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978-0-521-79154-0 - Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment

Henry E. Allison

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth century, usually known as the “Age of Reason,” has also been characterized as the “Century of Taste.”¹ If this juxtaposition seems strange to us today, it is because we have lost sight of the ideal, normative element, which, as Gadamer points out, was essential to the concept of taste as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries.² Thus, whereas for us to say that a question or evaluation is a matter of taste is to imply that it is merely a private, subjective matter lacking any claim to normativity, this was not at all the case in the eighteenth century. On the contrary, as Gadamer also points out, taste was thought of as a special way of knowing, one for which rational grounds cannot be given, but which nonetheless involves an inherent universality.³ In short, it was not a private but a social phenomenon, inseparably connected with a putative *sensus communis*.⁴ Moreover, taste, so construed, was not limited to the realm of the aesthetic, but also encompassed morality, indeed, any domain in which a universal order or significance is thought to be grasped in an individual case.⁵

It is therefore in terms of this widely shared viewpoint that we must understand both Kant's lifelong concern with the question of taste and his definitive account of it given in the *Critique of Judgment*. For in this respect, as in so many others, he was very much a man of his time, even though, as we shall see, this did not prevent him from breaking with the orthodoxy of the day on a number of crucial points regarding taste.

Kant's earliest significant discussion of taste is contained in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764). This brief and stylistically elegant work stems from a period in which Kant still thought, in agreement with the British moral sense tradition, that morality was based on feeling, and in which he, like many of his contemporaries, insisted on an intimate linkage between moral feeling and the aesthetic feelings of the sublime and the beautiful. Thus, in discussing the principles underlying true virtue, Kant remarks that they are not speculative rules, but “the consciousness of a feeling that lies in every human breast

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and extends itself much further than over the particular grounds of compassion and complaisance," a feeling which he identifies as that of "*the beauty and the dignity of human nature*" (Beob 2: 217; 60). Moreover, this work is not an aberration, since a continuous concern with questions of taste or matters aesthetic can be traced through the surviving transcripts of his lectures, particularly the recently published lectures on anthropology, as well as the associated *Reflexionen*.⁶ And throughout these discussions Kant, like many of his contemporaries, emphasized the social nature of taste, its inherent claim to universality.⁷

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that Kant's interest in the nature of taste and its putative claim to universality survived the radical change in his moral theory (and his whole philosophical orientation) announced in his Inaugural Dissertation (*On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*) of 1770. The essential feature of this important work, which is usually regarded as "semicritical" because it contains the essential elements of the account of space and time as forms of human sensibility found in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is the sharp distinction between sensible and intellectual cognition (with the latter including what Kant later distinguished as understanding and reason) and their respective spheres of application or "worlds." Given his understanding of this distinction, Kant was naturally led to link morality and its principles with pure intellect rather than feeling (sensibility), which meant that he could no longer maintain its close connection with taste.⁸ Correlatively, the latter was conceived more narrowly as relating merely to the aesthetic domain and, therefore, as lacking any direct connection with either morality or cognition.⁹

Nevertheless, this rationalism did not lead Kant (at least not immediately) to the marginalization or outright excision of the concept of taste from his systematic philosophical program. In fact, taste figures prominently in the outline of his incipient project that Kant conveyed to Marcus Herz in two well-known letters from early in the so-called silent decade.¹⁰ In both letters, the fundamental concern is with metaphysics or, more properly, the possibility thereof, and the projected work that is intended as a prelude to metaphysics is given the title "The Limits of Sensibility and Reason." In the first of these letters, Kant tells Herz that this projected work "is intended to contain the relation of the fundamental concepts and laws destined for the sensible world, along with an outline of what constitutes the nature of the doctrine of taste, metaphysics and morals."¹¹ In the second letter, he goes into more detail concerning the structure of the proposed work. He says that it is to consist of two parts, a theoretical and a practical; and the latter, which alone concerns us here, will supposedly consist of two sections: the first dealing with general principles of feeling, taste, and the sensible desires, and the second with the first grounds of morality.¹² Consequently, it appears from these letters

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that in spite of the sharp separation of taste from both morality and cognition, and its assignment to the domain of feeling, in the early seventies Kant continued to recognize the philosophical importance of taste.

By the time of the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, however, taste, together with any concern with feeling, seems to have been removed entirely from the framework of Kant's emerging transcendental philosophy. Thus, in a footnote to the Transcendental Aesthetic, wherein he is concerned to reserve the term "aesthetic" for his account of sensibility and its *a priori* conditions, rather than for a theory of taste, Kant remarks:

The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word 'aesthetics' to designate what others call the critique of taste. The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science. But this effort is futile. For the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed, rather the latter constitutes the genuine touchstone of the correctness of the former. For this reason it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term and preserve it for that doctrine which is true science (whereby one would come closer to the language and the sense of the ancients, among whom the division of cognition into *aísjeta; kai; no-ita* was very well known. (A21)¹³

Nevertheless, in late December of 1787, after having completed both the revisions for the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the composition of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant writes to Reinhold that he has discovered a new *a priori* principle that governs the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. The latter, for Kant, is one of three faculties or capacities of the mind, the other two being the cognitive faculty and desire or will. These two faculties had already been assigned their *a priori* principles in the first and second *Critiques* respectively, the former stemming from understanding (the "lawgiver to nature") and the latter from reason (construed as practical reason). And for a time Kant thought that this was sufficient to complete the critical project, since, on the one hand, it enabled him to lay the foundations for the two parts of metaphysics (a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals) for which the *Critique of Pure Reason* was intended as the propaedeutic,¹⁴ while, on the other, he continued to hold to the view expressed in the first edition of the *Critique* that any putative rules or principles governing taste could only be empirical.

However, as a result of his discovery that the feeling of pleasure and displeasure has its own *a priori* principle, irreducible to those of the other two mental faculties, Kant tells Reinhold that he now recognizes three parts of philosophy. In addition to theoretical and practical philosophy (the subjects of the first two *Critiques* and their corresponding metaphysics

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of nature and morals), there is also teleology, which is presumably grounded in this new principle and relates to the feeling of pleasure and pain. Moreover, he also tells Reinhold that he is now at work on a new manuscript dealing with this third part of philosophy, which is to be entitled "Critique of Taste," and which he hopes to have in print by Easter.¹⁵

As usual, Kant was overly optimistic regarding the time required for the completion of his project, since the promised work eventually appeared in April 1790, or some two years after the projected date. And, of course, it took the form of a critique of *judgment*, dealing with both aesthetic and teleological judgment, rather than a critique of *taste*, which is somehow supposedly itself concerned with teleology.¹⁶ But in spite of this significant change in title, it is clear from the Preface to the *Critique of Judgment* that Kant's major concern is still with taste and the possibility of its having a distinct *a priori* principle. For in introducing the idea and putative subject matter of a critique of judgment, Kant states that it will deal with the following three questions:

Does judgment, which in the order of our cognitive powers is a mediating link between understanding and reason, also have *a priori* principles of its own? Are these principles constitutive or merely regulative. . . ? Does judgment give the rule *a priori* to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, the mediating link between the cognitive faculty and the faculty of desire (just as understanding prescribes laws *a priori* to the cognitive faculty and reason to the faculty of desire)? (KU 5: 168; 5)

Although taste is not mentioned in this list of questions, it is unmistakably that to which they all point. For what Kant endeavors to demonstrate in the *Critique* itself is that, contrary to his earlier view expressed in the first *Critique* that judgment, as a merely subsumptive faculty, has no rules or principles of its own (A134–5/B173–4), judgment does in fact have a unique principle and that it is "constitutive," that is, normative, for the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Moreover, as normative or "rule-giving" for this feeling, the principle of judgment is precisely a principle of taste, understood as a capacity to judge or discriminate by means of this feeling. Thus, it is judgment's legislation to feeling through judgments of taste concerning the beauty of objects of nature and art that makes a critique of judgment both possible and necessary. It makes such a critique possible because it is only if a cognitive faculty lays claim to some *a priori* principle that it becomes the appropriate subject matter for a critique in the Kantian sense, which is just an examination of the grounds and limits of such a claim. It makes it necessary because any such claim, even one regarding taste, requires an examination of its grounds and limits before it can be accepted.

What greatly complicates the story and led to the transformation of the initial relatively modest, apparently self-contained project of a critique of

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taste into a full-scale critique of judgment is the introduction of a distinction between determinative and reflective judgment. The former concerns judgment's subsumptive activity on which Kant focused in the first *Critique*, and he continued to hold that, *qua* determinative or subsumptive, that is, insofar as it merely applies previously established concepts or rules to given particulars, judgment neither has nor needs an *a priori* principle of its own. Thus, as it were by default, the *a priori* principle supposedly governing taste is assigned to judgment in its reflective capacity, which essentially involves a movement from particulars to universals.

It turns out, however, that the reflective capacity of judgment is concerned with far more than judgments of taste, or even aesthetic judgment broadly construed (to include judgments of sublimity as well as beauty). For Kant argues in both Introductions that reflective judgment is deeply involved in the empirical investigation of nature and that in such an investigation it is governed by its own *a priori* principle, namely the purposiveness of nature, which, though merely regulative, is nonetheless necessary. In fact, it is claimed to be necessary in a twofold sense, or, more precisely, there are two forms of purposiveness necessarily involved in the pursuit of empirical knowledge. One, which Kant terms "logical" or "formal purposiveness," is necessarily presupposed in the search for empirical concepts under which particulars given in experience can be classified, in the quest for empirical laws in terms of which these same particulars can be explained, as well as in the unification of these laws into theories. The other, termed "real" or "objective purposiveness," is required for the empirical investigation of certain products of nature, namely organisms, whose possibility and mode of behavior we can only make comprehensible to ourselves in terms of the idea of a purpose or end [*Zweck*]. The former mode of purposiveness is a central topic of both Introductions, whereas the latter is the concern of the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*.¹⁷

Kant also argues in the Introductions, however, that even though both of these modes of purposiveness belong to the subject matter of a critique of judgment, since they rest upon a reflective use of judgment, by themselves they do not warrant a separate critique or division of philosophy. On the contrary, he insists that an investigation of them, "could at most have formed an appendix, including a critical restriction on such judging, to the theoretical part of philosophy" (KU 5: 170; 7). Thus, again, it is only taste or the capacity for aesthetic judgment, through which judgment legislates to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, that necessitates a separate critique. Or, as Kant puts it in the Second Introduction, "In a critique of judgment, the part that deals with aesthetic judgment belongs to it essentially" (KU 5: 193; 33).

Kant's clear privileging of taste from the standpoint of transcendental

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critique is perhaps the major reason for the title selected for the present work. It should also be noted, however, that, like the third *Critique* itself, this work is concerned with far more than Kant's theory of taste narrowly conceived. For the analysis of this theory that I attempt to provide is framed, on the one side, by an account of his underlying conception of reflective judgment and its principle of logical or formal purposiveness, which I try to show is central to Kantian epistemology, quite apart from its connection with taste; and, on the other side (in the last two chapters), by discussions of Kant's accounts of fine art and genius, that is, his analysis of artistic production or "creation aesthetic," and of the sublime. Neither of these latter two topics falls within the province of a theory of taste, though both certainly pertain to aesthetics as it is usually construed. Thus, I believe it fair to say that the present work deals with virtually all of the central topics of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*.

It does not, however, discuss in systematic fashion the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, which is the second part of the *Critique of Judgment*. Consequently, it does not deal explicitly with the thorny question of the unity of the *Critique of Judgment*, that is, whether the two parts of the work (and the discussion of logical purposiveness in the Introductions) are parts of a coherent whole, a single investigation into the various forms of reflective judgment, or constitute merely a set of distinct investigations externally linked by Kant's architectonic.¹⁸

Initially it had been my plan to deal with this broader issue. Operating on the principle, which I still take to be valid, that Kant's critical philosophy as a whole revolves around three great ideas, namely, the transcendental ideality of space and time, the freedom of the will, and the purposiveness of nature, and having already written books on the first two, I set out some years ago to complete my Kantian trilogy by producing a book on the third.¹⁹ The idea was to show that the concept of purposiveness, which is the *a priori* principle of judgment in its logical, aesthetic, and teleological reflection, does, indeed, provide a unifying principle.

After having worked on this project for some time, however, I came to recognize two considerations which led me to revise my overly ambitious agenda and narrow my focus to the topics discussed in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. One was the great variety of the senses that Kant gave to the notion of purposiveness and the difficulties involved in reconciling them with one another.²⁰ Although I continue to believe that it is both possible and important to do so, the issues, particularly as they involve teleological judgment, are extremely complex, and an adequate treatment of them would have both increased the size of the present work beyond reasonable proportions and threatened its integrity.²¹ The other, and perhaps more serious consideration, was my lack of sufficient expertise in biology, and the history and philosophy thereof, to do justice to Kant's account of teleological judgment. Thus, rather than contenting

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myself with a relatively superficial discussion of Kant's extremely interesting views on biology, which would not add anything of substance to the existing literature, I decided to leave that topic for those who are better equipped than I am to deal with it.²² Nevertheless, the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* is not neglected completely.²³ In fact, since there is much in that portion of the third *Critique* (and in the brief discussions of teleological judgment in the two Introductions) that is directly relevant to the issues discussed in this work, I turn to it at several key points in my analyses, including the discussion of the production of fine art.

Apart from this Introduction, the book as a whole is composed of thirteen chapters and is divided into four parts. The first part, consisting of the first two chapters, is concerned with Kant's conception of reflective judgment as articulated in the two Introductions and its connection with his theory of taste. The first chapter, which could stand by itself as an independent essay, offers a fairly detailed analysis of reflection and reflective judgment, their role in the formation of empirical concepts, and their connection with the transcendental principle of the formal or logical purposiveness of nature. It also analyzes and defends Kant's deduction of this principle, which it treats as at once an answer to Hume's skepticism regarding the rational grounding of induction and as a third way or "critical path" between Locke's conventionalism and Leibniz's metaphysical essentialism. Building on this analysis and following the suggestion of Béatrice Longuenesse that what is distinctive in the third *Critique* is not the conception of reflective judgment as such, but the idea that there might be a "merely reflective judgement" (reflection without a corresponding determination),²⁴ the second chapter examines Kant's account of judgments of taste as aesthetic judgments of reflection in the First Introduction and the corresponding account of an aesthetic representation of purposiveness in the Second. Its major concern is thus to try to understand the connection between the reflective activity of judgment in judgments of taste and Kant's broader views about the epistemic role of reflection.

The analysis of Kant's theory of taste as it is contained in the body of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* constitutes the heart of the book and is concerned with two questions, which, in opposition to many interpreters, I insist upon keeping sharply separate: the question of the normativity of judgments of taste (their supposed right to demand the agreement of others), and the question of the moral or systematic significance of taste.²⁵ These are the concerns of the second and third parts respectively.

The second part, consisting of Chapters 3 through 8, is organized around Kant's famous distinction between the *quid facti* and the *quid juris*, which to my knowledge has never before been applied to the third *Critique*. Its central claim is that the four moments of the Analytic of the

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Beautiful, each of which is treated in a separate chapter, are concerned with the *quid facti*, which is understood to refer to the conditions under which a judgment of taste can be pure, while the Deduction of Pure Judgments of Taste (Chapter 8) addresses the *quid juris*. An important consequence of this mode of analysis, which I endeavor to defend, is that although Kant succeeds reasonably well in the Deduction in showing that a pure judgment of taste makes a rightful demand on the agreement of others (and thus possesses genuine normativity), it turns out to be impossible in a given case to determine whether a particular judgment of taste is pure.

The third part (Chapters 9 through 11) completes the analysis of taste and the experience of beauty by considering the question of their moral and systematic significance. Since this relates directly to Kant's famous reference to the necessity of a transition or *Übergang* from nature to freedom, I devote the initial chapter to this issue as it is discussed in the Second Introduction and earlier texts. On the basis of this analysis, I then discuss in the next two chapters two related, though distinct, ways in which taste and the experience of beauty contribute to such an *Übergang* (and therefore to morality): first, by making possible an intellectual interest in natural beauty, which, by providing "hints" and "traces" that nature is on our side (is amenable to our morally required projects), helps to support the moral endeavors of radically evil agents such as ourselves (Chapter 10); and second, by serving as a symbol of morality (Chapter 11). Since the latter claim is the culmination of the Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment, I preface my treatment of it with a detailed analysis of the Antinomy of Taste and the doctrine of aesthetic ideas, which I argue is essential to understanding how the beautiful can symbolize morality.

Finally, as already noted, the fourth part of this book (Chapters 12 and 13) deals with two topics that are of considerable intrinsic interest but stand apart from the systematic structure of Kant's theory of taste: his conceptions of fine art and genius, and his account of the sublime. Appealing to Kant's term highlighted by Derrida, I refer to these topics as "parerga" to the theory of taste because of their "extra-systematic" status.²⁶

The first of these topics is parergonal because Kant's theory of taste as such is concerned exclusively with the nature and normativity of aesthetic judgment. Thus, as Gadamer suggests, the concept of a "pure judgment of taste" may be viewed as a "methodological abstraction, only obliquely related to the difference between nature and art."²⁷ But in order to apply this account to artistic beauty, Kant is forced to deal with the ways in which it differs from natural beauty. And this leads him inevitably to a consideration of the creative process, the centerpiece of which is his conception of genius.

Since a full treatment of Kant's views on fine art and genius would amount to a book-length work in its own right, I focus my analysis on the

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conditions which, according to Kant, must be met by a product of art if it is to be deemed beautiful, namely, it must seem like nature, though we must be conscious of it as art. The tension between these two requirements, I suggest, generates much of the interest in Kant's philosophy of art and is the key to understanding his conception of genius. Within this framework I return to the theory of aesthetic ideas and attempt to show that the account of beauty (both natural and artistic) is not only compatible with the formalism of the Analytic but is its necessary complement. In addition, I attempt to relate the conception of fine art to the free-adherent beauty distinction of the Analytic and to explore the diverse ways in which Kant views "representation" in the domain of art.

The account of the sublime, as the second species of pure aesthetic judgment, completes the study and is the longest and perhaps most complex chapter in the book. Both the length and complexity of the discussion derive partly from the many strands of thought that collide in Kant's account of the sublime and partly from the relatively undeveloped nature of his analysis. The latter I take to be a symptom of his deep ambivalence toward this conception, and I believe that this ambivalence underlies the apparently last-minute nature of his decision to include a discussion of it in the *Critique of Judgment*.

In particular, I emphasize the tension between the sublime and the underlying concept of the purposiveness of nature. The central problem is that whereas the beautiful provides intimations (not amounting to anything like evidence) that nature is on our side in the sense previously stipulated, the sublime provides us with a sense of our allegedly "supersensible" nature and vocation and, therefore, of our independence of nature. The latter is certainly crucial for Kant's understanding of morality, reflecting what I term the "Stoic side" of his moral theory; but the sense of purposiveness that it involves can no longer be readily viewed as that of nature, except in an indirect and Pickwickian sense.

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I

KANT'S CONCEPTION OF
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