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NORMATIVITY IN ART IN KANT'S AESTHETICS

Abstract: Like all books, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is of its time. On the topic of art in particular, Kant assumes that great art is beautiful art, and that artists attempt in some sense or other to represent nature. It is reasonable to ask whether Kant's theory of beauty can illuminate art in our time, when these assumptions have mostly been set aside. I will argue that it can, given a proper understanding of the theory. In particular, Kant's account of normativity in aesthetic judgment in general is the central thread also in his account of fine art. The crucial point is that beauty, for Kant, is more intellectual than sensuous, so consequently whether a particular object is beautiful is independent of its sensible qualities. I begin by explaining Kant's account of aesthetic normativity in general. Then I turn to what he says about art, which he treats as a special case within the broader theory of taste. Crucially, Kant thinks that beauty is the same thing in art as in nature, and thus so is the basis of normativity. I conclude by showing how Kant's theory can, perhaps surprisingly, shed light on our appraisal of recent works of art.

Keywords: Kant, normativity, aesthetics, beauty, art, genius.

Like all books, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is of its time. On the topic of art in particular, Kant assumes that great art is beautiful art, and that artists attempt in some sense or other to represent nature. It is reasonable to ask whether Kant's theory of beauty can illuminate art in our time, when these assumptions have mostly been set aside. I will argue that it can, given a proper understanding of the theory. In particular, Kant's account of normativity in aesthetic judgment in general is the central thread also in his account of fine art. The crucial point is that beauty, for Kant, is more intellectual than sensuous, so consequently whether a particular object is beautiful is independent of its sensible qualities.

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I.

Beauty, for Kant, is found primarily in nature, and only secondarily in works of art. The central problem in Kant's theory is reconciling the subjective and objective dimensions of taste: We say that "there is no disputing about taste," but also expect others to agree with our judgments of taste. This is a problem of normativity. Kant wants to show that this expectation is justified, which is why the issue of normativity is so central to his aesthetic theory. His solution is to borrow, in effect, the normativity of taste from the critical account of cognition. In cognitive judgments, e.g. "That bird is a gray catbird," as in judgments of taste, e.g. "That catbird is beautiful," we expect others to agree with our judgment. "Nothing," Kant tells us, "can be universally communicated except cognition, and representation so far as it belongs to cognition." (5:217) From this he infers that the "determining ground" of the judgment of taste "can be none other than the state of mind that is encountered in the relation of the powers of representation to each other insofar as they relate a given representation to *cognition in general*." (5:217) But what is "cognition in general [*überhaupt*]"? Kant cannot mean that taste is cognition, full stop, because then judgments of taste could be supported by appeal to rules, for example, "That sound is the characteristic song of the gray catbird." At the same time, though, it must be cognition in some very significant sense, for otherwise it could not demand the assent of others, which is to say it would carry no normative force.

My suggestion is that we take "cognition in general" to refer to the effort to systematize empirical cognition. The problem of the normativity of taste in the *Critique of Judgment* has its roots in the center of Kant's critical project. In the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant tells us that just as the understanding unifies appearances under concepts, reason seeks to unify empirical concepts into a system:

[W]hat reason quite uniquely prescribes and seeks to bring about concerning (the understanding) is the **systematic** in cognition, i.e. its interconnection based on one principle.

What Kant means here by a system is his version the unification of science. Kant's argument, in the earlier *Transcendental Analytic*, has the consequence that every object of experience can be subsumed under some concept or other. A tiny few of these concepts are the well-known pure categories of the understanding, the objective validity of which is a condition of the possibility of experience. This validity is established by the *Transcendental Deduction of the Categories*. More commonly, though, we subsume objects of experience under empirical concepts, such as 'table,' 'stone,' and 'catbird.' Reason's systematizing task is to find unity among these contingent concepts, for example by grouping 'catbird' under 'birds,' 'vertebrates,' and so on, and distinguishing within the grouping between gray catbirds, northern catbirds, etc. The goal, to which we can approach only "asymptotically" (A663/B691), is a hierarchical structure of concepts organized around an idea of pure reason, which defines as "a necessary concept of reason... to which no congruent object can be given in the senses." (A327/B383)

But why do empirical concepts require unification in a system? Kant calls systematic unity the "touchstone [*Proberstein*] of truth" for empirical cognition, which I take to mean that systematicity is Kant's construal of the demand for coherence in empirical cognition. The systematization of empirical cognition is thus an essential part of the task of the systematization in general. And this task is the work of the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself: investigating the possibility of cognition through pure reason. Systematic unity is thus crucial for the larger, well-known project of setting metaphysics on the "secure course of a science," (Bvii) for, he tells us near the end of the work, "systematic unity is that which first makes ordinary cognition into science." (A832/B860)

With what right, if any, do we suppose that our empirical concepts can in fact be unified in a system? That this unification is possible is a contingent proposition, and thus cannot be known through mere transcendental reflection, like the categories. But the possibility of systematic unification is, as I have explained, necessary for the critical project of putting metaphysics on the secure course of a science. Kant takes up this problem in the 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. In the introduction to the third *Critique* Kant tells the reader that the task of the book is to provide a transcendental ground for the possibility of systematizing empirical cognition:

[T]he power of judgment must... assume it as an *a priori* principle for its own use that what is contingent for human insight in the particular (empirical) laws of nature nevertheless contains a lawful unity, not fathomable [*nichtzuergründende*] by us but still thinkable, in the combination of its manifold into one experience possible in itself. (5:183–4)

I call this assumption the principle of the purposiveness of nature. Furthermore, of the two major divisions of the work, the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” is the one that belongs to that task “essentially,” since “this alone contains a principle that the power of judgment lays at the basis of its reflection on nature entirely *a priori*.” (5:193) So we should expect to find something in Kant’s aesthetic theory that supports the goal of system-building, and I propose that it is found in §9, which Kant calls the “key to the critique of taste.”

Kant’s question in §9 whether, in a judgment of taste, the pleasure precedes the judgment, or the reverse. In the former case, the pleasure would be merely agreeable rather than beautiful, and have only “private validity, since it would immediately depend on the representation through which the object is given.” (5:217; emphasis in original) Therefore, Kant concludes, the judging must precede the pleasure. But what must this pleasure be such that it gives rise to a pleasure we can impute to everyone? “Nothing,” Kant says, can be universally communicated except cognition, and representation in so far as it belongs to cognition,” and so the judgment of taste must have a relation to “cognition in general [*Erkenntnis überhaupt*].” (5:217) Unfortunately, Kant is rather vague about what this claim means, so interpreters of Kant have faced a dilemma. If “cognition in general” is just cognition, then judgments of taste ought to be supportable by appeal to determinate rules, which Kant consistently denies. It also threatens the unappealing consequence that all objects must be beautiful, since, according to Kant’s argument in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories in the first *Critique*, every object is subject to the pure principles of cognition, the categories. On the other hand, to the extent that we take “cognition in general” to cognition *strictu sensu*, Kant is open to the objection that the appeal to cognition does not entail the normativity that he needs from it.

On my reading, this dilemma is resolved by taking “cognition in general” to refer to the goal of systematizing empirical cognition. This allows us to avoid the first horn of the dilemma, because the principle of the purposiveness of nature is not a condition of the possibility of experience. Rather, the imperative to systematize empirical cognition is a regulative principle that guides our investigation of nature.¹ We also avoid the second horn of the dilemma, because systematization is of central importance to Kant’s overall account of cognition. So although Kant does not explicitly say that this is what he means by “cognition in general,” this reading fits the stated needs of his theory quite precisely.

1 This is the point of the first section of the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

I want to emphasize two aspects of Kant's view as I understand it. First, Kant's statement in §9 that in the judgment of taste the judging precedes the characteristically aesthetic pleasure has the consequence that the beautiful object does not need to be in itself particularly pleasant. Aesthetic appreciation is a mode of cognition, and the pleasure results from the (quasi-) cognition. I think Kant means to draw our attention to this when he tells us that the judging has the pleasure as its "consequence [*Folge*]." (5:217) Kant surely thought of beauty, including beautiful art, as starting with pleasant things, but this is not required by his theory. This will be important later on for applying Kant's theory to trends in modern art.

The second point I want to emphasize is that, as I read Kant, beauty is a property of objects, albeit an indeterminate one. This point in turn has two aspects: First, judgments of taste *refer* to things in the world, but (second) the only evidence we can give for them is the feeling of pleasure we felt upon judging. To the first point, Kant says quite plainly in the first section of the *Analytic of the Sublime* that "we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some **object of nature** sublime, although we can quite correctly call very many of them beautiful." (5:245) His task here is to explain the place of the sublime in his "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," so although this is just one spot in the text, it is a crucial one where Kant was surely writing very carefully. In addition, we should consider the many places in the text where Kant refers, seemingly without irony, to things as beautiful. If he thought it were an error to call objects beautiful, we would expect him to say so, and he does not. To the second point: taste is subjective in the sense that it is based on a feeling of pleasure (or displeasure), which Kant says is "the subjective aspect of a representation **which cannot become an element of cognition at all**." (5:189; emphasis in original) Here is how he presents his view in resolving the "Antinomy of Taste"—again, a crucial spot where Kant is writing carefully:

The judgment of taste doubtlessly contains an enlarged relation of the representation of the object (and at the same time of the subject), on which we base an extension of this kind of judgment as necessary for everyone, which must thus be based on some sort of concept, but a concept that **cannot** be determined by intuition, and which thus also **leads to no proof** for the judgment of taste. (5:339 – 40; emphasis in original)

He goes on to tie taste to the rather murky notion of the "supersensible substrate of appearances," a "pure rational concept" which, he says, "grounds the object (and also the subject) as an object of sense, consequently as an appearance." (5:340)

In sum, Kant holds the view that (some) objects are beautiful; that we have a right to expect, in a strongly normative sense, that others agree

with our judgments of taste; and that this normativity is grounded in the role of taste as a variety of cognition.

II.

After developing his aesthetic theory in relation to natural beauty, Kant begins his discussion of art in §43 of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.” There he faces a problem left over from §16, where he distinguished between “free” and “adherent” beauty. Free beauty—beauty in the truest sense, for Kant—presupposes no concept of what the object is supposed to be, whereas adherent beauty does presuppose a concept, so that the concept provides a standard against which the object can be judged. Kant gives the example of a church, the very concept of which places constraints on how a church should look. This is in keeping with a central idea in Kant’s aesthetic theory, already noted, that judgments of taste cannot be supported by appeal to rules. These rules would presumably have the form ‘Every object that is *p* is beautiful; *A* is *p*; therefore, *A* is beautiful.’ But for Kant, artistic production, like all intentional production, requires that the artist start from a concept of what she wants to produce, so it might seem as though it should be impossible for a work of art to be freely beautiful, and that any beauty there is in works of art must be different from beauty in nature.

Kant does not accept this consequence, and in fact affirms that beauty is, in a very strong sense, the same thing in works of art as in natural objects. He allows for the possibility of judging a work of art while ignoring, or being ignorant of, the artist’s intention for the work. The key is that, to be beautiful, art must seem to be nature: Referring back to his earlier account of beauty in nature, Kant says, “[n]ature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and yet art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature.” (5:306) Note that Kant characterizes his own view by saying that “nature resembles art.” This is a reference to the thesis of the *Critique of Judgment*, which is the claim that “particular empirical laws... must be considered in terms of the sort of unity they would have if an understanding (even if not ours) had... given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition, in order to make possible a system of experience.” (5:180) Nature is beautiful in so far as it seems to be made for us, as rational beings. Works of fine art actually are made for us, and it is central to Kant’s theory that, at least in so far as it is successful, art speaks to us as rational beings, just as beauty in nature does.

The univocity of beauty is also reflected in Kant’s account of artistic genius. Adopting a key concept of the *Sturm und Drang* movement as well as, later on, Romanticism, Kant says that “beautiful art is art of genius,”

and he defines genius as the talent “*through which* nature gives the rule to art.” (5:307; emphasis in original) Genius requires “spirit,” which is the source of the originality of its works (“genius is entirely opposed to the *spirit of imitation*” [5:308]), but also taste, which

is the disciple (or corrective) of genius, clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished; but at the same time it gives genius guidance as to where and how far it should extend itself if it is to remain purposive. (5:319)

Taste, that is, ensures that works of genius are beautiful as well as original. Kant's description of the nature of genius depends on the assumption that the taste guiding the genius is the same taste outlined earlier in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” and that the beauty she produces is the same beauty.

Thus beauty is the same in nature as in art, and so is the normative basis for each, namely the connection to cognition. Kant distinguishes beautiful from art that is merely “pleasant (*angenehm*)” by saying that while in the case of the latter “pleasure accompanies the representations as mere sensation,” in the former it accompanies them as “*kinds of cognition*.” (5:305; emphasis in original) Note that Kant refers to beauty here not merely as related to cognition but as a type of cognition (*Erkenntnisart*). Though Kant does not say so explicitly, it is clear that the motivation for contrasting ‘pleasant’ with ‘beautiful’ by means of their connections, respectively, to sensation and cognition is to emphasize that in all contexts cognition is the basis for imputing judgments about beauty to everyone.

Kant explains the genius’ spirit as “the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas.” These in turn are defined as “representations of the imagination that occasion much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. *concept*, to be adequate to it.” (5:314) The aesthetic idea is the “pendant” of the idea of reason, which he defines, consistently with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as a representation of reason to which no intuition can be adequate. Kant’s thought here is that a beautiful artwork offers a presentation to the senses that leads us to think beyond that presentation. But not just any thought will do; Kant emphasizes that beautiful art “brings the faculty of intellectual ideas [i.e. reason] into motion,” helping us to “feel our freedom from the law of association.” (5:314) Here too, then, the mark of good art is its appeal to the intellect.

To summarize the view of art I am attributing to Kant: Good art is beautiful art, and beauty is the same thing in works of art as in nature. Beauty in both contexts is the suitability of an object for integration into a system of empirical cognition. Objects are beautiful, but the evidence we give for our judgments of taste is the subjective feeling of the productive

interplay of our cognitive faculties that Kant calls the “harmony of the faculties.” The role of the beautiful object in Kant’s account is important because it is what makes beauty *normative*: Kant assumes throughout his critical writings that our goal in cognition is to get the world right, that is, to represent it accurately. The aspect of cognition most relevant for the *Critique of Judgment* is the systematization of empirical concepts. We cannot prove that such a system is possible, but we can feel that we are making progress toward it. This is what Kant thinks we feel when we have the experience of beauty.

I will conclude this section with a bit of a digression on the topic of normativity of art. We can ask about the basis for normative judgments about particular works of art, but philosophers have also debated the value of art as such. The original impetus for this discussion is Book X of the *Republic*, where Plato excludes artists and poets from the *kallipolis* because fine art is not a craft. Art appeals to our senses with beautiful falsehoods, undermining the rule of reason in the soul and leading us away from the truth. By connecting art to cognition, Kant’s theory suggests a response to Plato. As I read him, Kant connects art to the pursuit of truth without reducing art to a tool of science or morality. Contrary to criticisms from, e.g. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Kant does justice to the subjectivity of taste without reducing it to ‘mere feeling.’

III.

Equipped now with a proper understanding of Kant’s account of normativity in art, we are in a position to take a fresh look at how Kant’s aesthetic theory can be used to look at some important works of 20th-century art. To put it very broadly, many of the greatest works of modern art are great for reasons other than their propensity to be pleasant to experience. But on the present reading of Kant’s theory of taste, the pleasure characteristic of positive aesthetic, i.e. beauty, attaches to our reflection on the object rather than to the object or artwork itself. In the final section of this paper, I will show how Kant’s theory of art, suitably understood, can shed light on particular works of art exemplify a few of the trends in art in the 20th century. It might seem as though Kant, with his emphasis on art as the production of beauty, his ranking of the various art in terms of their “aesthetic value,” (5:326) and his unfortunate fondness for the poetry of Frederick the Great, would have little to offer to discussion of art in our time. I hope to show that he does.

Let me make clear what I am doing here. I have selected a few works of 20th-century art, some of them, I hope, familiar to most of us. Since my topic is normativity in art, I have chosen works that are generally regarded

as good, that is, successful. Of course, one might quarrel with my judgments, but I think that at least any theory of art that has the consequence that all of them are unsuccessful is not a plausible theory. I will rely to some extent on certain interpretations of the works I discuss, but I do not pretend that these interpretations are original with me, nor that they are unassailable. What matters is that the interpretations are plausible, and Kant's aesthetic theory can help us make sense of them.

Consider, for a first example, perhaps the most significant work of visual art in the 20th century, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. In 1918, Duchamp exhibited *Fountain* in the Independents Art Show in New York. It consisted of an ordinary porcelain urinal, turned on its head and signed, whimsically, 'R. Mutt 1917.' One could be enraptured by *Fountain's* smooth white surfaces, but in fact *Fountain* owes its exalted status not to its appearance but rather to the statement Duchamp makes by means of it: Art is whatever the artist says it is, or whatever an artist does. This is a claim about the nature of art, and as such it might appear to be too abstract to be the basis for a claim of beauty, for Kant or indeed for anyone. This appearance is misleading, however. For Kant, a beautiful thing is one that gives pleasure by stimulating the intellectual faculties. To give one's attention to the sensuous surface of the work would be to miss the genuine significance of it. (Tomkins, 1996, Chap. 12)

The 20th century, in fact, saw a number of attempts, in a variety of media, to erase the artist from the artwork. The American composer John Cage, for example, composed *Music for Change* by having visitors to his New York apartment throw the I Ching and thereby determine notes in the piece. Cage's thought, apparently, was that the work was composed by chance, rather than by himself or his guests. Similarly, Surrealist artists played a game called Exquisite Corpse, in which multiple people would draw on a surface without seeing what the others had drawn. The result was supposed to be a work produced by the collective unconscious of the group, rather than a collaboration between individuals.² Now, Kant certainly assumes that artworks are produced by rational agents; indeed, he considers this to be definitive of works of art as opposed to natural objects. (5:303) Interestingly, though, Kant might accept the 'death of the artist,' because rational agency plays no role in explaining a work's success, that is, its beauty. This follows from two aspects of Kant's aesthetic theory already mentioned. First, "beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature." (5:306) In other words, beautiful art does not seem like it is intentionally made. Second, "beautiful art is art

2 Breton, André (7 October 1948). Breton Remembers. Archived from the original on 27 January 2008. Retrieved 28 May 2024.

of genius,” and genius, as Kant defines it, is the mental faculty “*through which* nature gives the rule to art. (5:307; emphasis in original) Genius is a nonrational faculty, so to the extent that an artwork issues from genius (and thus, to the extent that it is beautiful), the rational agency, and thus the personhood of the artist drops away. What is crucial for evaluation of the work is its propensity to stimulate the free play of the understanding and the imagination.

Finally, consider what Kant might say about works of art that are non-representative. Jasper Johns’ *Flag*, for example, looks like an American flag, but in fact it is actually a flag. The artist seems to be making a bit of a joke about the fact that any surface with the appropriate arrangement of color planes counts as a flag. Abstract art, too, does not represent anything, that is, it does not carry the mind to anything other than itself. Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, for examples, are just records of the artist’s activity in creating them—hence the term ‘action painting.’ Both “Flag” and the drip paintings are examples of artworks for which there is no gap between the artwork (in both of these cases, painting) and the thing represented. “Flag” is actually a flag. Both it and the drip painting are, as Hume would say, “original existences,” not representations. Neither has what Descartes calls “objective reality.” (Danto, 1981, Chap. 1) But this does not matter for Kant’s theory. Both works are causally attributable to specific people. Even if they weren’t, remember that for Kant beauty is the same thing in nature and in art, and beauty is the propensity to stimulate the free play of the cognitive faculties.

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