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Beauty as an idea that can be developed and realized: A historical comparative study of Schiller's aesthetics

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Abstract: Schiller's work is deeply rooted in Western philosophical traditions and significantly influences the evolution of aesthetics in the nineteenth century. Despite its foundational role, Schiller's writings exhibit a lack of precision and systematic structure. This paper employs a historical-comparative approach to examine Schiller's aesthetics in relation to other philosophical perspectives. By re-evaluating and interpreting classical texts, the study aims to provide a comprehensive clarification of Schiller's aesthetic theory. Schiller conceptualizes beauty as an idea, yet this conception diverges from the notions advanced by Plato and Kant. He reconfigures the relationship between beauty and perfection, suggesting a return to Baumgarten's principles. In Schiller's view, perfect beauty encompasses its own reality, thereby addressing and surpassing the subjectivity and abstraction found in Kantian aesthetics. Furthermore, Schiller explores the origin and development of freedom, positing that freedom evolves through its awakening and growth, thereby demonstrating the realizability of beauty and the full potential of human nature.

Keywords: Schiller; Plato; Baumgarten; Kant; idea of freedom; realizability

1. Introduction

Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) aesthetic theory occupies a pivotal position in the history of aesthetics. Building on the intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century, Schiller significantly contributes to the aesthetic discourse of the nineteenth century [1] (p. 2). Goethe (1749–1832) commends Schiller, asserting that Schiller “laid the first foundation of the whole new development of aesthetics” [2] (p. 298). Similarly, Hegel (1770–1831) acknowledges Schiller's contribution, stating that we must give Schiller “great credit for breaking through the Kantian subjectivity and abstraction of thinking” [3] (p. 61)¹. Hegel further contends that due to Schiller's “true and actual idea” of beauty, “philosophy has attained, with Schelling (1775–1854), its absolute standpoint” [3] (p. 63)².

Schiller's influence extends to subsequent philosophers. His classification of poetry likely informs Hegel's tripartite classification of art forms (Kunstformen) [4] (pp. 177–232). Additionally, Schiller's ideas resonate with Marx's (1818–1883) notions of “alienation” and “free and complete human nature”. As Zhang Yuneng (1943–2022), a distinguished Chinese scholar and translator of Schiller's works, observes, “Schiller's aesthetic system of human nature is the direct source of Hegel, Marx, as well as modernists and post-modernists who reflect and criticize capitalist society and the construction of an ideal society” [5] (p. 27).

Despite his significant impact, Schiller's definitions of key concepts and terms lack the precision and systematic organization typical of other philosophers. For instance, “the second kind of freedom”, a central concept in Schiller's aesthetics, is

only mentioned in a footnote in the “Nineteenth Letter” of his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Similarly, core concepts such as “idea”, “freedom”, and “nature” are presented with a degree of obscurity in Schiller’s works. He has been criticized for lacking an accurate and explicit style of philosophical and theoretical expression, which complicates understanding compared to other philosophers [6].

Furthermore, Schiller does not fully articulate the intellectual lineage of his aesthetic theory. The only philosopher Schiller explicitly acknowledges as an influence is Kant [7] (p. First Letter). An examination of Schiller’s writings alone reveals numerous ambiguities and apparent contradictions. Therefore, this article employs a historical-comparative method, analyzing Schiller in relation to other philosophers. This approach involves investigating both the philosophers who influenced Schiller, such as Plato, Baumgarten, and Kant, and those whom Schiller influenced, such as Hegel and Karl Marx, whose perspectives may reveal underlying ideological aspects of Schiller’s thought.

Recent scholarship has predominantly focused on Schiller’s political philosophy [8–10]. Nonetheless, the study of Schiller’s philosophical and aesthetic theories remains crucial [11] (pp. 47–130), [12] (pp. 133–232), [13] (pp. 41–425), [14]. In light of the extensive research, this article aims to elucidate the origins and development of Schiller’s aesthetics within the broader context of intellectual history from a comparative perspective. Through a detailed re-evaluation and interpretation of classical texts, this study seeks to provide a fundamental clarification of Schiller’s aesthetic theory.

The article is structured into four main sections. The first section demonstrates that Schiller’s aesthetics retains a strong Platonic color, whether defining beauty as freedom in appearance in his earlier work or as the harmonious balance between form and reality in his later writings. The second section illustrates how Schiller transcends Kantian aesthetics by incorporating the concept of development, thereby endowing the idea of beauty and human nature with ultimate realizability. This approach suggests a return to Baumgarten’s principles, as perfect beauty must encompass reality. The third section elucidates Schiller’s view that freedom has both an origin and development, diverging from the perspectives of Plato and Kant, and significantly impacting subsequent philosophical paradigms. The fourth section builds upon the previous comparisons and analyses to provide a conclusive clarification of the key terms used by Schiller.

2. Is beauty an idea? The Platonic color of Schiller’s aesthetics

In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* alone, Schiller uses the word “idea” (Idee) and its compound words, such as “idea kingdom” (Ideenreich), 35 times. Hegel highly praises Schiller’s philosophy because Hegel believes that Schiller takes the idea “as that which alone is true and actual” [3] (p. 63)³. In Western philosophy, the concept of “idea” in its philosophical sense must be traced back to Plato, so it is appropriate to access Schiller by comparing him with Plato.

According to Plato, the world of ideas is immutable, while the physical world is constantly changing; each idea is one in form, and physical things are various; the physical world imitates the world of ideas. The idea is the archetype, and the physical

reality is the imitation; therefore, the idea is more real than the reality. These statements are equally valid for the concept of beauty. Plato writes, “I assume the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, ... if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that Beautiful” [15] (p. 86). In other words, the Platonic beauty “always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes”; it “is not anywhere in another thing”, but “itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form” [15] (p. 493). All the other beautiful things share in such an ideal beauty.

It can be seen that Plato distinguishes “beauty (the Beautiful)” from “beautiful things” and regards real “beauty” as an eternal and unitary idea. Physical things are beautiful because they participate in the eternal and unitary idea of beauty. However, Plato himself does not put forward a distinct definition of eternal beauty.

There are clear traces of Schiller’s inheritance to Plato in delineating beauty. In *Kallias or Concerning Beauty*, Schiller wrote, “The agreement of an action with the form of pure will is morality. The analogy of an appearance with the form of pure will or freedom is beauty (in its most general sense). Beauty is thus nothing less than freedom in appearance” [16] (p. 152).

When writing *Kallias or Concerning Beauty*, Schiller was still following Kant and believed that there is no real freedom in the physical world (nature) and that nature is determined by the law of causality. However, some phenomena (physical appearances) can be similar to freedom (freedom as an idea). Borrowing Platonic expressions, we can say that such phenomena are imitations of the idea of freedom.

Unlike Plato, at that time, Schiller did not put beauty but freedom directly into the realm of ideas. “Beauty is freedom in appearance” means that beautiful things existing in the physical world are imitations of freedom as an idea. In this sense, Schiller ensures the indispensability of material sensibility to beauty. In this case, Schiller uses the word “aesthetic” more appropriately than Kant because the semantic stipulation of this word implies sensibility; nevertheless, Kant does not hold that material sensibility is necessary for his aesthetics. Sensibility, in Kant’s sense, can also be intangible and pure. Kant interprets time and space as pure forms of sensible intuition that belong to sensibility [17] (p. A22)⁴. Based on this, imagination in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* can be interpreted as a free gestalt of time and space. Consequently, the free interplay between understanding and imagination, as Kant’s aesthetics concerns, depends on no material sensibility.

Schiller’s view that “beauty is freedom in appearance” also provides the key to understanding Hegel’s aesthetics. Hegel understands beauty as the sensuous⁵ manifestation of the idea. According to him, “... the Idea should realize itself externally and win a specific and present existence as the objectivity of nature and spirit” [3] (p. 111)⁶.

However, the idea in Hegel’s sense is not freedom but absolute spirit (absoluter Geist), even though absolute spirit itself is ultimately free and self-determining. If everything is the manifestation of the idea, isn’t everything beautiful? Hegel’s discourse implies that all things are beautiful if they are understood as the sensible manifestation of the absolute spirit. Nevertheless, different degrees of beauty exist in different stages of the sensitization of the idea. Of course, those without sensible appearances are not beautiful, such as pure logic in Hegel’s philosophy. Accordingly,

natural things are beautiful, whereas natural beauty is low level. If seeking the beauty of a higher level, we have to turn our sights to artifacts (works of art) because only in artifacts does the spirit possess self-consciousness. It is worth mentioning that, according to Hegel, “classical art became a conceptually adequate representation of the ideal, the consummation of the realm of beauty. Nothing can be or become more beautiful” [3] (p. 517)⁷. However, romantic art is higher than classical art because romantic art has more free spirit within [18] (p. 128). Therefore, under Hegel’s suggestion, aesthetics should mainly concentrate on works of art. In this case, aesthetics becomes the philosophy of art.

Schiller’s exposition that “beauty is freedom in appearance” debuted in *Kallias or Concerning Beauty* in 1793. At that time, Schiller understood freedom primarily as autonomy, which is self-determination, a determination from within. Schiller stressed then, “It is the same thing to be free and to be determined through oneself and from within oneself” [16] (p. 161). As for regarding beauty as the sensible manifestation of this self-determining freedom, Schiller had a clear expression: “This great idea of self-determination resonates back at us from certain appearances of nature, and we call it beauty” [16] (p. 153).

However, Schiller’s exposition on beauty has undergone some changes in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, published in 1795. It is primarily due to the change in Schiller’s understanding of freedom and human nature. At this time, Schiller supplemented and developed Kantian freedom and proposed the second kind of freedom. Beauty is mainly related to the second kind of freedom. In the note to the nineteenth letter, Schiller expresses that:

To avoid any misconception, I would observe that whenever I speak of freedom, I do not mean the sort that necessarily attaches to Man in his capacity as an intelligent being and can neither be given to him nor taken from him, but the sort that is based upon his composite nature. By only acting, in general, in a rational manner, Man displays a freedom of the first kind; by acting rationally within the limits of his material and materially within the laws of actuality, he displays a freedom of the second kind. We might explain the latter simply as a natural possibility of the former. [7] (p. Nineteenth Letter).

The second kind of freedom based on composite nature is not the freedom of autonomy but the freedom of the equilibrium between the sense impulse and the form impulse. Obviously, perfect balance, like complete self-determination, can only be an idea. Similarly, the ideal community (play impulse) between the sense impulse and the form impulse is an idea; the object of the play impulse (namely, beauty in the broadest sense) is an idea; and the human nature (*Menschheit*) associated with the play impulse is also an idea [7] (p. Fifteenth Letter).

Here, Schiller provides four closely related ideas in a Platonic sense: The second kind of freedom is play impulse, beauty, and human nature. The human being who possesses the second kind of freedom is the one who holds the equilibrium between the form impulse and the sense impulse. Man, as such, has an aesthetically balanced mood (*ästhetische Stimmung, freie Stimmung*). The play impulse is the impulse in the balanced state, and the impulse also has its object. The object of the play impulse is beauty; the real beautiful thing is the thing in which form and reality are in balance (harmony). Human nature is neither person (*Person*) nor condition (*Zustand*) [7] (p.

Eleventh Letter)⁸. The complete realization of human nature requires the unity of matter and form, chance and necessity, as well as passivity and freedom. As Schiller says, “In every condition of humanity it is precisely play, and play alone, that makes man complete” [7] (p. Fifteenth Letter).

We can see that the beauty understood by Schiller in the above citation from *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is different from the beauty presented in *Kallias or Concerning Beauty*. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, beauty is no longer freedom in appearance; it is a kind of idea *per se*. Schiller makes it explicit in the “Sixteenth Letter”:

From the interaction of two opposing impulses, then, and from the association of two opposing principles, we have seen the origin of the beautiful, whose highest ideal is therefore to be sought in the most perfect possible union and equilibrium of reality and form. But this equilibrium always remains only an idea, which can never be wholly attained by actuality [7] (p. Sixteenth Letter).

In this sense, Schiller returns to Plato: Beauty itself is a kind of idea, namely the perfect union and equilibrium between form and reality, while the beautiful things in experience only approximate the idea of beauty. In other words, Schiller distinguishes between “beauty in idea” and “beauty in experience”. The former “is eternally only something indivisible, unique, since there can exist only one single equilibrium”; the latter “will always be twofold, since through oscillation the balance may be destroyed in a twofold fashion, on one side or the other” [7] (p. Sixteenth Letter).

However, we must pay close attention to the fact that although Schiller also utters that beauty is an idea, there is still a noticeable difference between Schiller and Plato. Plato’s idea of beauty is pure and non-perceptual, while Schiller’s idea of beauty contains sensibility or reality from the very beginning. A pure, non-perceptual idea can only be purely formal, whereas an idea containing sensibility or reality can only be justified through the ideal state of perfect equilibrium.

Consequently, Schiller would not adhere to Plato’s hierarchy; that is, the idea is the most real thing, the sensible reality is the imitation of the idea, and the art is a third imitation of the reality; hence, art is misleading and should be abandoned. In Plato’s view, imitation, as the core of art, “is far removed from the truth, for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image” [15] (p. 1202); “Imitation is an inferior thing that consorts with another inferior thing to produce an inferior offspring” [15] (p. 1207). In the *Republic*, Plato says through the words of Socrates, “A tragedian is by nature third from the king and the truth, as are all other imitators” [15] (p. 1202).

On the contrary, in Schiller’s opinion, art’s semblance (Schein) is particularly significant precisely due to the current impossibility of realizing the idea (the perfect equilibrium between form and reality). The reason is that art is almost the only way to train our senses toward the perfect equilibrium between form and reality in a world filled with alienation and fragmentation. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that Schiller advocates that actuality should be “overpowered by appearance” and “nature by art” [7] (p. Ninth Letter). However, Plato wants to drive the artist (poet) out of the republic because an imitative poet “puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth” [15] (pp. 1209–1210). Plato

concludes, “In view of poetry’s nature, we had reason to banish it from the city earlier, for our argument compelled us to do so” [15] (p. 1211).

3. Must beauty also be perfect? Schiller’s overcoming of Kantian subjectivity and his proximity to Baumgarten

From the above discussion, we have seen that Schiller’s understanding of the status and function of ideas is different from Plato’s; mostly, he follows Kant [7] (p. First Letter).

In Kant’s view, the idea belongs to the concept but is a pure concept of reason. Not all concepts are ideas because there are also empirical concepts [19] (p. B377)⁹. The pure concepts of reason are transcendental ideas to which “no congruent objects can be given in the senses”. Ideas are also transcendent concepts and “exceed the bounds of all experience” [19] (p. B384)¹⁰. For example, according to Kant’s exposition, “the absolute whole” is a true and genuine idea [19] (p. B327)¹¹.

In Plato’s thought, nearly all the concepts that modern people talk about belong to ideas, such as the ideas of bed, tree, flower, and so on. According to Kant, these are empirical concepts rather than transcendent ideas because there are sensible objects under all these concepts.

By comparison, in Plato’s sense, ideas are more real than physical things, while Kant does not make such metaphysical assertions and regards ideas directly as non-real or non-empirical. Kant’s idea has been semantically defined as unrealizable, but Plato’s idea is already the most real. In such a discourse space, Schiller’s understanding of the idea lies between Plato and Kant and is even closer to Kant. However, as we have seen, Schiller’s stance is more inclined to Plato as far as taking beauty as an idea.

According to Kant, freedom is neither a pure concept of the understanding (reiner Verstandesbegriff) nor an empirical concept but a transcendental idea. As a transcendental idea, freedom does not contain anything borrowed from experience, nor can its object be given determinately in any experience [19] (pp. A533/B561)¹².

In *Kallias or Concerning Beauty*, Schiller embraced the view that freedom, as self-determination, is a transcendental idea from the outset; beauty is merely such freedom in appearance. However, as the above analysis presented, Schiller treats beauty itself as an idea in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. According to Plato, ideas cannot be induced from empirical facts; on the contrary, actual judgments and actions have already benefited from pure concepts. Schiller utters the following Platonic sentences without hesitation: “This pure rational concept of Beauty, if such a thing may be adduced, can be drawn from no actual case—rather does it itself correct and guide our judgment concerning every actual case” [7] (p. Tenth Letter).

Kant would not define beauty as an idea. According to Kant, the viewed object is only responsible for providing representation; the concern of aesthetic judgment is *de facto* “the state of mind”. This inner state is the free play of both mental powers (imagination and understanding). This free play is not guided and determined by concepts or ideas and, therefore, is purposeless.

According to Kant, imagination and understanding can work together harmoniously, although they are not restricted by a determinate concept. The pleasure

of free harmony and the pleasure of beauty explain each other, which is the mere formal purposiveness of the inner state of the “pleasure of beauty”, namely, the activity of “preserving a continuance of the state of the representation itself and the active engagement of the cognitive powers without further¹³ aim” [20] (p. 54)¹⁴.

Both imagination and understanding belong to humans, namely the viewers, and have nothing to do with the viewed objects; that is to say, Kant pushes all aesthetic activities into the human mind. In this sense, Gadamer’s criticism of Kant seems pertinent because *Critique of Judgment* opens up the “radical subjectivization of the aesthetics” [21] (p. 84)¹⁵. Schiller was already trying to correct Kantian subjectivization by arguing that beauty is a living form (*lebende Gestalt*) and an equilibrium between form and reality.

If looking at it from another angle, Kant’s point of view also has advantages. Kant does not consider the harmony between imagination and understanding a realizable idea. Such harmony in the human mind does not need the cooperation of sensible material. Therefore, the possibility of harmony between imagination and understanding always exists when one faces any object. Comparatively, in Schiller’s thought, harmony and consistency require sensible material. This precise balance (harmony) can only stay in the realm of ideas because Schiller’s harmony is the harmony of form and reality, not of imagination and understanding.

However, it is worth noting that Schiller does not always confine beauty to the realm of ideas. He introduces the view of development and endows the ideas with ultimate realizability. That is to say, although reality (sensibility) and form (reason) are not completely harmonious and consistent at the present stage, they can be harmoniously integrated, and such integration will be realized someday. By then, man will overcome all abstraction and alienation and become a free and complete person; perfect, beautiful things will also appear in reality, not just in the imaginary world of art. According to Schiller, “a real union and interchange of matter with form” occurs “with the enjoyment of beauty”; by this occurrence, “the compatibility of both natures”, “the practicability of the infinite in finiteness”, and consequently “the possibility of a sublime humanity” is proved [7] (p. Twenty-fifth Letter).

Here, we can also decipher the significant influence Schiller had on Marx. However, Marx’s argument on “realizability” is materialistic, on which human nature cannot be realized merely through artistic and aesthetic education. Only in a communist society based on rich materials will all the alienation brought about by the division of labor be ultimately overcome, and men will be free and complete. In any case, in terms of the ultimate ideal state of human beings (being free and complete), Marx undoubtedly inherits Schiller. Marx once stated that:

...In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. [22] (p. 20)¹⁶.

It is worth mentioning that Schiller’s notion of “realizability” completely deviates from Kant. In Kant’s sense, an idea is only an idea and cannot be reached definitely; it only plays a regulatory role.

Schiller's aesthetics imply three kinds of beauty. First, beauty, as the idea, is the harmony and consistency between form and sensibility in the realm of ideas. Second, beauty, as artistic beauty, refers to the harmony and consistency between form and sensibility in the world of imagination. Third, the future beauty is the real existing harmony and consistency between form and sensibility in the future. However, the realizable beauty of the future cannot be strictly distinguished from the beauty of ideas and artistic beauty in the current stage because all three kinds of beauty remain currently in the human mind. In this case, beauty can hardly go beyond human imagination. Therefore, Kant is still hard to surpass.

By comparison, we can see that Schiller's aesthetics echo Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's (1714–1762) aesthetics, while Kant opposes Baumgarten in many ways. Baumgarten defines beauty as "the perfection of sensible knowledge" [23] (pp. 10–11)¹⁷. In Baumgarten's opinion, although beauty can stay in the inner mind, such an inner state of beauty is not the highest beauty [23] (p. 13). It is like Anselm's proof of God in the Middle Ages: If God is the most perfect, IT cannot just stay in one's mind because the perfect and real God must be much more perfect than a God that is perfect only in the mind. So, God must be real. In Baumgarten's thought, beauty (harmony, consistency, and perfection) must also be sensibly manifested to achieve greater perfection. Schiller's aesthetics is closer to Baumgarten in this sense. In contrast, Kant has no intention of combining beauty with perfection. Kant separates beauty from perfection because perfection is "an objective, internal purposiveness".

However, as the above analysis shows, Schiller possesses a view of development that is absent in both Baumgarten and Kant. In Schiller's conception, the development of the individual or the human race can be divided into three separate moments or stages: physical, aesthetic, and moral. If a man should realize all his stipulations, he must pass through these three stages in a particular order, and neither nature nor the human will reverse the order of these stages [7] (p. Twenty-fourth Letter). It is clear that Schiller's conception of beauty and human nature cannot be achieved overnight.

4. Does freedom have its origin and development? Schiller's influence on later philosophers

As mentioned above, freedom is a transcendental idea in Kant's philosophy. However, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant endows freedom with reality through the practicality of pure reason. Kant's argument can be summarized as that pure reason is actually practical which is a fact; the possibility of being practical of pure reason, which does not depend on experience, inevitably requires spontaneity; it actually proves the reality of transcendental freedom [17] (p. 4).

If freedom is only a kind of suspension, the origin of freedom is only a fake question, just as discussing how unicorns evolved when no unicorns existed in this world. However, its origin and development can be discussed if freedom is real. Things that actually exist should have an origin and steps of how they have developed till today.

Then how should we talk about the origin of freedom?

According to Kant, the concept of origin is closely related to the concept of cause [19] (pp. A533/B561)¹⁸. If there is no causal connection between A and B, why should

we say B originates from A? Here is the dilemma: Is freedom still freedom if it originates from something else? If the source of freedom has nothing to do with freedom and cannot exert any influence on freedom, is it still the source of freedom? Following the conceptual stipulation of freedom, it seems that freedom cannot be influenced by anything else. Then how does Schiller deal with such a dilemma? Schiller is well aware of the essential stipulation of the concept of freedom. He states, “It follows from the very conception of freedom that it cannot be subject to influence” [7] (p. Twentieth Letter).

If it is assumed that man was created by God and that freedom was immediately and directly given by God, it is of little significance to discuss the origin and development of freedom because to admit that freedom is given by God is sufficient. However, Schiller does not believe that God created man. In the short poem “My Faith”, he expresses, “Which religion do I acknowledge? None that thou namest” [24] (p. 298). Instead, he thinks that human beings are products of nature. Such belief and insight make it possible for Schiller to discuss the origin and development of freedom.

Because of the compulsion of logic, nature, in its broadest sense, in which the human race is born, must be free; otherwise, how could an unfree nature produce a free man? It is a categorical error that what is free arises from what is not. It is because Schiller has the concept of “nature in the widest sense” that he can logically say, “Freedom itself is an operation of nature (in the widest sense of the term)” [7] (p. Twentieth Letter). Schiller still adheres to this broad view of nature in the later published *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*. His “pure nature” (“as an undivided sensuous unity as a harmonious whole”) [4] (p. 193) and “true nature” (as “the subject of naive poetry”) [4] (p. 215) can only be understood under this broad view of nature. Schiller’s exposition implies that reason and freedom have already been preset in nature.

In short, Schiller offers a solution that nature (in the widest sense) is free; however, the initial freedom in nature is unawakened. The so-called origin and development of freedom is its awakening, growth, and strengthening in the relationship with matter. Accordingly, freedom does not belong exclusively to human beings (or other rational beings); even lower animals already possess the sprout of freedom. Schiller is different from Kant at this point. Though Schiller does not systematically elucidate this thought in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, it could not be more apparent throughout the book. In this case, we can take Schelling, Hegel, and Marx as the inheritors and developers of Schiller. Although Schiller inherits Plato and Kant from their core ideas, he makes these ideas historical. In other words, the distinction is that the vision of Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Marx is historical, while that of Plato and Kant is ahistorical.

In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller has a very vivid expression about the awakening of freedom and the relationship between freedom and material conditions:

Certainly nature has given even to the creatures without reason more than the bare necessities of life and cast a gleam of freedom over the darkness of animal existence. When the lion is not gnawed by hunger and no beast of prey is challenging him to battle, his idle energy creates for itself an object; he fills the echoing desert with his high-spirited roaring, and his exuberant power enjoys

itself in purposeless display. The insect swarms with joyous life in the sunbeam, and it is assuredly not the cry of desire that we hear in the melodious warbling of the songbird. Undeniably there is freedom in these movements... [7] (p. Twenty-seventh Letter).

Schiller's expression quoted above has a far-reaching influence. He makes some assertions about nature: Nature does not always keep living things in a state of scarcity; the awakening of freedom has something to do with material surplus. It can be seen that, in Schiller's thought, freedom is based on matter; in places where sensible materials are insufficient, freedom will not wake up, let alone grow. Such a view of Schiller, full of materialistic factors, must undoubtedly have influenced Marx. For instance, Marx emphasizes in *Capital* that people bound by survival labor could not have freedom. He states, "In fact, the realm of freedom does not commence until the point is passed where labor under the compulsion of necessity and of external utility is required. In the very nature of things, it lies beyond the sphere of material production in the strict meaning of the term" [25] (p. 954).

As Zhang Yuneng points out, "Marxist practical aesthetics is not only the logical development but also the revolutionary practical surmounting of Schiller's aesthetics of human nature" [26]. However, it is worth mentioning that ideas are inherently difficult to achieve, whether through aesthetic education or materialistic practice. In this sense, both Schiller and Marx cannot escape the criticism of utopianism.

5. A conclusive clarification of the key terms used by Schiller

As noted earlier, unlike other philosophers, Schiller did not provide clear definitions for the terms he employed. However, based on the previous comparisons and discussions, we are now able, and it is necessary to provide a conclusive clarification of the terms used by Schiller. This clarification centers around the concept of freedom. Freedom is a polysemous term; therefore, I will not conduct a comprehensive historical examination of philosophy but will limit the comparative scope to the philosophers mentioned above.

Kant primarily emphasized the spontaneity of freedom in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he placed greater emphasis on the aspect of autonomy in freedom, closely linking freedom with moral law. In writing *Kallias or Concerning Beauty*, Schiller followed Kant, primarily understanding freedom as autonomy. However, in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller developed his notion of the second kind of freedom. Kant's autonomy is strictly moral, meaning self-legislation through rational will rather than freedom from external constraints. Understanding the second kind of freedom hinges on grasping Schiller's fundamental view that true freedom exists only in the equilibrium between form and reality. In other words, such equilibrium refers to the balance between the sense impulse, driven by desires and emotions, and the form impulse, which seeks order and rationality. Schiller's first kind of freedom aligns with Kant's moral autonomy, while the second kind of freedom is presented as an aesthetic equilibrium between sensibility and rationality. Through his unique concept of the second kind of freedom, Schiller developed a notion of humanity (Menschheit) associated with aesthetic equilibrium, which differs from Kant's personality linked to moral autonomy.

It is important to emphasize that Schiller's second kind of freedom, understood as the balance between form and reality, does not remain merely an ideal. Whether understood in a Platonic or Kantian sense, the idea of Schiller's second kind of freedom ultimately aims for realization. Thus, the balance expressed by the second kind of freedom is neither a psychological state, nor a subjective goal of individuals or groups, nor a regulative ideal like Kant's moral law; rather, it is not an existing reality either. It resembles a historical condition toward which society progresses. Schiller believed that the second kind of freedom would inevitably be realized in the future, with the path to this realization being aesthetic education. This point has drawn considerable criticism, with Schiller being accused of utopianism. However, he also discussed the material foundation necessary for this realization, which greatly inspired Marx, leading Marx to develop his theory of achieving freedom and complete humanity through political economy.

What is particularly noteworthy here is Schiller's clear association of freedom with beauty, whether understanding beauty as freedom in appearance or directly as the second kind of freedom. However, in Plato, freedom pertains to rational control and harmony within the soul rather than Kant's autonomy. In Baumgarten, freedom is not a primary concept but can be connected to aesthetic perfection in perception. Yet, neither clearly links freedom with beauty. In Plato's view, beautiful things are imitations of the idea of beauty, but he does not clarify what the idea of beauty is. In Baumgarten's perspective, beauty is interpreted as perfect sensible knowledge.

As previously mentioned, Schiller was not a systematic philosopher. He did not clearly articulate his own philosophical system, nor did he simply merge the thoughts of his predecessors. However, Schiller (along with his contemporaries) made significant contributions to the philosophical shift of his time. His philosophical reflections are crucial. After Schiller, the realm of sensible reality became an essential element that philosophers could no longer overlook. As Gadamer noted, he overcame the subjectivity of Kant's philosophy. In other words, he accelerated the movement of German philosophy away from the epistemological preferences initiated by Kant, turning toward a more ontologically focused philosophical inquiry.

6. Conclusion

The concept of the "idea" is instrumental in accessing Schiller's aesthetic theory, yet its interpretation varies significantly across different philosophers. Therefore, accurately positioning Schiller's understanding of the idea is essential. In Plato's framework, the idea represents the highest form of reality but remains unrepresentable through sensible experience, with sensible objects merely imitating these ideas. Kant's philosophy, in contrast, treats the idea as non-empirical and primarily regulatory. While Schiller's use of the term "idea" aligns more closely with Kant, his conceptualization of beauty follows a Platonic tradition but insists on its ultimate realizability, diverging from both Plato and Kant. This synthesis of the idea and its realizability is a defining feature of Schiller's aesthetics and elucidates why philosophers like Hegel and Marx highly value his work.

Plato's conception of beauty, characterized by its disconnection from freedom, contrasts with Kant's view, which tightly links beauty and freedom. Schiller,

acknowledging this relationship, aligns with Kant in this respect. However, Schiller's definition of beauty—characterized by the harmony between form and reality—diverges from Kant's notion of harmony between imagination and understanding¹⁹. Schiller's integration of beauty, the second kind of freedom, and human nature allows him to mitigate the subjectivity in Kantian aesthetics. By reuniting beauty with perfection, Schiller's perspective also reflects Baumgarten's influence.

Schiller's argument that freedom possesses both an origin and a developmental trajectory significantly impacts the historical development narrative with distinctly German characteristics. In this regard, Schiller's intellectual position aligns more closely with Hegel and Marx rather than with Plato and Kant. Schiller not only builds upon and extends the ideas of Plato and Kant but also initiates a progressive historical view that Hegel and Marx later developed. However, a potential drawback of Schiller's philosophy is the assertion that ideas have been fully realized in the actual world, which may preclude further improvements to reality.

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Notes

- ¹ The original German text: “Es muß Schiller das große Verdienst zugestanden werden, die Kantische Subjektivität und Abstraktion des Denkens durchbrochen und den Versuch gewagt zu haben, über sie hinanus die Einheit und Versöhnung denkend als das Wahre zu fassen und künstlerisch zu verwirklichen” [27] (p. 89).
- ² The original German text is: “Dadurch erstieg mit Schelling die Wissenschaft ihren absoluten Standpunkt” [27] (p. 91).
- ³ The original German text is: “die Idee als das allein Wahrhafte und Wirkliche” [27] (p. 91).
- ⁴ For the original German reference, see [28] (p. A22).
- ⁵ “Sinnlich” in German is translated here as “sensuous” See [3] (p. xiv).
- ⁶ The original German text is: “Doch die Idee soll sich auch äußerlich realisieren und bestimmte vorhandene Existenz als natürliche und geistige Objektivität gewinnen” [27] (p. 151).
- ⁷ The original German text is: “Dadurch ward die klassische Kunst die begriffsgemäße Darstellung des Ideals, die Vollendung des Reichs der Schönheit. Schöneres kann nicht sein und werden” [18] (pp. 127–128).
- ⁸ Schiller describes “person” and “condition” at the beginning of the “Eleventh Letter”: “It distinguishes in Man something that endures and something that perpetually alters. The enduring it calls his *person*, the changing his *condition*” [7] (p. Eleventh Letter).
- ⁹ For the original German reference, see [28] (p. B377).
- ¹⁰ For the original German reference, see [28] (p. B384).
- ¹¹ For the original German reference, see [28] (p. B327).
- ¹² For the original German reference, see [28] (pp. A533/B561).
- ¹³ The original German text is “weitere”; but translating it into “ulterior” is not very appropriate, so we have rewritten “ulterior” to “further”.
- ¹⁴ The original German text is: “Sie hat aber doch Kausalität in sich, nämlich den Zustand der Vorstellung selbst und die Beschäftigung der Erkenntniskräfte ohne weitere Absicht zu erhalten” [29] (p. 138).
- ¹⁵ For the original German reference, see [30] (p. 103).
- ¹⁶ The original German text is: “... während in der kommunistischen Gesellschaft, wo Jeder nicht einen ausschließlichen Kreis der Tätigkeit hat, sondern sich in jedem beliebigen Zweige ausbilden kann, die Gesellschaft die allgemeine Produktion regelt und mir eben dadurch möglich macht, heute dies, morgen jenes zu tun, morgens zu jagen, nachmittags zu fischen, abends Viehzucht zu treiben, nach dem Essen zu kritisieren, wie ich gerade Lust habe, ohne je Jäger, Fischer, Hirt oder Kritiker zu werden” [31] (p. 33).
- ¹⁷ The corresponding Latin expression is “perfectio cognitionis sensitivae”.
- ¹⁸ For the original German reference, see [28] (pp. A533/B561).

- ¹⁹ Later philosophers, such as Nietzsche, did not use harmony but tended to interpret beauty through contradictions and forces. See [32] (pp. 63–65).

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