Introduction

For decades the Critique of Judgment received little attention outside of the narrow circle of Kant scholarship. What little notice it did receive in broader circles was usually confined to an obligatory bow to it as the philosophical source of the critical doctrines of aesthetic formalism and of the autonomy of art: the ideas, that is, that in all works of art our interest is properly confined to features of perceptual form and that appreciation and judgment of art must take place within parameters set by art itself, independently of any other or broader cognitive or practical concerns. In the last decade or two, however, Kant’s third Critique has suddenly been transformed from a tabula rasa into a palimpsest of philosophical and critical theories. Instead of being the archetypical work of modernism, the Critique of Judgment has suddenly become the archetypical work of postmodernism, revealing the contradictions inherent in every idea of knowledge, rationality, culture, and art which it has suddenly become so fashionable to discover. No longer the paradigm of an irenic classicism or a more contemporary but equally imperturbable formalism, the last of Kant’s trio of great Critiques has suddenly become the symbol of deconstructionism itself, a book that shows how every attempt to make firm distinctions between accident and essence, whether in theory or practice (and including the distinction between theory and practice), undercuts itself.¹

In the present work I want to suggest that Kant’s conception of the full range of natural and appropriate responses to aes-
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thetlic objects, whether works of art or beauties of nature, does indeed go beyond the narrow formalism which is, to be sure, suggested in certain sections of the opening of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” itself the first half of the Critique of Judgment (especially §§2–4 and §§13–16). I also want to show that Kant’s attitude toward art, in particular, is much more complicated and, indeed, conflicted than is suggested by the traditional supposition that he was the founding father of the idea of “art for art’s sake.” But I want to present these complexities not by importing contemporary preconceptions and preoccupations into his work but in Kant’s own terms. Kant cannot be reduced to a merely representative man of his own times, for he often saw far beyond what any of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries had thought. But neither can he be transformed, without distortion, into a figure of our own times. Kant himself set the terms in which he wanted to go beyond the simplicities of aesthetic formalism and artistic autonomy, and our first task must be to discover what these terms are.

I will argue throughout these essays that Kant did not simply deconstruct, or show the underlying incoherence of notions of aesthetic formalism and artistic autonomy, as so many have recently supposed, but rather that he showed how the uniqueness of aesthetic response and artistic creation could be reconciled with the vital role of the aesthetic in the larger morality of mankind. Kant believed in the intrinsic and independent value of aesthetic experience but also in the uniquely unconditional value of morality, or the primacy of practical reason (that is, the use of reason to determine what we ought to do rather than what is the case). One of my chief purposes in the following essays is to show how Kant tried to make these two beliefs not merely compatible but interdependent.

In my earlier work I was rash enough to suggest that Kant’s discussions of such topics as the sublime and genius, which appear to be tied only loosely to the basic architectonic structure of the argument of the Critique of Judgment, were mere concessions to the literary fashion of his day, thus not essential to his fundamental argument about the conditions
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under which it is epistemologically justifiable to claim the universal validity of one’s pleasurable response to a work of nature or art, the claim that is inherent in a judgment of taste. Few commentators on my work have spared me the embarrassment of quoting my dismissal of the significance of the sublime, for instance, although my own lack of interest in that topic, in a work conceived during the early and mid-1970s, certainly reflected the predilections of the analytical aesthetics of the period. Were it not for the risk of appearing equally rash (if not equally callow) in taking another similarly one-sided view, I might now be tempted to assert the opposite. If I succumbed to that temptation, I would claim that it is Kant’s exclusive focus on the problem of the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste, in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” which is his mere concession to a literary fashion of his time, since he here adopts the genre of the essay on agreement in taste that had been popularized earlier in Britain by Hutcheson and Hume. I might also claim that the real heart of Kant’s aesthetic theory and the underlying motivation for its creation is the connection to his moral theory which appears in his discussion of the sublime, of aesthetic ideas as the content of works of artistic genius, and of beauty as the symbol of morality.

But I trust that the stance taken in the following essays is more subtle than that. What I hope to reveal is that there is an intimate and indispensable connection between the analysis of aesthetic judgments and explanation of aesthetic response, which is the core of Kant’s theory of pure judgments of taste, and the linkage of aesthetics to morality, which is clearly Kant’s ulterior motive. The pleasurable yet disinterested sense of freedom from cognitive or practical constraint – that is, the sense of the unity of aesthetic experience without its subordination to any scientific or moral concepts and purposes – which is at the heart of Kant’s explanation of our pleasure in beauty is precisely that which allows aesthetic experience to take on deeper moral significance as an experience of freedom. The meaning of the aesthetic cannot be fully plumbed as long as this realm of human experi-
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ence is entirely isolated from the moral dimension, yet it is primarily through the experience of freedom which is captured by Kant’s conceptions of the disinterestedness and purposelessness of aesthetic response that aesthetic experience is capable of taking on the deep moral import that Kant assigns to it. The coils of Kant’s conception of the moral value of the aesthetic, in other words, are tightly wound around the armature furnished by his epistemological analysis and psychological explanation beginning with his discussion of pure judgments of taste. And by tracing out this complex connection (especially in light of the variety of historical connections examined in Part I and Chapter 7), I hope that I can show that Kant’s sense of the connections between beauty, art, and morality is more subtle than much of what was suggested not only before, but also since, he wrote.

Immanuel Kant, who was born in 1724, published his first scientific work, Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces, in 1747, and his first philosophical work, the New Exposition of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition, in 1755; but although his lectures on logic and epistemology touched upon what we would now identify as issues of aesthetics from early in his career (our earliest extensive texts of these lectures date from 1770), Kant did not publish his views on aesthetics until the last of his three great critiques, the Critique of Judgment, which was first published in 1790, when Kant was already sixty-six years old. (An earlier work that sounds as if it would concern aesthetics, the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime of 1764, really concerns what we would now call moral psychology rather than aesthetics.) And although it is natural for us now to read Kant’s three great critiques – the Critique of Pure Reason, first published in 1781 and extensively revised in 1787; the Critique of Practical Reason of 1788; and the Critique of Judgment – as if they were conceived as the continuous exposition of a single, coherent system, in fact each of the later two works was unplanned at the time of its predecessor and represents some considerable revision of it. Indeed, in the
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first edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant had completely dismissed the possibility of aesthetics as an a priori theory of taste (A 21), a position which he only barely moderated in the second edition of the work (B 35–6), Kant’s work on which was completed by March 1787. Nor was there any suggestion of the possibility of a third Critique in the Critique of Practical Reason, the manuscript for which was finished by the end of June 1787. The first hint that Kant had conceived of the possibility of a third Critique came only in December of 1787, in a letter from Kant to his then disciple Karl Leonhard Reinhold. Yet the work was ready for the publisher by the beginning of March 1790, hardly two years later – two years in which Kant was by no means exclusively occupied with the Critique of Judgment, but was also working on the defense of some of the most basic doctrines of the Critique of Pure Reason in the most extensive polemic in which he ever engaged, his reply to the neo-Leibnizo–Wolffian critic J. A. Eberhard in his essay “On a Discovery according to which every new Critique of Pure Reason should be rendered dispensable by an older one.”

The Critique of Judgment was thus conceived and written in considerable haste, and this is evident in the text. The work treats not only aesthetics but also teleology, that is, the role of conceptions of purposiveness in our comprehension of nature, and the connection between the two is fraught with tension; moreover, the discussion of both of these topics is forced into the organizational scheme or “architectonic” originally developed in the Critique of Pure Reason for other subjects, and that can be confusing or even misleading. Further, the treatment of aesthetics, although hardly long (153 pages, in the standard German edition), is particularly convoluted and repetitive. It may therefore be of some use to preface any discussion of the substance of the work with an outline of its structure.

The Critique of Judgment begins with a preface, followed by a general introduction, the latter of which exists in two different versions: the introduction that was published with the text and that was apparently one of the final sections to have been written, and an earlier version, which Kant had re-
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jected, supposedly on grounds of length alone, but which differs in a number of interesting ways. This text, which Kant by no means disclaimed and even made available to some of his associates but which was not published in its entirety until 1914, is now referred to as the “First Introduction” to the Critique of Judgment. Following the introduction(s), the Critique then is divided into two principal parts, the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” and the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” the former of which is the primary focus of most of the essays in the present volume. The “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” has a complex internal structure. The “First Division” is comprised of two “books,” the “Analytic of the Beautiful” (consisting of §§1–22 and the following “General Remark”) and the “Analytic of the Sublime” (consisting of §§23–9 and the following “General Remark”). The first division also includes the “Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments.” Although this latter title should properly subsume only sections 30 through 40 or perhaps 42, in which Kant attempts to prove a claim about the intersubjective validity of judgments of beauty that he had made in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” the title is carried over to the quite independent discussion of the fine arts in sections 43 through 54. Finally, the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” concludes with the “Second Division,” entitled the “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment” ( §§55–9), which has as an appendix an essay on the “Methodology of Taste” (§60). (The “Critique of Teleological Judgment” also has a complex internal structure, but familiarity with that will not be necessary for our purposes).7

We can now turn to the main issue of these essays, the connections between Kant’s aesthetics and his moral philosophy. In my earlier book, Kant and the Claims of Taste, these connections played a minor role in my account of Kant’s aesthetic theory. That was because I confined my consideration of them there to the specific question of whether these links were necessary or sufficient for the completion of Kant’s transcendental deduction of the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste, that is, his attempt to prove that agreement about judgments of beauty and sublimity is not
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only possible but even necessary, at least under ideal circumstances, a thesis that had been advocated by R. K. Elliott and Donald W. Crawford. I argued that the various links to morality canvassed by Kant did not succeed in this specific objective, and, in spite of the vigorous criticism that my earlier work has received on this score, I am still inclined to believe that this judgment was essentially correct. But this is not to deny that Kant’s links between aesthetics and morality are of profound interest and importance when considered apart from this narrow question. They must only be considered from the right point of view to appreciate their importance. This is why I wish to describe what is offered in the present collection of essays not as a retraction but as an enrichment of my previous treatment. Given this goal, however, it may be of use if I briefly characterize my earlier position and some of the criticism it has engendered.

According to the picture of Kant’s aesthetic theory that I presented in Kant and the Claims of Taste and refined in some subsequent work (such as the essay on the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime included here as Chapter 6), the core of Kant’s theory is an epistemological interpretation of the claims made by judgments of taste and a psychological explanation of the responses, such as our feelings of pleasure in the beautiful and the sublime, that are expressed by such judgments. (By a “judgment of taste,” Kant means the proposition or the assertion of the proposition that a particular object is, for example, beautiful. Such a judgment is made or at least justified on the basis of reflection on the origin of the pleasure one feels in the object, when such reflection suggests that this feeling of pleasure is not merely a physiological response to the stimulus provided by sensation of the object but is the product of the harmonious reaction of the higher cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding to the perception of the object. Kant confuses the reader by suggesting that the process which leads to this feeling of pleasure, as well as that which leads from the feeling of pleasure to the assertion of the judgment of taste, are both acts of “reflective judgment.”
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There are good reasons for thinking of both of these as expressing a reflective use of judgment, but it should be clear that the enjoyment of an object, on the one hand, and the judgment that other persons should also enjoy it, on the other, are, at least in principle, psychologically and epistemologically distinct acts of mind.) In other words, my interpretation was an account of the significance of judgments of taste and the character of aesthetic response, constructed from the materials offered by Kant’s theory of human cognition – the theory offered in the Critique of Pure Reason but also transformed, at certain key points, in the Critique of Judgment itself. The aesthetic theory, as I presented it, starts off with a logical analysis of the claims that are asserted in a judgment of taste, proceeds to offer an explanation which is essentially a psychological model of the underlying mechanisms of the aesthetic responses that are expressed by such judgments, and then attempts to conclude with a transcendental deduction (that is, a justification from the conditions of the possibility of experience in general) that would demonstrate that responses explained in the manner described at the second stage of the theory do in fact satisfy the logical demands raised at the initial stage of the analysis.11

On this approach, Kant commences with an analysis of the very idea of a judgment of taste as an aesthetic judgment,12 which yields two fundamental claims. On the one hand, as aesthetic – that is, as essentially connected with feeling or sensibility – a judgment of taste cannot be made on the basis of the subsumption of its object under any determinate concept;13 it must, rather, both be about that aspect of perception which can never become part of the objective cognition of an object, namely the pleasure (or, in the case of a negative judgment, the displeasure) it produces in an observer, and even be made primarily on the basis of such a feeling (see Cj, §1, 5:203–4, and Fk, §VIII, 20:229). On the other hand, as a judgment, an aesthetic judgment claims acceptability not only by the person who asserts it on the basis of her own encounter with its object but by all others who might encounter it, at least under appropriate or ideal condi-
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tions. Some utterances, such as mere judgments of agreeableness (what Kant calls “aesthetic judgments of sense”), defeat the expectation of such intersubjective acceptability by permitting the attachment of the restrictive phrase “to me,” which expressly limits their validity to the speaker, but judgments of taste do not. One can appropriately say, “Olivies taste good to me (but not to my daughter),” but one cannot say, “The Chrysler Building is beautiful to me (but not to my wife).” By calling something “beautiful,” we mean precisely that everyone ought to be pleased with it (CJ, §7, 5:212). In this regard, in fact, judgments of taste do not differ from other empirical judgments. In sum, then, a judgment of taste is one in which one person, on the basis of her own pleasurable response to an object, asserts that all others who encounter that object under appropriate circumstances can also be expected to take pleasure in it. In Kant’s terms, in a judgment of taste the subjective response of pleasure is connected with the object with the “quantity” of “universal subjective validity” and the “modality” of “exemplary necessity” – that is, it holds not just for one person but for everyone, and not accidentally but necessarily (CJ, §8, 5:215, and §18, 5:236–7).

This analysis obviously raises the question of how one can reasonably assert that such a subjective response as one’s own pleasure in a particular object, whether that object is a work of nature or of human art, must necessarily occur in all others who encounter it, at least under the right conditions. Kant sharpens this problem, and also tries to solve it, by means of the theory of pleasure that underlies the Critique of Judgment. Kant supposes that all pleasure is connected with the satisfaction of an aim or objective, and that universally valid pleasures must therefore be connected with the satisfaction of some universally valid objectives. This suggests that the pleasure of aesthetic response must be connected with the perception of its object as satisfying some determinate cognitive objective or some determinate practical objective, which would in any case presuppose a determinate cognitive judgment of the object, although this would seem to be con-
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trary to the underlying analysis of aesthetic judgment. Kant goes on to add, however, that pleasure is most noticeable when the satisfaction of the objective involved appears to be contingent rather than necessary and is therefore not obviously imposed by the basic laws of thought or practice themselves (CJ, § VI, 5:187–8). This sets the stage for his central explanation of our pleasure in beauty, which claims that this pleasure arises when the manifold of intuition produced by an object – that is, the variety of experiences the perception of it engenders in us – sets our faculties of imagination and understanding into a harmonious or free play that feels as if it satisfies our subjective goal in cognition, that of finding unity in all of our manifolds of intuition, without producing that unity by what is ordinarily the objective condition or guarantee of the possibility of cognition, namely the subsumption of the variety of our experiences under determinate concepts of the understanding (see especially FI, §VIII, 20:224–5). The harmony of imagination and understanding induced by a beautiful object is pleasurable precisely because it seems like the satisfaction of our fundamental cognitive aim for unity but also seems contingent because it is not produced by the application of any determinate concept to the manifold which would guarantee the unification of the manifold.

This preliminary explanation of aesthetic response is enriched as the exposition of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” unfolds. In the case of judgments on the sublime rather than on the beautiful, Kant postulates a subjective satisfaction of underlying goals of reason rather than understanding, that is, our capacity not just to apply concepts to our experience but to seek and find coherence and completeness in our systems of theoretical and practical concepts themselves. In the case of works of art rather than nature, ideas as well as merely perceptual forms may contribute to our subjective sense of unity and satisfaction, and our sense of harmony may not have as its object mere perceptual form as contrasted to concepts but rather the interrelation of concepts and form. These amplifications of Kant’s underlying