

## 1 Introduction: Reflection and Revolution

Although the relation between politics and aesthetics is a subject of perennial interest, the political implications of Kant's Critique of Taste (in Part One of the *Critique of Judgment*) have not previously been the focus of a sustained study. That omission is all the more striking given Kant's attention to the issue, from the 1760s onward, in response to Rousseau's famous charge that progress in the arts and sciences was inimical to moral health and collective human happiness. Kant's Critique of Taste, as I here argue, represents his definitive response to Rousseau's challenge. I do not mean to claim that this is *all* that Kant's Critique aims to accomplish; nor do I claim to offer a comprehensive account of his theory of taste. Still, a concentration on this neglected theme has two distinct advantages: *first*, it enables one to better locate Kant's aesthetic work within the larger political program he laid out in the years following the French Revolution, from the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) to the later *Metaphysics of Morals* (1798). *Second*, it brings new clarity to two much-contested interpretive issues: namely, *the relation between aesthetic judgments of natural and artistic beauty and the normative force and significance of aesthetic judgment as such*.

Despite the profusion of insightful scholarly work on Kant's aesthetics and politics, little has been written on their interrelation. The dramatic exception that proves the rule is Hannah Arendt, whose *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* replaces his most overtly "political" philosophic work, namely, the *Doctrine of Right* (which she dismisses as a product of senility), with his critique of aesthetic judgment, which she tends to read as the political work that Kant would or should have written (Arendt, 1992). To be sure, there are obvious practical implications of Kant's aesthetic theory to which he himself explicitly points, and that have been duly noted in the literature. These include, but are not limited to, the "discipline" of weaning us from our dependence on crudely sensual pleasure and making our natural drive to sociability more decorous and "civilized," with implications for political life that are seemingly obvious. At the same time, the precise relation between Kant's aesthetics and his practical philosophy more generally is one of the outstanding unsettled scholarly issues currently being debated, with some claiming that the normative basis of Kantian aesthetics is ultimately moral and others treating such concerns as incidental to Kant's central argument.

In conflating, in defiance of Kant's own text, the "common sense" of aesthetic judgment with one directly pertinent to politics, Arendt (1992:64–72) may have been responding to Walter Benjamin's famous juxtaposition of fascism, understood as the aestheticization of politics, and communism understood as the

politicization of aesthetics. As he writes at the end of “Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility”: “Fiat ars – pereat mundus”, says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology . . . . This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art” (Benjamin, 1968:242). Arendt had good reason to seek a more moderate, republican alternative to these two horns, and evidently thought she had found it in the unwritten Kantian text she attempted to compose. But there are alternative political lessons to be drawn from Kant’s Critique of Taste that are both truer to Kant’s meaning and ultimately more compelling, as I will argue, than those drawn either by Arendt or by some later, more textually faithful scholars.<sup>1</sup>

The sections that make up this study aim to chart the political consequences Kant hoped would flow from a critical doctrine of taste. (I mainly exclude Kant’s treatment of the sublime, on whose political implications much has indeed been written, which is only indirectly the object of judgments of “taste” – e.g., in “beautiful” representations of the sublime.) Section 2 (“The Elements of Beauty” [*CJ* #1–40]) takes up the earliest and most commonly studied sections of the Critique of Taste, including both the “deduction” of taste at #38 and Kant’s discussion of our “empirical” and “moral” interests in the beautiful. Sections 3 and 4 (“Artistic Beauty” [*CJ* #41–52] and “Rhetoric and the Antinomy of Taste” [*CJ* #53–57]) consider Kant’s treatment of fine art in greater detail. Rather than either downplay these sections (like Guyer in his earlier work) or make it the central focus of Kant’s doctrine of taste (like Crawford), I argue that judgments of artistic beauty make a distinctive normative claim, requiring its own independent “deduction,” and that such taste (unlike a taste for free beauties of nature) develops only under specific social conditions. As such, judgments of artistic beauty have a normative character that is distinctly their own (and hence not exhausted by Kant’s earlier deduction of pure judgments of natural beauty). Section 5 (“The Politics of Beauty” [*CJ* #58–60]) discusses the final sections of the Critique of Taste, including both beauty as “symbol” and the peculiar relation, as it seems to Kant during the early months of the French Revolution, between taste and the solution to the problem of establishing a state.

In sum: this is mainly a study of Part One of the *Critique of Judgment* (minus Kant’s treatment of the sublime). Unlike other such studies, mine especially focuses on what Kant aimed to accomplish practically and politically through

<sup>1</sup> For instructive suggestions, however, see Clewis (2009), Dobe (2018), and Stoner (2019).

such a critique (insofar as this can be established on the basis of the text itself). Moreover, unlike many who have touched on the latter topic,<sup>2</sup> I try to take seriously the moral and political harms, as well as benefits, that flow from the advance of civilization and culture. So understood, Kant's Critique of Taste, as I will argue, is itself a practical/political intervention meant to redirect taste in a more positive civil and moral direction. I do not claim this to be the primary aim of the Critique of Taste; nor is what follows intended as a comprehensive study of Kant's account of beauty. Still, as I hope to show, viewing the Critique of Taste through such a lens not only reveals a degree of *comprehensive philosophic rigor and coherence* not otherwise easily appreciated; it also suggests that Kant's Critique of Taste may harbor untapped resources for understanding and improving our own civic and aesthetic culture.<sup>3</sup>

This study is also distinguished from many others<sup>4</sup> in claiming that the normative standard of taste may be *either* constitutive *or* regulative, depending on whether natural or artistic beauty is mainly at issue. The *constitutive* standard applies to "pure judgments of taste" that presuppose a capacity shared by all human beings capable of making objective epistemic judgments. The *regulative* standard, by way of contrast, mainly applies, as I will argue, to a taste for exemplary works of art. Unlike the capacity for and exercise of pure judgments of natural beauty, the latter sort of taste must be *cultivated*, a process that is partly dependent on the progress of civilization and that gives rise to an "antinomy" that must be critically resolved if taste is to realize, rather than frustrate, its morally preparatory mission. Moreover, unlike pure judgments of taste for free beauties (of nature), which only concern the free play of imagination and understanding, taste in the regulative sense crucially involves reason as well.<sup>5</sup> It also presupposes a "creative" expansion of the imagination (beyond that involved in pure judgments of taste) that gives rise to both new opportunities for spiritual enlivening (e.g., through the art of poetry) and new dangers (e.g., through the misuse of rhetoric to beguile rather than elevate).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Sweet (2013), Murray (2015); but compare Kalar (2017) and Otabi (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Consider in this regard both Clement Greenberg's championing of abstract expressionism on putatively (and falsely) "Kantian" grounds, and Arthur Danto's counter-championing of "conceptualism" on grounds that were more Kantian than he himself evidently recognized. On these and other misappropriations of Kant's aesthetics within the contemporary art world, see Cazeaux (2021), Guyer (2021), and Costello (2007).

<sup>4</sup> "Regulative" readings include, for example, Crawford (1974), Longuenesse (2006), and Matherne (2019). For some alternative combined readings see Saville (1987), Kemal (1992), and Dobe (2010). According to Guyer (1979:327) and Stoner (2019) Kant leaves the matter unsettled.

<sup>5</sup> The significance of this addition (and hence an essential difference between the two sorts of aesthetic judgment) tends to be overlooked; an exception is Crowther (2010:142) who neglects, however, the continuing importance of the relation between imagination and understanding (as well as reason) in judgments of fine art.

The sections that follow take their initial bearings from the oft noted but insufficiently pondered coincidence of the Storming of the Bastille in July 1789 – along with its immediate political context and aftermath – and the months in which Kant completed the *Critique of Judgment*, installments of which he sent off to the printer between January and March 1790. As John Zammito (1992) has convincingly argued, building on the earlier work of Giorgio Tonelli (1966), much of the latter sections of Part One, as well as the bulk of Part Two, were written after May 1789 and some, including the final version of the “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment” and a greatly expanded concluding section of Part Two, were not completed until early 1790. By May 1789, much had already happened in France, including the publication of Abbé Sieyès’ influential pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?* in January of that year, followed by the king’s call for elections of delegates to the Estates-General (which had not met for over a century) and the Paris riots in April; May and June witnessed the meeting of the Estates-General followed by its transformation, under the self-declared authority of the Third Estate, into a National Assembly which Louis XVI officially recognized in late June. Formal adoption by the Assembly of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen would follow in August. By December 1789, the Assembly had appropriated the property of the Church for the nation’s use, introduced the assignat (a form of currency based on the value of confiscated Church property), and opened up public office to Protestants.

Kant’s avid interest in revolutionary developments in France is common knowledge. According to one contemporary report, he was so caught up that he “would have walked for miles to get the mail” (Kuehn, 2001:343); and he would later admit, in an unpublished draft, to a “feverish” enthusiasm for the latest news (*Refl-E* 19:604). That Kant had events in France firmly in mind as he completed Part Two of the *Critique of Judgment* is strongly suggested by his reference, in a striking footnote, to the recent transformation of a great people into a state “organized” along republican lines, and copying almost verbatim the words of the Abbé, who writes in *What Is the Third Estate?* of the constitutional laws that can emanate from the will of a nation as of two kinds, some “determin[ing] the organization and the functions of the legislative body; the others . . . the organization and functions of the various executive bodies” (Sieyès, 2002:53). It seems likely, then, as Zammito (1992:334) argues, that the French Revolution contributed to a general reorientation in Kant’s historical, political, and religious thinking to which the third *Critique* bears signal witness.

In Part One of the *Critique of Judgment*, the evidence is admittedly less conclusive and more subtle, as we shall see. But, in any case, the political dimensions of Kant’s Critique of Taste were not limited to, or bounded by,

current events but ultimately reflect deeper philosophic issues, including those raised by Rousseau as to the very possibility of genuine human progress (Allison, 2001:206). As Kant had himself stated in the *Idea for a Universal History* (1784), “we are *cultured* to a high degree through art and science. We are *civilized* – perhaps too much for our own good – in all sorts of social grace and decorum. But as to our being *moralized* – for that, much is lacking” (*IUH* 8:260). Kant’s early answer to that question had suggested two possible solutions: a republic dependent on social habits of frugality and civic virtue, and a monarchic state suitable for luxurious societies (*Rem* 2:166),<sup>6</sup> such as contemporary Prussia, in which progress in the arts and sciences could flourish without damage to civil unity thanks to the iron rule of “enlightened” monarchs like Frederick II in the short run, and with further civil freedom left to the indefinite future (*WIE* 8:41–42). Contemporary events in France collapsed that time frame, suggesting the possibility of combining progress, stability, and republican freedom in the here and now. Indeed, as he finished the last pages of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant would have had good reason to hope that a new constitutional monarchy with strongly republican features, and hence favorable to both intellectual and moral advancement, was then in the making, thanks to the domination in the National Assembly of moderates like Sieyès. Such hopes would have been further supported by the reports of sympathetic observers like Count Windisch-Graetz, in whose recent work on “organism” Kant took particular interest at this time (Shell, 2009:164–67).

But there were other philosophic issues at stake – not least, both the precise status of teleological principles in the conduct of natural scientific inquiry, as treated in his 1787 essay, and the very possibility of an a priori principle of taste (a possibility that he had explicitly denied in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), leading to the need for a transcendental “critique of taste.” By 1787 the two questions had merged under the general rubric of the “Critique of Judgment” thanks to an expanded understanding of the scope of “reflecting,” as distinguished from “determining,” judgment.

That the provenance of this new a priori principle was by his own account aesthetic (*Corr* 10:513–15) adds weight to the suspicion of an important link between Kant’s treatment of aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique* and his new approach to history as worldly realization, if only by continual approximation, of a highest good earlier presented as an otherworldly transcendental ideal. For, if in Kant’s *Idea for Universal History* culture and civilization had proceeded, in that order, a moralization that remained problematic, now culture, issuing from mere “civilization” and infused under the title of “discipline” with

<sup>6</sup> See also Shell and Velkley (2012).

new moral promise, was pointed toward the future. That promise, to be sure, was double-edged, art never altogether losing its morally destructive association with the twin vices of vanity and luxury and giving Kant's treatment of aesthetic judgment an open-endedness particularly pertinent to our own age. What Kant foresaw was the possibility and need for a new national art suitable for the republican constitutional state that his political writings of the 1790s helped conjure forth. Part One of the *Critique of Judgment* presents the faint but distinctive outlines of that aesthetic-political project.

## 2 The Elements of Beauty

In #1–42 of Part One of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant presents, in consecutive order: elucidations (*Erklärungen*) of the four “moments” (*Momenta*) of taste and beauty; a “deduction” of pure judgments of taste with regard to free beauties of nature; and, finally, a provisional inquiry into the possibility of a principle that might guide or otherwise apply to judgments of artistic beauty – aesthetic judgments of a sort that the deduction provided in #38 specifically omits. In so claiming, I take seriously Kant's promise, at the end of #20, to resolve the question of whether the “indeterminate norm” of taste is “constitutive” or “regulative” – that is, whether taste is an “original and natural faculty” or one that is “artificial” and “yet to be acquired.” For as I will argue (and as the text bears out), the indeterminate norm of taste – that is, “[the idea of] common sense” – is *both constitutive* (with respect to judgments of free natural beauties) *and regulative* (with respect to judgments of artistic beauty as well as natural beauty insofar as it arouses “aesthetic ideas”). That characterization not only resolves a number of stubborn textual puzzles; it also proves peculiarly well suited to a “humanity” (*Menschheit*) whose *Anlagen* can develop fully “only in the species” (*IUH* 8:18) – a species, that is to say, whose faculty of taste is both original and natural *and* open to cultivation. The norm of taste is constitutive with respect to free beauties of nature, from which even “savages”<sup>7</sup> and young children can derive pure aesthetic pleasure (*CJ* 5:205 n.); while the norm of taste is regulative with respect to artistic works, which presuppose a certain degree of social sophistication in both the artist and the judge. And yet the relation of artful beauty to true human progress is “ambiguous,” giving rise, as I will claim, to the need for “transcendental critique,” that is, for the “science” of taste that is laid out in Parts One and Two of the Critique of Taste (the Analytic and the Dialectic, respectively). In short, Kant's Critique of Taste presents a continuous

<sup>7</sup> Although someone “abandoned on some remote island” would not bother to decorate his person or his house (*CJ* 5:297), Kant never says that human beings at the rudest stage (who are, on his account, at least minimally social) wouldn't take disinterested pleasure in the beautiful (see, e.g., *CB* 8:113). Compare Otabe (2018).

argument that not only helps to satisfy the architectonic need for a “bridge” between the realms of nature and freedom; it also represents a direct effort on Kant’s part to intervene pragmatically and politically at a particularly precarious civilizational moment.

## 2.1 The Four “Moments” of Taste

This double aim (simultaneously theoretical and practical) is reflected in Kant’s initial analysis of the “moments” of taste, which, in Kemal’s (1992:29) words, begins by “looking at our ordinary way of talking about and responding to beautiful objects.” In calling these conceptual elements “moments” (*Momenta*) Kant calls attention to their criterial function as “grounds” that “determine” judgments of taste.<sup>8</sup> In the course of explicating these determining criteria, which are always already at work in our judgments of taste, if only implicitly, he not only makes our concepts of taste more theoretically precise; he also encourages readers to become more careful and discriminating in their own aesthetic responses. The person who is made explicitly aware of the difference between, say, the pleasures of beauty and those associated with mere charm is less likely to confuse them. Kant’s analysis is thus not only a theoretical exercise in conceptual description; it is also a practical contribution to what he calls the “cultivation” of taste.

The “moments” of taste are, one could say, the four-fold considerations that implicitly determine our judgments of taste, just as the four concepts that head the Table of Categories in the first *Critique* – that is, quantity, quality, relation, and modality – determine all our empirical cognitive judgments whether or not we are always aware of it consciously. In adopting those a priori “logical forms” as his guide, Kant also adapts them to his present purpose, beginning not with “quantity” (as in the first *Critique*) but instead with what in appreciating the beautiful we “notice first” – namely, “quality,” that is, a subjective state consisting in a peculiar feeling of pleasure. The other moments follow in order of deepening foundational primacy (or *Gründlichkeit*), as I will argue in what follows; and they culminate in the criterion of “necessity” (under the heading “modality”). And yet unlike the earlier criteria, this final moment is not referred to (as in the earlier cases) as a “determining ground” of judgment but assimilated, instead, with an “indeterminate” norm whose precise character and force is left unresolved. For whether that norm should be understood as “constitutive” or as merely “regulative” cannot be settled, as we shall see, on the basis of the Analytic alone.

<sup>8</sup> According to Grimm and Grimm (1854), “moment” (from the Latin *momentum*) bore the contemporary meaning of “motive, or essentially deciding circumstance.” See also Wenzel (2005:13–14).

Another factor bears mentioning before entering into Kant's analysis directly: namely, the social character of the aesthetic experience, and related civilizational context, that Kant here presupposes. In explicating the various moments of taste he repeatedly appeals not only to internal experience – to what one feels or is conscious of in inner sense – but also to what we commonly proclaim to one another. There may indeed be a rudimentary sort of taste that is available to isolated “savages” or young children (*CJ* 5:203 n.); but taste insofar as it presents itself most readily to critical analysis is always also oriented toward communication with others. Indeed, taste's elements would seem to make themselves fully available for deliberate reflection only where civilization is relatively advanced; whereas among those whose taste remains “barbarous,” the difference between pleasures of beauty and those merely of charm may hardly be noticed let alone attentively considered (*CJ* 5:223).

The *qualitative* criterion that determines judgments of the beautiful is one of mere subjectivity. “In order to decide whether something is beautiful,” we do not relate our representation to the object but to the subject and our own feeling of pleasure or displeasure (*CJ* 5:203). I do not first attend to its defining features as an object of a certain kind, but whether (and how) it pleases me. In adopting the logical forms of judgment as a template, Kant also changes their order, beginning not with “quantity” but “quality,” because, as he puts it, “aesthetic judgment on the beautiful regards it first” (*CJ* 5:203 n.).

Kant's opening bears instructive comparison in this respect with Plato's *Greater Hippias*, a locus classicus of philosophic treatments of beauty, which begins with the question “what is beauty?” and ends, aporetically, after defining it as a specific sort of pleasure: namely, that associated with sight and hearing.<sup>9</sup> Kant begins, one could say, where Plato ends: by defining beauty as a kind of pleasure (that will indeed prove to be associated with sight and hearing), while also denying, contra Plato, that judgments of taste, as merely subjective and hence not dependent on a concept of what the object “is” or “is to be,” are cognitive judgments at all. What mainly distinguishes the pleasure in the beautiful, however, is what Kant famously calls its “disinterestedness.” Unlike the two other sorts of satisfaction (that engage the sensible and intellectual faculties respectively), pleasure in the beautiful has no immediate relation to the faculty of desire, and hence involves no interest in the existence of the object, be it a well-cooked meal or a virtuous will. Judgments of taste are not determined by any concept: either one pertaining to an object of cognition, or one pertaining to an object of desire.

<sup>9</sup> Plato. *Greater Hippias*, 297e.