of his standpoint and treats them as equally important, allows us to see the various roles that productive imagination seems to have in the aesthetic experience.

Instead of limiting the discussion to the role of this ability in aesthetic judgment, i.e., making evaluative aesthetic judgments, as is usually done by interpreters of Kant’s aesthetics, starting from Ostaric’s thesis, we can develop a standpoint according to which productive imagination in the aesthetic context has various functions. From this perspective, its second basic function would relate to the generation of the moral image of the supersensible. Since this ability does not follow the rules or concepts of reason in this particular use, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to describe this activity in a lawlike or rule-based manner. In other words, when it comes to generating the schema-analogue, it seems there is no underlying algorithm according to which this activity proceeds.

The outlined position that could be derived from Ostaric’s thesis on the relationship between the free play of understanding and imagi-

¹¹ Jerome Stolnitz is one of the most prominent defenders of the thesis that art is cognitively trivial. See Stolnitz 1992. For recent defense of the view that art is not trivial in this regard, see Vidmar Jovanović 2024.

nation and the moral image of the supersensible, extrapolated to the domain of contemporary aesthetic debates, could be developed into a unique and quite strong type of aesthetic cognitivism.¹² According to this position, aesthetic experience is conceived as virtually the only way for us to gain insights into the noumenal nature of reality; the transcendental argument from “The Postulates of Practical Reason” does not lead us to the insight that we are free, but just to the conclusion that freedom is a necessary condition of morality, which is a significant epistemological difference.

The cognitivistic aesthetic position that could be developed from the thesis about the generative function of productive imagination in aesthetic experience would represent a kind of philosophical aesthetic cognitivism: the experience of art leads us to philosophical and similar (for example, religious) insights of equal degrees of abstraction. If this is true, Kant’s initial agnosticism regarding metaphysical questions and his famous critique of metaphysics could, quite unexpectedly, find a unique resolution in the aesthetic experience. Under this assumption, Kant’s principled stance on questions that transcend the limits of possible experience is much more complex than it might first appear.

Instead of a rigid stance that we can virtually know nothing about questions of this kind, which are relativized in the Postulates, as this reflection shows, Kant actually advocates a kind of epistemological compatibilism. Strictly speaking, we cannot have the same kind of knowledge about metaphysical questions as we do about things that are within our experience, but this does not mean that we cannot have any cognitive gain when it comes to them. The concept of knowledge can be understood in such a way that possessing knowledge is not an “all or nothing” kind of property, but it can be graduated. Furthermore, this concept seems to have a loose conceptual structure: there are various kinds of cognitive insights, from discursive and syllogistic to intuitive and pictorial, and the type of knowledge we can achieve in a given domain depends on the cognitive powers that play a central role in this process, as well as on the object of knowledge itself.

3. *Dynamically sublime and the highest good*

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

(*Invictus*, William Ernest Henley)

In this section, I want to explore how the supersensible within, and the ultimate vocation of human beings, is connected to Kant’s concept of the dynamically sublime. In Ostarić’s book, the sublime is far less rel-

¹² One recent analysis of a historically relevant cognitivist positions in aesthetics is provided by Tuna 2025.

evant than many other key themes from the third *Critique*. The author explains this lack of relevance in the following manner:

One may question why this book does not discuss the role of the sublime in connecting the sensible and the supersensible or the realm of nature and the realm of freedom. The focus of my discussion, and what I take to be central to the third *Critique*, is the problem of the highest good and our progress toward this unconditioned end of reason in the world. Thus, of central concern for this project is reflective judgment's principle of nature's purposiveness by means of which the highest good is, not merely conceived as possible, but also perceived in nature. For Kant's discussion of the sublime, making palpable our own purposiveness and not that of nature, is central. (Ostarcic 2023: 10, f.23)

For Ostarcic, sublime doesn't have the required explanatory weight or relevance for understanding the concepts her book deals with. In that, she agrees with Allison (2001), and immediately after this passage she mentions Kant's own words where the sublime is seemingly treated as less relevant than the beautiful for exploring the purposiveness in nature. To repeat the key part of her quotation of Kant:

For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground outside ourselves, but for the sublime merely one in ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into the representation of the former – a very necessary introductory remark, which entirely separates the ideas of the sublime from that of a purposiveness of nature, and makes of the sublime a mere appendix to the aesthetic judging of the purposiveness of nature. (Kant 2001: §23, 5:246)

Kant, as we can see, makes the crucial distinction between what we might term the sublime understood as a property of something in nature, and the sublime understood as a specific type of feeling. In other words, one might be tempted to treat an object or a phenomenon as sublime – Kant mentions thunder clouds, volcanoes, hurricanes, boundless oceans, waterfalls (Kant 2001, §26:1). Nevertheless, the feeling of the sublime is what Kant primarily aims at exploring. We can contrast his view of the sublime with that of, say, Schopenhauer, who sees sublime precisely as a property of natural phenomena.

However, while Ostarcic is right that Kant does not wish to primarily treat the sublime as something like a property, still it seems to me that there is an inextricable connection between the way he explains how the feeling of the sublime is elicited in human beings, and as Ostarcic puts it in the quote above “progress toward this unconditioned end of reason in the world.” Namely, the sections on the dynamically sublime hold key connections to both Kant's practical philosophy and the ultimate vocation of human beings in terms of purposiveness. When it comes to the former, let us take a look at a passage in §28:

If nature is to be judged by us dynamically as sublime, it must be represented as arousing fear (although, conversely, not every object that arouses fear is found sublime in our aesthetic judgment). For in aesthetic judging (without a concept) the superiority over obstacles can only be judged in accordance with the magnitude of the resistance. (Kant 2001: 5:260)

This last part of the quote is crucial because it exhibits one of the central topics within Kant's ethics, which is the notion of overcoming obstacles. We can see that in one of the opening sections of his "Doctrine of Virtue" (Kant 1999), where he states:

Virtue is the strength of human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty. Strength of any kind can be recognized only by the obstacles it can overcome, and in the case of virtue these obstacles are natural inclinations, which can come into conflict with a human being's moral resolution. (6:394)

As we can see, for Kant the concept of overcoming obstacles is connected both to moral and to the aesthetic context. In both the third *Critique* and in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the inner strength is portrayed as a necessary condition for genuine judgment. As Kant adds, "Someone who is afraid can no more judge about the sublime in nature than someone who is in the grip of inclination and appetite can judge about the beautiful." Thus, a certain kind of strength is required to overcome the natural inclinations, which exist for Kant in the context of ethical maxims, judgments of taste, or, as we can see, in the context of the sublime.

In that sense, the sublime becomes important because it seems that our contact with what we judge in that regard can strengthen our capacities:

[W]e gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature. For just as we find our own limitation in the immeasurability of nature and the insufficiency of our capacity to adopt a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its domain, but nevertheless at the same time find in our own faculty of reason another, non-sensible standard, which has that very infinity under itself as a unit against which everything in nature is small, and thus found in our own mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability. (Kant 2001: 5:261)

It seems that we can see this passage as arguing for the dynamically sublime as being such that it provides a way for human beings to recognize their own strength in overcoming something greater than themselves (even "all-powerful"), and in that recognition human beings expand their capacities for overcoming inclinations generally. Because, if our strength is judged by the size of the obstacle we overcome to accomplish something (to do a moral act, or provide a pure judgment of taste or of the sublime), then gaining the capacity to overcome a towering, all-powerful 'opponent' is a necessary step toward realization of our ultimate vocation, which requires precisely overcoming our existing inclinations. In this way, the sublime is relevant for our ethical elevation and, in that regard, has an important role in Kant's system:

The sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us. Everything that arouses this feeling in us,

which includes the powers of nature that call forth our own powers is thus (although improperly) called sublime; and only under the presupposition of this idea in us and in relation to it are we capable of arriving at the idea of the sublimity of that being who produces inner respect in us not merely through his power, which he displays in nature, but even more by the capacity that is placed within us for judging nature without fear and thinking of our vocation as sublime in comparison with it. (Kant 2001: 5:264)

Ultimately, thus, for Kant it is not quite correct to ascribe something like the property of the sublime to the natural objects and phenomena that threaten our very existence. Instead, the objects and phenomena (volcanoes, hurricanes, etc., as we have seen) that we are inferior to can be judged in a way that reveals that we are actually superior to all of that, even infinitely superior. Considering that there is something—namely, what is characteristic of us, our freedom and reason—that surpasses in value anything in nature, it is our contact with the aspects of nature we (improperly, as Kant adds) term ‘sublime’ that reveals what it is in us that makes us superior. This is, again, because only in contact with the obstacles we face, we can gain the strength that stems from overcoming them. And the ‘all-powerful’ nature is the largest obstacle in front of us. Overcoming it, we reach the awareness of what is distinctive of us as human beings. In Kant’s words:

[The] judgement of the sublime [...] has its foundation in human nature, and indeed in that which can be required of everyone and demanded of him along with healthy understanding, namely in the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to that which is moral. (Kant 2001: 5:265)

Here, in one of the concluding paragraphs of the section on the sublime, we see how Kant explicitly connects the notions of sublimity and morality to reveal the intricate ways in which judgments of the sublime provide a necessary component of human beings’ rise to establishing their dominion and superiority over nature. As Kant concludes at the end of §84:

Now if things in the world, as dependent beings as far as their existence is concerned, need a supreme cause acting in accordance with ends, then the human being is the final end of creation; for without him the chain of ends subordinated to one another would not be completely grounded; and only in the human being, although in him only as a subject of morality, is unconditional legislation with regard to ends to be found, which therefore makes him alone capable. (Kant 2001: 5:436)

The way Kant views what ultimately elevates human beings above nature and makes them its final end, is by elucidating the one distinctive characteristic of human beings—freedom. This characteristic was the topic even in the first *Critique*, when Kant discussed the antinomies of reason. But this antinomy was, famously, resolved in the second *Critique*. In Ostarić’s book, this is very well covered and in thorough detail. It ultimately does answer how it is that Kant’s system is unified. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we still need one key aspect relevant to understanding our freedom as providing superiority over nature, namely,

the explanation of how it is that free human beings realise their inner worth. The concept of overcoming obstacles, elaborated in the “Doctrine of Virtue” and again present in the section on the dynamically sublime, provides this intermediate step. It strengthens the picture of the ‘supersensible within’ human beings, and ultimately helps provide a comprehensive picture of how different strands of Kant’s critical system are unified. This, of course, doesn’t take anything away from Ostarić’s thought-provoking and revealing view of the unity of Kant’s system. It, if anything aims to further its key conclusions.¹³

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¹³ This paper has been presented at the international conference “Kant’s Critical System” held at the University of Rijeka on November 25–26, 2024.