

*Kant's "curious catalogue of human frailties"  
and the great portrait of nature*

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As has been noted in the recent literature on Kant's ethics, Kant holds that although natural drives such as feelings, emotions, and inclinations cannot lead directly to moral worth, they nevertheless play some kind of role vis-à-vis morality.<sup>1</sup> The issue is thus to understand this role within the limits set by Kant's account of freedom, and it is usually tackled by examining the relationship between moral and nonmoral motivation in the *Groundwork*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and more recently, the *Anthropology*.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the aim of this chapter is to argue that the *Observations* is a peculiar work, for by contrast with later works, its focus is not on the ways in which nature helps human beings become more moral, or better moral agents, but rather on how it ensures that the human species survives and flourishes independently of its morality, and in particular despite its lack thereof. In this sense, the *Observations* emphasizes first that the human species can, and does, function independently of its moral worth; and second, that it is intended to function beautifully as a whole in spite of its lack of moral worth. On this basis, I will conclude that the Kant of the *Observations* is more akin to a Mandeville than a Rousseau – he describes the functioning of the species, spelling out its survival mechanisms through natural drives, rather than explains that and how it ought to perfect itself.

I will support this claim by examining the *Observations*' "curious catalogue of human frailties" from the perspective of the relationship between natural and moral properties (*Beo* 2:214; see in Kant 2007 [*Obs, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*], 29). The first section will flesh out what Kant only hints at, namely the "standpoint from which these contrasts [between the noble and the weak sides of human beings] can

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Herman 1993, Baron 1995, Sherman 1997, and Loudon 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In Cohen 2009, I have addressed this issue in the context of Kant's *Anthropology* by arguing that although natural drives have no part to play with the agent's moral improvement as such, they help the realization of his moral choices by making him more morally efficacious.

nevertheless exhibit the great portrait of human nature” (*Beo* 2:227, *Obs* 39). The second section will analyze Kant’s account of temperaments and gender in order to determine whether these categories can ground a sustained account of the relationship between natural drives and moral worth. The third section will turn to the dichotomy between the “grotesque” and the “adventurous,” and suggest that they should be interpreted as degenerations of the inclinations nature has implanted in human beings in order to compensate for their lack of virtue. This will lead me to conclude that inclinations are nature’s means for “the whole of moral nature [to display] beauty and dignity” (*Beo* 2:227, *Obs* 39).

#### I THE GREAT PORTRAIT OF NATURE

Kant’s account of “Nature’s intentions” for the human species has been the object of numerous debates. As is well known, he sometimes portrays nature as having providential aspects, and in particular, as designed to allow human beings to fulfill their moral destiny: nature “strives to give us an education that makes us receptive to purposes higher than those that nature itself can provide.” This purpose is “man, the subject of morality, . . . the *final purpose* of creation to which all of nature is subordinated” (*KU* 5:433–36; see Kant 2000 [*CJ*, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*], 321–22). In addition, he presents a distinct, “naturalistic” account of nature according to which it aims at the preservation of the human species: “Nature has also stored into her economy such a rich treasure of arrangements for her particular purpose, which is nothing less than the maintenance of the species” (*ApH* 7:310; see in Kant 2007 [*Anth*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*], 225).<sup>3</sup>

These two rival conceptions of nature (naturalistic vs. moral) give rise to a tension that will plague Kant’s ethics all the way through its mature period. It can be summed up in the following question: Can nature bring about some form of moral progress, or at least some moral worth? If so, it would be in tension with Kant’s account of freedom. For given his transcendental framework, we seem to be stuck with the impossibility of any type of influence of the sensible on the intelligible: empirical factors (which include all natural drives, that is, inclinations, feelings, emotions, etc.) cannot effect any change in the moral character of agents, for we cannot in principle postulate, even practically, what is impossible from a theoretical point of view. The implication of this claim for the relationship between nature and freedom takes the form of a dilemma. Theoretically, there can be no causal

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of this distinction, see Cohen 2009, ch. 5.

Table 7.1 *The three modalities of the relationship between nature and morality.*

Purposefully fake	“demeanor” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)	“outer appearance” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)	“delusion” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)	“conceal” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)
Contingently tally	“harmonize” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:215)	“match” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:213)	“great similarity” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)	“contingently agree” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:215)
Positively support	“supplement” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:217)	“inspire” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:211)	“carry” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:212)	“helpful drives” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:217)

influence of the empirical on the intelligible and the only possible causal connection between the agent and his environment operates from the latter to his *empirical* character; yet practically, nature seems to have a moral relevance that cannot be accounted for. As a result, either we should abandon the theoretical impossibility of an empirical influence on the intelligible, or we have to accept the moral futility of “nature” as a whole, including culture, politics, and education. Or to reformulate the dilemma, either nature and morality contingently harmonize, or we have to interpret the whole of nature as arranged so as to support morality, or at least as preparing us for morality, in a way that cannot be accounted for given the theoretical restrictions of the transcendental system.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Observations*, as suggested in Table 7.1, Kant seems to want it both ways: some passages suggest that nature can only tally with morality in a contingent fashion (i.e. it only happens to harmonize with morality), while others suggest that it can play an active role in the realization of moral worth (i.e. it can help make it happen) – to which should be added the passages that emphasize the fact that many natural drives motivate us to fake moral worth.

The distinction between the three modalities of the relationship between nature and morality takes the form of a trichotomy of feelings nature provides human beings with: the feelings of honor and shame, complaisance and sympathy, and beauty and dignity of human nature (Table 7.2). They are all feelings, but what distinguishes them is that the first two merely compensate for the lack of morality, while the latter alone positively promotes it. While nature cannot make us virtuous, it can do one of three things: strengthen the virtuous motive (through the feelings of beauty and dignity of human nature), supplement virtue (through sympathy and complaisance), or fake it (through honor and shame).

<sup>4</sup> For another formulation of this dilemma, see Shell 2002, 457.

Table 7.2 *The trichotomy of feelings.*

Moral worth	Feeling
“Simulacrum of virtue” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)	Honor <sup>a</sup> Shame
“Adopted virtues” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:217)	Complaisance <sup>b</sup> Sympathy <sup>c</sup>
“Genuine virtue” ( <i>Beo</i> 2:218)	Feeling of beauty of human nature <sup>d</sup> Feeling of dignity of human nature <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> “The opinion that others may have of our value and their judgment of our actions is a motivation of great weight, which can coax us into many sacrifices, and what a good part of humanity would have done neither out of an immediately arising emotion of goodheartedness nor out of principles happens often enough merely for the sake of outer appearance, out of a delusion that is very useful although in itself very facile, as if the judgment of others determined the worth of ourselves and our actions. What happens from this impulse is not in the least virtuous, for which reason everyone who wants to be taken for virtuous takes good care to conceal the motivation of lust for honor” (*Beo* 2:218, *Obs* 32).

<sup>b</sup> Complaisance is the inclination to “make ourselves agreeable to others”; it is “beautiful and charming” (*Beo* 2:216–18, *Obs* 30–31).

<sup>c</sup> Sympathy is the “kindly participation in the fate of other people”; it is “beautiful and lovable” (*Beo* 2:215, *Obs* 30).

<sup>d</sup> It is the ground of “universal affection” (*Beo* 2:217, *Obs* 30).

<sup>e</sup> It is the ground of “universal respect” (*Beo* 2:217, *Obs* 30).

The feelings of the beauty and the dignity of human nature are the only ones that give rise to genuine virtue because “[o]nly when one subordinates one’s own particular inclination to such an enlarged one can our kindly drives be proportionately applied and bring about the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue” (*Beo* 2:217, *Obs* 31). In this sense, the purpose of the feelings of sympathy and complaisance on the one hand, and shame and honor on the other, is not to prepare us for morality as such but rather to compensate for the lack of virtue in order to secure the survival of the human species in spite of the moral shortcomings of its parts.

In recognition of the weakness of human nature and the little power that the universal moral feeling exercises over most hearts, providence has placed such helpful drives in us as supplements for virtue, which move some to beautiful actions even without principles while at the same time being able to give others, who are ruled by these principles, a greater impetus and a stronger impulse thereto. (*Beo* 2:217, *Obs* 31)

These natural drives (sympathy, complaisance, honor, and shame) are the means nature uses to compensate for human beings’ lack of virtue in order to realize its end for the species (Table 7.3). In this sense, nature produces an

Table 7.3 *The feelings that compensate for the lack of virtue* (Beo 2:217–18).

	Function	Motivation	Limitation	Moral worth
Sympathy and complaisance	Supplement virtue	Move us without principles	Insufficient to drive actions for the common good	“adopted virtues”
Honor and shame	Counterfeit virtue	Move us by balancing self-interest and sensuality	Restricted to demeanor in the eyes of others	“simulacrum of virtue”

organic whole where natural drives lead to the same overall result as would morally worthy intentions. Yet although natural drives and virtue are both functionally equivalent, crucially they are not morally equivalent:

One certainly cannot call that frame of mind virtuous that is a source of actions of the sort to which virtue would also lead but on grounds that only contingently agree with it, and which thus given its nature can also often conflict with the universal rules of virtue. (*Beo* 2:215, *Obs* 30)

Sympathy and shame are thus the heteronomous forms of the feeling of the beauty of human nature, while complaisance and honor are the heteronomous forms of the feeling of the dignity of human nature.<sup>5</sup> Their purpose, Kant suggests, is to secure the social order of the human species and peaceful relationships among its members.<sup>6</sup> To understand this claim, we should

<sup>5</sup> Note that a thread connects Kant’s early account of the feelings of the beauty and the dignity of human nature in the *Observations* with what he later calls moral feelings in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. For, the feeling of the beauty of human nature becomes the feeling of “love of human beings” (i.e. the pleasure felt from representation of the dignity of others’ rational nature), while the feeling of the dignity of human nature becomes the “feeling of respect” (i.e. self-esteem) (*MS* 6:401–3; see in Kant 1999a [*MM*, *Metaphysics of Morals*], 530–31).

<sup>6</sup> This line of thought remains present all the way up to *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Anthropology*: “Nature has already implanted in human beings receptivity to these feelings [shared sympathetic feelings] . . . [T]he *receptivity*, given by nature itself, to the feeling of joy and sadness in common with others . . . is *unfree* . . . the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us . . . is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish” (*MS* 6:456–57, *MM* 575–76). “To this end it has very wisely and beneficently simulated objects for the naturally lazy human being, which according to his imagination are real ends (ways of acquiring honor, control, and money). These objects give the person who is reluctant to undertake any *work enough to keep him occupied and busy doing nothing*, so that the interest which he takes in them is an interest of mere delusion. And nature therefore really is playing with the human being and spurring him (the subject) to its ends; while he stands convinced (objectively) that he has set his own end” (*ApH* 7:275, *Anth* 375).

turn to his brief remarks on “the standpoint of the great portrait of human nature” (*Beo* 2:226–27, *Obs* 38–39). This standpoint divides the human species into four groups, classified below from the smallest to the largest:

1. Few: the principled (i.e. they act in accordance with principles)
  - a. From the standpoint of nature, it is a good thing they are so few since one can err with principles.
  - b. From the human standpoint, acting from principles is noble.
2. More numerous: the good-hearted (i.e. they act out of good-hearted drives)
  - a. From the standpoint of nature, it is excellent that they are numerous since it accomplishes the great aim of nature just as well as animal instinct.
  - b. From the human standpoint, good-hearted drives are beautiful but not noble.
3. Most common: the self-interested (i.e. they are moved by self-interest)
  - a. From the standpoint of nature, it is an advantageous natural incentive that serves the common good in spite of itself because it realizes the condition of possibility of the spread of “beauty and harmony” by providing a solid foundation for social order.
  - b. From the human standpoint, it is a prudential attitude to adopt, but it is neither beautiful nor noble.
4. Present in all, although in unequal measures: the honor-seekers (i.e. they are moved by the love of honor)
  - a. From the standpoint of nature, it is an excellent accompanying drive since it provides hidden incentives to adopt a standpoint outside oneself in order to judge the propriety and demeanor that one presents to others.<sup>7</sup>
  - b. From the human standpoint, it “gives the whole a beauty that charms to the point of admiration.”

Through the interaction of these various human groups, each motivated by a different type of feeling, the unity of the human species shines forth and thereby the whole displays beauty and dignity (*Beo* 2:227, *Obs* 39). Although Kant’s claim in this respect is essentially concerned with the contribution of feelings, the next section will argue that the variety of human types (and in

<sup>7</sup> Similarly in the *Anthropology*, Kant writes that “love of honor is the constant companion of virtue” (*ApH* 7:257, *Anth* 359). In this sense, one function of the love of honor, which makes us adopt a standpoint outside ourselves, is to prepare us for morality. Think also of the *sensus communis*, and in particular its second maxim, “To think in the position of everyone else,” which allows “broad-minded” thinking (*KU* 5:293–94, *CJ* 173–74).

particular gender and temperaments) should be interpreted in a similar fashion as contributing to the beauty and dignity of the human whole.

## 2 HUMAN TYPES, NATURAL DRIVES, AND THE UNITY OF THE SPECIES

From the publication of the *Observations* all the way through to the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant analyzes human natural predispositions according to four criteria: temperament, gender, nation, and race. Relative to these criteria, Kant distinguishes between different “types,” as shown in Table 7.4. As I have argued elsewhere (see Cohen 2006), each human “type” should be interpreted as the means to the realization of a particular purpose that contributes to the realization of Nature’s overall purpose for the species, as summarized in Table 7.5. The aim of this section is to examine two of these types, gender and temperament, from the perspective of the great portrait of nature.<sup>8</sup>

### *2.1 Temperaments, natural drives, and moral worth*

In the *Observations*, Kant distinguishes between four temperaments: the sanguine “seeks joy in himself and around himself, amuses others, and is

Table 7.4 *The four human types.*

	Race	Sex	Person	Nation
Criterion	Hereditary transmitted features	Gender	Temperament	Civil whole united through common descent
Type	White, Negro, Hindu, Hunnish–Mongolian–Kalmuck	Male and female	Sanguine, melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic	French, English, Spanish, etc.

<sup>8</sup> The reason why I focus on gender and temperaments in particular is that more than races and nations, they play a crucial role in the preservation and the functioning of the whole (the human species). The natural function of races and nations is centered on the relationship between different groups (national and racial) and their environment (whether internationally or environmentally). In this sense, they are concerned with the interaction of the parts with each other rather than the contribution of the different groups to the whole.

Table 7.5 *Human types and nature's purposes.*

	Type	Nature's purpose
Gender	Male, female	Reproduction and preservation of the human species
Temperament	Sanguine, melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic	Diversity of human character (leading to social antagonism) which secures civil peace
Race	White, Negro, Hindu, Hunnish–Mongolian–Kalmuck	Diversity of biological character so as to be suited for all climates
Nation	French, English, German, Italian, etc.	Diversity of national character (leading to external war) which secures international peace

good company. He has much moral sympathy”; the melancholic “is so called not because, robbed of the joys of life, he worries himself into blackest dejection, but because his sentiments, if they were to be increased above a certain degree or to take a false direction through some causes, would more readily result in that than in some other condition”; the choleric “considers his own value and the value of his things and actions on the basis of the propriety or the appearance with which it strikes the eye. With regard to the inner quality and the motivations that the object itself contains, he is cold, neither warmed by true benevolence nor moved by respect”; finally, “in the *phlegmatic* mixture there are ordinarily no ingredients of the sublime or the beautiful in any particularly noticeable degree, this quality of mind does not belong in the context of our considerations” (*Beo* 2:220–24, *Obs* 33–36). While it is unnecessary to discuss the detail of each temperament here, what is crucial for my present purpose is that through the variety of temperaments it has created, Nature can be seen as willing the diversity rather than the uniformity of the human species in order to ensure its functioning, just as, as shown in Section 1, it divides the human species into four groups in order to secure its unity.

If we compare the casts of mind of human beings in so far as one of these three species of feeling [feelings of the beauty and dignity of human nature, sympathy and complaisance, and honor and shame] dominates in them and determines their moral character, we find that each of them stands in closer kinship with one of the temperaments as they are usually divided . . . since the finer moral sentiments here mentioned are more compatible with one or the other of these temperaments and for the most part are actually so united. (*Beo* 2:218–19, *Obs* 32)



Table 7.6 *The correspondence of temperaments and natural drives*  
(Beo 2:219–20).

	Feeling	Aesthetic property	Moral worth
Choleric	Honor	Magnificent	Simulacrum of virtue
Sanguine	Sympathy	Beautiful	Adopted virtue
Melancholic	Noble	Sublime	Genuine virtue
Phlegmatic	None	None	–

Note: –, not applicable.

Each temperament corresponds to a kind of feeling (or lack thereof) (Table 7.6) so that we find that nature has distributed temperaments in accordance with the great portrait it had in mind for the human species.

Genuine virtue from principles therefore has something about it that seems to agree most with the *melancholic* frame of mind in a moderate sense. . . . In this temperament [sanguine] we shall have to seek the well-loved qualities that we called adopted virtues.

The feeling for honor is usually already taken as a mark of the *choleric* complexion. . . .

A person is never without all traces of finer sentiment, but a greater lack of the latter, which is comparatively called a lack of feeling, is found in the character of the *phlegmatic*. (Beo 2:219–20, *Obs* 32–33)

Through the balance of temperaments, Nature ensures that the whole exhibits an equilibrium that is sufficient to allow it to function beautifully: “In this way the different groups unite themselves in a painting of magnificent expression, where in the midst of great variety unity shines forth” (Beo 2:227, *Obs* 39).<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 *Gender, natural drives, and moral worth*

Numerous pages of the *Observations* are dedicated to questions of gender and in particular feminine characteristics. Without getting into the detail of Kant’s account of gender differences, one passage deserves to be considered, for it reveals nature at work in women’s natural characteristics; namely, it

<sup>9</sup> Note that the premise of this claim is that an organic whole in which a variety of parts function harmoniously for and through the whole is more beautiful than a whole composed of identical parts. While there is no space to justify this claim here, an appeal to the arguments spelt out in the *Critique of Judgment* would no doubt be helpful.

uses their natural aversion for ugliness as the means to making them act in accordance with virtue (rather than virtuously) and thus helping the functioning of the human whole.

Women will avoid evil not because it is unjust but because it is ugly, and for them virtuous actions mean those that are ethically beautiful. Nothing of ought, nothing of must, nothing of obligation. To a woman anything by way of orders and sullen compulsion is insufferable. They do something only because they love to, and the art lies in making sure that they love only what is good. It is difficult for me to believe that the fair sex is capable of principles, and I hope not to give offense by this, for these are also extremely rare among the male sex. In place of these, however, providence has implanted goodly and benevolent sentiments in their bosom, a fine feeling for propriety and a complaisant soul. (*Beo* 2:231–32, *Obs* 43)<sup>10</sup>

That nature has to compensate for women's deficiencies is in fact a good thing since as already mentioned, one can easily err with regard to principles – and we can presume that women are even worse than men in this respect. Because they are incapable of acting on principles, nature is left with the task of compensating for their inability through the natural inclination for beautiful things. In this sense, women are really amoral creatures, and most of their weaknesses are mere “beautiful faults” (*Beo* 2:232, *Obs* 43): because they have no moral color, they are easily forgiven. However,

[i]f vanity is a fault that in a woman is well deserving of forgiveness, nevertheless *conceitedness* in them is not only blameworthy, as in humans in general, but entirely disfigures the character of their sex. For this quality is exceedingly stupid and ugly and entirely opposed to engaging, modest charm. (*Beo* 2:232, *Obs* 44)

Kant singles out the particular attribute of conceitedness because it “disfigures” women, which suggests that it makes them ugly by going against nature's intention for them, namely charm and modesty.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to vanity, which “seeks approbation and to a certain degree honors those on whose account the effort is made,” conceitedness “already believes itself to

<sup>10</sup> Yet the fact that women are naturally attracted to beauty (as a compensation for their lack of principles) suggests that beautiful things are naturally good and ugly things naturally vicious (and vice versa) – which leads us back to the problem of nature's harmony with morality. Unfortunately, there is no space to tackle this issue here. However, a way out of this vicious circle could consist in showing first that insofar as beauty is the symbol of morality (as argued in the *Critique of Judgment*), due to their lack of principles and understanding, women have to reach moral norms indirectly via their aesthetic symbol. And second, women have to be trained: “the art lies in making sure that they love only what is good” (*Beo* 2:232, *Obs* 43). Thus, women's aesthetic education could offer a way of ensuring that the natural harmony between beauty and morality is internalized and acted upon.

<sup>11</sup> “The noble qualities of this sex . . . announce themselves by nothing more clearly and surely than by the *modesty* of a kind of noble simplicity and naïvete” (*Beo* 2:235, *Obs* 45). By contrast, conceitedness repels: “whoever insists on haughtiness invites everyone around her to reproach her” (*Beo* 2:233, *Obs* 44).

be in complete possession of that approbation, and making no effort to acquire it, it also wins none" (*Beo* 2:233, *Obs* 44). By being conceited, women preclude themselves from achieving the one thing nature wants from them, that is, to charm men through their attractiveness and thereby refine men's taste and secure the reproduction of the species.

Kant spends most of the third section of the *Observations* discussing what nature does for female attributes, and his remarks about male qualities are sparse. The *Anthropology* gives a clue as to why this is the case: "culture does not introduce these feminine qualities, it only allows them to develop and become recognizable under favorable conditions," and thus "in anthropology the characteristic features of the female sex, more than those of the male sex, are a topic of study for the philosopher" (*ApH* 7:303, *Anth* 400).<sup>12</sup> In any case, what is clear is that "the ends of nature are aimed more at *ennobling* the man and *beautifying* the woman by means of the sexual inclination" (*Beo* 2:240, *Obs* 50).

The analysis of the role of gender and temperaments expounded in this section suggests that although Kant's claim about the great portrait of nature (i.e. "the different groups unite themselves in a painting of magnificent expression, where in the midst of great variety unity shines forth" [*Beo* 2:227, *Obs* 39]) is essentially concerned with the feelings described in Section 1, taken together, Kant's remarks on the various human types and their relationship to the functioning of the species as a whole should be interpreted in a similar fashion as contributing to the beauty and dignity of the human whole. To complete Kant's great portrait of nature in this respect, I have summarized it in Table 7.7.

### 3 THE DEGENERATION OF NATURAL TENDENCIES: THE ADVENTUROUS AND THE GROTESQUE

Despite the beauty and dignity of the human whole composed for us by motherly nature, Kant suggests that its major shortcoming is that some natural tendencies are susceptible to degenerating into ugly and/or vicious ones: "In human nature there are never to be found praiseworthy qualities that do not at the same time degenerate through endless gradations into the most extreme imperfection" (*Beo* 2:213, *Obs* 28). To elucidate this claim, I examine the dichotomy between the "adventurous," which I will define as a

<sup>12</sup> Thus, Kant does not consider the possibility of their social conditioning. As Robin May Schott argues, Kant "asserts that women's character, in contrast to men's, is wholly defined by natural needs. Women's lack of self-determination, in his view, is intrinsic to their nature" (Schott 1996, 474).

Table 7.7 *Expanded version of the great portrait of nature.*<sup>a</sup>

Feeling	Moral worth	Aesthetic status	Temperament	Gender	Races	Nation
Noble and righteous	True virtue	Sublime	Melancholic	Men	White	English, Japanese
Good heart	Adopted virtue	Beautiful	Sanguine	Women	Hindus	French, Persian
Honor and shame	Simulacrum of virtue	Magnificent	Choleric	Male (honor) and Female (shame)	Negroes	Spanish
Lack of feelings	None	None	Phlegmatic	–	Americans	Dutch and African (as weakness), German (as strength)

*Note:* –, not applicable.

<sup>a</sup>Note that I have added the categories of race and nation despite the fact that there is no space to develop Kant's account of them here. However, there is sufficient textual evidence in the *Observations* to slot them in this table.

perversion of beautiful natural tendencies, and the “grotesque,” which I will define as a perversion of sublime natural tendencies. Although this may seem to suggest that nature’s great plan is far from reliable in the long run, I will argue with Kant that “[i]t is never the fault of nature if we do not appear with a good demeanor, but is rather due to the fact that we would pervert her” (*Beo* 2:240, *Obs* 50). Thus, “whatever one does contrary to the favor of nature one always does very badly” (*Beo* 2:242, *Obs* 51).

To begin with, I have organized Kant’s scattered remarks about the degeneration of beautiful and sublime qualities in Table 7.8.

On the one hand, noble human qualities are not only sublime, they are also a means to the realization of virtue, as appears most clearly in the examples of melancholy as a withdrawal from the tumult of the world and the restraint of passions by principles.<sup>13</sup> The former, which will take the form of the duty of apathy in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, allows the agent to distance himself from the feelings and inclinations that come from his nature, thereby reinforcing the strength of moral consciousness.<sup>14</sup> The latter, which will take the form of the culture of discipline in the *Critique of Judgment*, allows the agent to develop control over his inclinations, thereby indirectly consolidating moral resolve, determination, and strength of character.<sup>15</sup> Of course, neither melancholy nor discipline are intrinsically good, for they could be used for immoral purposes; but insofar as they are a means a good will can use, they can acquire indirect moral worth.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, Kant’s examples of degeneration, and in particular grotesqueries, are not merely a hindrance vis-à-vis morality, they are wrong because

<sup>13</sup> “Melancholy withdrawal from the tumult of the world out of a legitimate weariness is *noble*” and “Subduing one’s passions by means of principles is *sublime*” (*Beo* 2:215, *Obs* 29).

<sup>14</sup> “Since virtue is based on inner freedom it contains a positive command to a human being, namely to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason’s) control and so to rule over himself, which goes beyond forbidding him to let himself be governed by his feelings and inclinations (the duty of *apathy*); for unless reason holds the reins of government in its own hands, his feelings and inclinations play the master over him” (*MS* 6:408, *MM* 536).

<sup>15</sup> The culture of discipline “consists in the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires, by which we are made, attached as we are to certain things of nature, incapable of choosing for ourselves, . . . while yet we are free enough to tighten or loosen them, to lengthen or shorten them, as the ends of reason require” (*KU* 5:432, *CJ* 299). And as Kant writes in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “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 the human being’s moral resolution; and since it is the human being *himself* who puts these obstacles in the way of his maxims, virtue is not only self-constraint (for then one natural inclination could strive to overcome another), but also self-constraint in accordance with a principle of inner freedom” (*MS* 6:394, *MM* 524–25).

<sup>16</sup> As Kant suggests in the *Groundwork*, “Some qualities are even conducive to this good will itself and can make it much easier; despite this, however, they have no inner unconditional worth but always presuppose a good will, which limits the esteem one otherwise rightly has for them and does not permit their being taken as absolutely good” (*G* 4:393–94, see in Kant 1999a, 49–50).

Table 7.8 *The degeneration of beautiful and sublime qualities.*

Qualities	Risk	Seclusion	Passion	Literature	Knowledge
Noble	Danger for friends, rights, or country	Melancholy withdrawal from world tumult	Subduing passions for principles	Epic poems of Virgil and Klopstock	Mathematical representation of the immeasurable magnitude of the universe, etc.
Adventurous (degeneration of beautiful)	Crusades and ancient knighthood	Solitary devotion of hermits	–	Homer and Milton	–
Grotesque (degeneration of sublime)	Duels	Cloisters for living saints	Castigation, vows and monkish virtues	Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i> , fairy tales of French lunacy	Four syllogistic figures

*Note:* –, not applicable.

they distort nature's intentions by perverting its aims. As I argued in the previous section, nature entrusts human beings with certain feelings in order to compensate for their lack of virtue and thereby ensure the beautiful functioning of the species as a whole. But through culture, human beings turn these natural tendencies into degenerate forms that pervert them. For instance, the noble melancholic quality turns into solitary confinement in its adventurous form and castigation in its grotesque form, thus degenerating into something that runs counter to nature's original purpose. In turn, this suggests that the degeneration of noble feelings is not merely unnatural but actually morally wrong. This appears most clearly in the degenerations of melancholy. To understand this claim, recall that Kant's disapproval of hermits and cloisters in the *Observations* is echoed in later works such as the *Anthropology*:

The cynic's purism and the hermit's mortification of the flesh, without social good living, are distorted interpretations of virtue and do not make virtue attractive; rather, being forsaken by the Graces, they can make no claim of humanity. (*ApH* 7:282, *Anth* 191)

These zealous individuals may appear virtuous, but for Kant, they are not. For the hermit, by living in isolation, goes against human nature. As Kant writes in his *Anthropology*, "Man was not meant to belong to a herd like the domesticated animals, but rather, like to bee, to belong to a hive community. It is necessary for him always to be a member of some civil society" (*ApH* 7:330, *Anth* 247).<sup>17</sup> In fact, not only does the hermit deny his natural needs as a member of the human species, but more importantly, he violates a crucial duty to the self:

It is a duty to oneself as well as to others not to *isolate* oneself but to use one's moral perfections in social intercourse . . . to cultivate a disposition of reciprocity . . . and so to associate the graces with the virtues. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue. (*MS* 6:473, *MM* 588)

By isolating himself from the rest of the human species, the hermit neglects the social dimension of virtue, which is crucial to the realization of the duty of perfecting oneself morally. One cannot be truly and fully moral if one lives alone, because for Kant, the social aspect of virtue is just as important as the agent-centered one: "*The art of good living* is the proper equivalent to living well as to sociability" (*ApH* 7:250, *Anth* 154).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, hermits,

<sup>17</sup> See also *ApH* 7:324, *Anth* 241: "Man is destined by his reason to live in a society of other people."

<sup>18</sup> This is akin to cases of self-sacrificial altruism. For instance, "[t]he action by which someone tries with extreme danger to his life to rescue people from a shipwreck, finally losing his own life in the attempt,

living saints and the ethical ascetics represented by the Stoics make virtue unappealing:

Monkish ascetics, which from superstitious fear or hypocritical loathing of oneself goes to work with self-torture and mortification of the flesh, is not directed to virtue but rather to fantastically purging oneself of sin by imposing punishment on oneself. . . . it cannot produce the cheerfulness that accompanies virtue, but much rather brings with it secret hatred for virtue's command. (*MS* 6:485, *MM* 597–98; see also *ApH* 7:282)

By neglecting the virtues that come together with the art of good living, cloistered monks overlook a crucial dimension of morality, the social dimension, which alone makes virtue lovable through social interaction.

To complete this picture of the degenerative tendencies of human nature, I want to end on the claim that both temperaments and gender can degenerate in a similar fashion. What makes these degenerative tendencies interesting is that they pervert nature's aim by misfiring. This appears most clearly in gender, for as Kant writes, "What is most important is that the man become more perfect *as a man* and the woman *as a woman*" (*Beo* 2:241–42, *Obs* 51; my emphasis). Thus, it is when men adopt feminine characteristics and women masculine ones that the great portrait of human nature loses its dignity and its beauty to become ugly (Table 7.9). Similarly in the case of temperaments, their respective natural tendencies can be corrupted in the ways set out in Table 7.10.

What emerges from these tables is that grotesque degenerations have to do with a corruption of the understanding, adventurous degenerations have

Table 7.9 *Gender and its degenerations.*

	Natural tendency	Ridiculous (relative to Nature's purposes)	Ugly (relative to morality)
Male	Noble	Dandy and fop (beautiful without noble)	Presumption
Female	Beautiful	Babble (cheerfulness without understanding)	Conceitedness

will indeed be reckoned, on one side, as a duty but on the other and even for the most part as a meritorious action; but our esteem for it will be greatly weakened by the concept of *duty to himself*, which seems in this case to suffer some infringement" (*KpV* 5:158; see in Kant 1999a, 266). As Baron writes, "That she [the altruistic person] is self-sacrificing might indicate a lack of self-respect and, more specifically, a failure to view herself as an equal" (Baron 2006, 340).



Table 7.10 *Temperaments and their degenerative forms.*

	Natural tendency	Grotesque	Adventurous	Ridiculous
Melancholic	Principles	Presentiments (weak understanding)	Apparitions (perverted feeling)	Fantast or crank
Sanguine	Sympathy	Old fop (no understanding)	–	Dawdling and childish
Choleric	Honor	Galimatia (exaggerated understanding)	Strident	Fool (when conceited)
Phlegmatic <sup>a</sup>	–	–	–	–

Note: –, not applicable.

<sup>a</sup> “A person is never without all traces of finer sentiments, but a greater lack of the latter, which is comparatively called a lack of feeling, is found in the character of the *phlegmatic*, whom one also deprives even of the cruder incentives, such as lust of money, etc., which, however, together with other sister inclinations, we can even leave to him, because they do not belong in this plan at all” (*Beo* 2:220, *Obs* 33).

to do with a corruption of feelings, and ridiculous degenerations have to do with a corruption of reason. However, since the *Observations* uncharacteristically lacks systematicity, the various forms of degeneration do not fully match up. For instance, there is no clear mention of grotesque or adventurous degenerations of gender, while there are no obvious candidates for ugly deformations of temperaments. Moreover, the following passage suggests a slightly different classification according to which the adventurous is a degeneration of the terrifying sublime, the grotesque of the sublime, and the ridiculous of the beautiful:

The quality of the *terrifying sublime*, if it becomes entirely unnatural, is *adventurous*. Unnatural things, in so far as the sublime is thereby intended, even if little or none of it is actually found, are *grotesqueries*. . . . On the other side, the feeling of the beautiful degenerates if the noble is entirely lacking from it, and one calls it *ridiculous*. (*Beo* 2:213–14, *Obs* 28)

So unfortunately, Kant’s classification is insufficiently systematic to allow for a methodical account of the meaning of the grotesque, adventurous, and ridiculous.

However, it remains that despite the permanent risk of perversion (whichever form it takes) through the development of culture, Kant is adamant that Nature holds the reins, and that we can, and

should, have faith in its power to restore the natural order as she intended it.

Vanity and fashion may well give these natural drives a false direction, and make out of many a man a *sweet gentleman*, but out of the women a *pedant* or an *Amazon*, yet nature still always seeks to return to its proper order. (*Beo* 2:241, *Obs* 50)<sup>19</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that the *Observations* presents us with a picture of the great order of nature whereby it actively seeks to compensate for human beings' lack of virtue by implanting in them natural tendencies that allow them to function as a whole at the level of the species. As I have hinted at throughout this chapter, this trend is developed further in Kant's later empirical works, and in particular in the *Lectures on Anthropology* and the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.

What is particularly interesting from the perspective of the development of Kant's thoughts on the subject, however, is that contrary to his later works, the *Observations* presents a picture of Kant that is closer to Mandeville than to Rousseau. For it emphasizes what Nature does for the human species instead of emphasizing what human beings can, should, or ought to do for it themselves.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that contrary to what is usually thought, although the *Observations* should be positioned within the lineage of Kant's empirical works as following from the *Lectures on Physical Geography* and anticipating the *Lectures on Anthropology*, what is clear is that by contrast with the latter, the *Observations* does not contain much that is intrinsically pragmatic.<sup>21</sup> That is to say, it does not contain much in the way of recommendations (whether prudential or moral), despite the fact that a lot of the information it provides "makes it possible to judge what

<sup>19</sup> As Larrimore notes, "The understanding of diversity displayed in *Observations* showed that things fit together as a whole. Yet this unity was more an article of faith than something Kant could demonstrate. . . . At this point the unity was assured, whether we could see it or not" (2008, 348).

<sup>20</sup> In the *Anthropology*, Kant defines pragmatic anthropology as "the investigation of what *he* [the human being] as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself" (*ApH* 7:119, *Anth* 231).

<sup>21</sup> As Kant writes, "The physical geography [course] which I am announcing hereby belongs to an idea which I make myself of a useful academic instruction and which I may call the preliminary exercise in the *knowledge of the world*. This knowledge of the world serves to procure the *pragmatic* element for all otherwise acquired sciences and skills, by means of which they become useful not merely for the *school* but rather for *life* and through which the accomplished apprentice is introduced to the stage of his destiny, namely, the *world*" (*vRM* 2:443; see in Kant 2007, 97).

each [people] can expect from the other and how each could use the other to its own advantage” (*ApH* 7:312, *Anth* 408). In this sense, although the *Observations* can undoubtedly be useful for pragmatic purposes, its actual intent appears to be more descriptive than prescriptive: Nature is portrayed as compensating for our lack of virtue instead of helping us remedy it.