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Introduction

Placing the Aesthetic in Kant's Critical Epistemology

Rebecca Kukla

The primary thesis of this book, taken as a whole, is that we cannot properly understand Kant's critical epistemological program or his account of empirical cognition without also understanding his account of aesthetic judgment, imagination, and sensibility (articulated primarily in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* but showing up in bits and pieces in the *Critique of Pure Reason*).¹ And yet, the book also demonstrates that placing the aesthetic within Kant's cognitive theory is a difficult task that often risks challenging that theory from within. Between them, the eleven original essays in this volume show that on the one hand, careful attention to Kant's aesthetics revises and illuminates our entrenched understandings of core elements of Kant's critical epistemology, such as his notions of discursive understanding, experience, and determinative judgment, while on the other hand, a rich grasp of Kant's whole critical project is necessary for making sense of his aesthetic theory.

For most of the twentieth century, Kant's aesthetic theory was marginalized by analytic philosophers, who systematically privileged epistemology and (to a lesser extent) ethics as the core philosophical subdisciplines, and who did not see aesthetics as substantially relevant to these subdisciplines. Kant's third *Critique* received vastly less scholarly attention than the first two, and the little commentary that it did receive was insulated from the rest of the corpus of Kant scholarship. The *Critique of the Power of*

¹ Kant discusses aesthetics in other places, particularly his precritical essay *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (2004), but the focus of this volume is specifically on Kant's critical philosophy and the place of the aesthetic within it.

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Judgment was assumed by the majority of Anglo-American philosophers to be a lesser work, a dated romantic treatise on art that was easily separable from the first two critiques. Those who did turn their attention to the work were mostly dedicated philosophers of art, who also did not read the book as integral to Kant's critical epistemology, but rather as a self-contained account of beauty, artistic genius, the standards of good art, or (at most) the connection between aesthetic taste and moral character.² Meanwhile, continental philosophers and literary theorists such as Paul de Man and Jean-François Lyotard took the third *Critique* very seriously indeed, but mostly without much interest in engaging the epistemological concerns of Anglo-American philosophy.³

This sequestering of the third *Critique* was especially surprising and unpromising, in retrospect, given Kant's own scrupulous and extensive efforts to tie his three *Critiques* tightly together into a single architectonic whole. All three critiques share a great deal of analytical structure and conceptual machinery. Each is organized into an 'analytic' and a 'dialectic', each analyzes the form of judgments according to the same moments (quantity, quality, relation, modality), derived from the table of judgments introduced in the first *Critique*, each contains a transcendental deduction of the validity of the form of judgment that it takes as its topic, and so forth. Furthermore, Kant repeatedly insists that the three critiques are meant to form a comprehensive whole, with each book explicating how its distinctive form of judgment can function legitimately within the transcendental idealist metaphysics and critical epistemology that he lays out in the Preface and the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Under the circumstances, it seems that the burden of proof would lie firmly on Kant's commentators to show that the third *Critique* was a separable or ignorable document and *not* an integral part of the critical project. But it remains the case that until fairly recently, only two philosophers really took the purported fundamental unity of the critical project absolutely seriously, namely, Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze,⁴ and neither of them came from this side of the Atlantic. Only, it seems, a bias against aesthetics as a serious philosophical topic can explain why so many scholars were willing to assume this separability in advance of any serious attention to the text.

² For example, see the contents of Cohen and Guyer's classic collection of essays on Kant's aesthetics (1982).

³ See, for instance, de Man (1990) and Lyotard (1994), and also Bernstein (1992).

⁴ See Heidegger (1990) and Deleuze (1990).

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But scholarship on the third *Critique* and on Kant's theory of judgment in general, understood to include aesthetic judgment, has undergone a renaissance over the past few decades, and over the past fifteen years in particular. The prominence of the third *Critique* in the Anglo-American world, as well as interest in its significance beyond philosophy of art, began an important upswing in the 1970s with the publication of a few influential works such as Donald Crawford's *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (1974), Theodore Uehling's *The Notion of Form in Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1971), Eva Schaper's *Studies in Kant's Aesthetics* (1979), and the first edition of Paul Guyer's *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (1979, second revised edition 1997). The year 1990 saw the publication of Hannah Ginsborg's doctoral dissertation, *The Role of Taste in Kant's Theory of Cognition*, and Rudolf Makkreel's *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of Kant's Critique of Judgment*. Both works were specifically designed to show the systematic connections between Kant's aesthetic theory and his epistemology and theory of cognition, and both chipped away at the counterproductive impasse between continental and analytic philosophy, availing themselves of the insights and texts of each. From 1990 on, philosophical attention turned quickly and vigorously to this set of systematic connections, and Kant's aesthetic theory became a topic of direct interest to many epistemologists. There quickly followed a blossoming of philosophical interest in the third *Critique*, with an eye to its epistemological and cognitive dimensions and its contribution to the critical project as a whole, as well as a fresh rereading of the first *Critique*, with an eye to the place it assigns to the aesthetic functions of sensibility and imagination in empirical cognition. Several classic contributions to this exploration have already emerged, such as Henry E. Allison's *Kant's Theory of Taste* (2001)⁵ and Béatrice Longuenesse's *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (1998).⁶

In a complementary development, several philosophers, prominently including John McDowell, have recently followed Wilfrid Sellars in looking to Kant's account of sensibility and its relationship to the discursive understanding as a rich source for illuminating contemporary epistemological debates. According to McDowell, the Kantian critical apparatus is the source of a set of dualisms (between concepts and intuitions,

⁵ This book completed Allison's trio of works on the three branches of the critical philosophy, interpreted as a systematic whole, the first two being *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (1983) and *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (1990).

⁶ Longuenesse's book was released first in French in 1993 as *Kant et le Pouvoir de Juger*.

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receptivity and spontaneity, sensibility and understanding) out of which spring some of the deepest problems in contemporary epistemology, such as how the preconceptualized deliverances of sensibility could ground conceptual judgment and inference. At the same time, Sellars and McDowell argue, careful attention to Kantian sensibility and imagination also provides resources for overcoming these dualisms and dissolving these problems.⁷

In light of the dazzling reinvigoration of our engagement with both the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, it is high time that the voices of the major participants in this renaissance be collected in one volume; this is what I have aimed to do here. I have included essays by a couple of the most prominent and established living Kant scholars, both of whom have long been dedicated to treating the critical philosophy as a whole (Paul Guyer and Henry Allison), scholars who initiated and gave form to the renaissance in Kant scholarship I have just described (Rudolf Makkreel, Hannah Ginsborg, Béatrice Longuenesse); emerging Kant scholars who were trained in a new climate in which the third *Critique* was taken to be a key philosophical text, the critical philosophy was treated as a unified endeavor, and the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy had begun to break down (Melissa Zinkin, Kirk Pillow); and philosophers with established reputations in epistemology, phenomenology, and the history of philosophy who are finding new reasons to turn to Kant in light of recent work on Kantian sensibility and aesthetic theory (Mark Okrent, Richard Manning, John McCumber).

1. CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE COPERNICAN TURN: AN OVERVIEW

Kant's critical epistemological project, writ large, was to overcome the twin threats of humiliating skepticism and hubristic dogmatism. He wished to find a secure ground for our judgments, which would guarantee that they were both accountable to an empirical world and able to grasp and make sense of that world. In order to establish such security, Kant insisted on relinquishing the dream of total epistemic mastery in order to gain genuine mastery over a carefully limited and circumscribed

⁷ See Sellars (1992), McDowell (1994), and especially McDowell (1998). See also Norris (2000), MacBeth (2000), and in particular Manning, this volume.

domain. Specifically, he argued that we had to give up the dream of understanding things as they are in themselves, unconditioned by our own epistemic activities ('noumena') so as to gain the right kind of secure grasp of things as they are conditioned by our encounter with them ('phenomena').

Kant sought to bring the domain of phenomena – the empirical objects of possible experience – under the mastery of the understanding by way of his famous “Copernican turn,” wherein we begin from the assumption that our understanding plays a constitutive role in producing and regulating the empirical order. Whereas “up to now it ha[d] been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects,” he hoped to

get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition. . . . This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest.⁸

The Copernican turn is supposed to take the humiliating sting out of our epistemic finitude by carving out a safe and delineable domain within which the world can be counted upon to be intrinsically comprehensible, since the principles and conditions of our cognitive faculties are the constitutive conditions governing the objects we seek to understand.

Our cognitive faculties can remain secure in their hegemony only when they remain cloistered within their carefully controlled and charted territory. The “land of the understanding”

is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end. (B294–5)

Rather than venture off our island, we must be “satisfied with what it contains out of necessity” (ibid.). By carefully containing our inquiries within this domain, we could, in a limited way, become masters rather than

⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason* Bxvi. Henceforth in this volume, references to the *Critique of Pure Reason* shall be given simply by their pagination in the A and B editions. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from the Guyer and Wood edition (1997).

subjects in our epistemic partnership with the empirical world.⁹ Kant's language of the encounter between human cognition and the objective world is thoroughly inflected with legislative rhetoric. His guiding epistemological concern is that the understanding remain legitimately vested with the power to lay down laws that nature must follow while not overstepping the boundaries of its authority. He describes the three Critiques themselves as playing a 'policing' role (*CPR* Bxxv); they enable our cognitive faculties to master their epistemic domain by guarding and enforcing its boundaries. Human cognition purportedly enjoys safe haven on the island of truth because here, objects are under *our* rule. Instead of being "instructed by nature like a pupil," dependent on our teacher's contingent gifts of knowledge, our relation to nature on the island would be that of "an appointed judge, who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them" (Bxiii). Human cognition does not create empirical nature in its particularity, but it does give it the law. "Reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own. . . . It must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature's lead strings, but must itself show the way" (*ibid*).

The project of critical epistemology, then, is the twofold task of delineating the boundaries of the domain of proper inquiry and determining the principles of proper judgment with respect to the phenomena within this domain. Kant's three critical works are intended to carry out this project with respect to pure theoretical judgment, practical judgment, and aesthetic and teleological judgment,¹⁰ respectively. Furthermore, the very title of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* gives it a presumptive primacy over the other two: While the *Critique of Pure Reason* introduces the critical project, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* purports to complete it.

Although our cognitive faculties will always help constitute the order they encounter, Kant insisted upon the ratification of an empirical realist epistemology and metaphysics in which, as Richard Manning puts it in this volume, our judgments "amount to commitments directed toward objects in a world that is not of our making, . . . answerable for their correctness to the way that those objects are." The Copernican turn, successfully executed, would guarantee that our cognitive faculties are suited to the task

⁹ For an exploration of this dream of epistemic mastery contained within the boundaries of a circumscribed 'island' and its place in the eighteenth century imaginary, see Kukla (2005).

¹⁰ Both aesthetic judgment and teleological judgment are species of *reflective judgment*, of which more later.

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of grasping and making sense of empirical objects, but in turning we risk losing the answerability of cognition to these objects. For once we begin, as the critical method asks us to do, with the *subjective conditions of cognition* and the constitutive influence of our cognitive faculties, we must immediately ask why we should believe that these subjective conditions reflect the real character of empirical objects, as opposed to merely our representations of these objects. How, if we constitutively contribute to the objects we experience, do we avoid descending into empirical idealism and concluding that our inquiries merely hold up a mirror that fails to be accountable to an independent world? Or, as Kant puts the problem, how is it that “*subjective conditions of thinking* should have *objective validity*” (A89/B122)? Having foreclosed the problem of successful access to the objects of inquiry through the Copernican turn, this problem of objective validity then becomes the driving question of the critical epistemology as a whole, and of the Transcendental Deduction of the first *Critique* in particular.

2. DISCURSIVITY AND SENSIBILITY

Kant's model of cognitive judgment, as he introduces it in the first *Critique*, is quite simple, and he uses this initial model to help narrow and focus the problem of objective validity that it will purportedly be the task of the Transcendental Deduction to solve. According to this familiar model, our central cognitive tool for grasping the world in judgment is the understanding. The understanding is *discursive*, which is to say that it consists of a faculty of general concepts that function as rules for categorizing particulars. Judgment involves subsuming particulars under such general concepts, and hence every judgment has the form of a proposition, with the table of judgments giving the possible logical forms of such propositions (A70/B95). The understanding can *determine* particulars using concepts it already possesses, or it can *reflect* upon particulars, and their similarities and differences, in order to form a new concept. The faculty of understanding has no goals or guiding principles of its own, according to Kant; rather, it is the tool used by *reason*, which seeks a systematic, nomological grasp of the empirical world. Reason builds such a systematic grasp (though never completes it) through *determinative judgment*, which subsumes particulars under concepts, and through *reflective judgment*, which creatively goes beyond the mere processing of experience in order to form hypotheses, find new connections, and otherwise tie experience together systematically.

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The understanding is a spontaneous faculty: It does not collect information about the world but rather operates, through reflection and determination, on what is delivered to it. The Kantian *aesthetic*, properly speaking, is just that which we receive through our sensuous encounter with the world, which can then (normally) be delivered to the understanding for processing in discursive judgment. Our aesthetic encounter with the world is that provided by our faculty of *sensibility*, which, unlike the understanding, is a *receptive* faculty. Without such a receptive faculty and its deliverances, our understanding would make no contact with the world and would have nothing to operate upon – as Kant notoriously puts it, without the content provided by sensibility, concepts are “empty” (A51/B75). As presented at the beginning of the first *Critique*, the faculty of sensibility is a quite neat and simple dualistic complement to the faculty of concepts: Where the latter is spontaneous, the faculty of sensibility is purely receptive, and what it receives are *intuitions*, which are (equally notoriously) “blind” without concepts (*ibid.*). It is only through empirical judgment, which applies concepts to intuition, that we have *experience* – which has discursive structure, can ground inference, and so forth – at all. Hence the aesthetic dimension of experience, on this view, is just that which belongs to receptive sensibility. True to this initial stark division of labor, the only explicit discussion of the aesthetic in the first *Critique* is the Transcendental Aesthetic, which argues for the transcendental, a priori status of space and time as the forms of intuition – that is, the aesthetic form in which sensibility is received by our cognitive faculties. That intuition has such a priori forms makes it clear that even the deliverances of sensibility are *conditioned* by our cognitive faculties, but the faculty of sensibility does not (here) actively *form* intuition – it just *receives* intuition in a certain form.

The task of the Transcendental Deduction, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is to discharge the initial assumption of the possibility of the Copernican turn. The Deduction – whose job is nothing less than the ratification of the objectivity of our cognition – purports to show that our judgments succeed in being accountable to the empirical world, in virtue of this world in turn being transcendently required to conform to the principles of our discursive understanding. The Deduction has a double thrust. It needs to show that the sensuous deliverances of intuition will not outrun the ability of the understanding to order these deliverances by bringing them under general concepts, and it needs to show that our properly formed discursive judgments neither distort nor misrepresent the phenomena they seek to grasp. According to Kant, intuitions – including space and

time as the pure aesthetic forms of intuition – need no deduction. Rather, they “necessarily relate to objects” because of their receptive character. Furthermore, he claims, our use of empirical concepts does not need an a priori deduction, since these concepts are derived from the deliverances of sensibility. Hence, he concludes, what is needed is only a transcendental deduction of the legitimacy of the pure, a priori categories of the understanding, which “do not represent to us the conditions under which objects are given in intuition” (A89/B122).

3. THE EVOLVING AUTONOMY OF THE AESTHETIC

Notice that if we take this dualistic model seriously, then strictly speaking there can be no such thing as either ‘pure aesthetic experience’ or ‘pure aesthetic judgment,’ since the aesthetic is that which is passively received in intuition and not yet synthesized by the understanding, as Kant says it must be in order to constitute experience. The story of how and why the Kantian aesthetic becomes so much more than it initially appears to be is the story that frames this book.

The role of the aesthetic in cognition and judgment starts to become more complex almost immediately after Kant dismisses it as a problem at the beginning of the Deduction. Quite unexpectedly, given Kant's reiteration of his two-faculty approach at the start of this section, in it Kant abruptly introduces what seems to be a whole new cognitive faculty; the *imagination*, which is capable of a whole new kind of synthesis, which Kant calls the *figurative synthesis* of the manifold of intuition. Until this point in the text, Kant's discussion of synthetic activity concerned the synthesis of *intuition in understanding*. However, figurative synthesis is pre-discursive, and its job is to display order and unity *at the level of the sensible particular* in preparation for its subsumption under discursive concepts. Although Kant claims that the imagination “belongs to sensibility,” he also portrays it as a kind of *activity* and hence not merely receptive:

This synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuition, which is possible and necessary a priori, may be entitled figurative synthesis, to distinguish it from the synthesis which is . . . entitled synthesis of the understanding. . . . The figurative synthesis . . . must, in order to be distinguished from the merely intellectual combination, be called the *transcendental synthesis of the imagination*. (B151)

The introduction of imagination and its figurative synthesis is already a suspicious departure from the neat dualism of active understanding and passive sensibility, but in the B version of the Deduction, Kant tries to keep

this new faculty from posing any real challenge to the mastery and regulatory power of the understanding by claiming that though imagination “belongs to sensibility,” and though figurative synthesis is prediscursive, it is “an action of the understanding on sensibility” (B152). Thus it appears here that the imagination operates as a servant of the understanding, readying intuition for understanding’s rule *according to the latter’s own, discursive principles*.

Hence it is a surprise when, right after the Deduction is complete and the objective validity of our concepts is supposedly secure, we find out that the job of making perspicuous which conceptual rules apply to objects cannot possibly be governed by discursive general rules without introducing a hopeless regress:

General logic contains no precepts at all for the power of judgment, and moreover cannot contain them. . . . If it wanted to show generally how one ought to subsume under [formal] rules, . . . this could not happen except once again through a rule. But just because this is a rule, it would demand another instruction for the power of judgment, and so it becomes clear that although the understanding is certainly capable of being instructed and equipped through rules, the power of judgment is a special talent that cannot be taught but only practiced. (A133/B172)

This ‘rules regress,’ which foreshadows Wittgenstein’s formulation of it in the *Philosophical Investigations*, indicates that our general capacity to ‘see’ which concepts apply to a particular cannot itself be governed by conceptual rules. Judgment requires that the imagination guide the understanding by making perspicuous, through figurative synthesis, a type of order that the understanding can articulate. This in turn requires a ‘peculiar talent’ for grasping the particular at the aesthetic level of sensibility. The call for this special guiding function of the imagination initiates Kant’s chapter on the “Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding” (or just the Schematism), whose brief eleven pages Heidegger claims “constitute the central core of the whole [critical project].”¹¹ Schematization is the process by which the imagination gathers intuition and produces schemata that somehow *show the understanding, from within sensibility*, how the presentations of sensibility can be categorized and comprehended under general concepts. And again, schematization cannot be governed by discursive rules, for its function is precisely to enable the application of such rules. In other words, however schematization is governed, this activity is *aesthetic* rather than discursive – a fact marked not only by Kant’s explicit argument here about the limits of the understanding, but also

¹¹ Heidegger (1990), 60.