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KANT ON THE NORMATIVITY OF TASTE: THE ROLE OF AESTHETIC IDEAS

Andrew Chignell

For Kant, the form of a subject's experience of an object provides the normative basis for an aesthetic judgement about it. In other words, if the subject's experience of an object has certain structural properties, then Kant thinks she can legitimately judge that the object is beautiful—and that it is beautiful for everyone. My goal in this paper is to provide a new account of how this 'subjective universalism' is supposed to work. In doing so, I appeal to Kant's notions of an aesthetic idea and an aesthetic attribute, and the connection that Kant makes between an object's expression of rational and the normativity of aesthetic judgements about it.

Kant's views in aesthetics are often classified as *formalist*.¹ This classification is misleading, however, because it aligns Kant with later philosophers of art who locate an object's aesthetic merits in what Clive Bell calls 'Significant Form'—i.e., the relations and combinations of lines, hues, rhymes, notes, or rhythms that the object exemplifies [Bell 1958]. For Kant, the formal characteristics of the *object* are not of primary importance in determining its aesthetic value. Rather, the form of a *subject's experience* of the object is what provides the normative basis for her aesthetic judgement about it. In other words: if a subject's experience of an object has certain formal or structural properties, then Kant thinks that she can legitimately judge that the object is beautiful—and that it is beautiful *for everyone*.

My goal in this paper is to provide a new account of how this subjective universalism works—i.e., of how the formal properties of one person's subjective experience can ground aesthetic judgements about particular objects or vistas, judgements that speak with a 'universal voice'. In developing this account, I appeal to the notions of an *aesthetic idea* and an *aesthetic attribute*, and also exploit the connection that Kant makes between the metaphysical, mathematical, moral, and religious expressions of beautiful objects and the normativity of aesthetic judgements about them. Unlike other commentators who exploit that connection, however, I do so in a way that (I submit) retains Kant's commitment to the subjective and disinterested character of pure aesthetic judgements.

¹For instance, by Werhane [1984] and Burnham [2006].

I

In the second Introduction to the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant employs the faculty psychology developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to describe the formal properties of aesthetic experience. Here I will draw from this material—omitting most of the technicalities—in order to provide a sketch of his account.²

In ordinary empirical cognition, according to Kant, the faculty of imagination puts together or ‘synthesizes’ the information provided by sense-perception in order to produce a sensory ‘manifold of intuition’. If all goes well, this intuited manifold can be ‘unified’ or subsumed under concepts by the faculty of understanding, and the upshot of the process will be cognitive experience and knowledge of various sorts. Unifying sensory manifolds is thus an important ‘aim’ (*Absicht*) for us as insofar as it contributes to our goal of cognizing the world around us [5: 242; cf. 5: 187].

Kant goes on to claim that in conjunction with experience of *some* objects and vistas, the imagination presents the sensory manifold as somehow ‘already unified’, prior to or apart from the use of determinate concepts of the understanding. Precisely what Kant means by this is complex; here it will suffice to say that in the course of having these exceptional experiences, the sensory manifold is given in such a way that it seems *especially* predisposed to the accomplishment of the subject’s cognitive aims.³ As she reflects on this, the entire phenomenological episode will strike her as ‘purposive’ (*Zweckmässig*) even apart from her use of a concept to determine the object’s actual nature or ‘purpose’ (*Zweck*) [5: 188ff.]. Kant dubs the mental activity involved in the experience of this formal purposiveness the ‘unexpected harmony’ or ‘free play’ of the faculties of cognition (i.e., imagination and understanding), and claims that this harmony is the occasion of a feeling of pleasure in the subject. It is on the basis of this pleasure (and not on the basis of any interests in the existence or possession of the object in question) that a judgement of taste is made [5: 186–8].

In moving away from the object or property-based accounts of aesthetic value that were dominant in the medieval and early modern periods to this sort of subject-based theory, Kant clearly did not intend to give up the idea that judgements of taste are normative. They still speak, as he puts it, with a ‘universal voice’. Accordingly, a good portion of the third *Critique* is devoted to showing how one person’s subjective aesthetic judgements can be legitimately ‘imputed to’, ‘expected of’, or ‘required from’ all other human

²Quotations from Kant are translated from Kant [1902–]. I will follow standard practice and cite the pagination from this edition as [volume: page], unless the first *Critique* is being referred to, in which case I cite it as [A-edition pagination/B-edition pagination]. I have consulted and often used the English translations in Guyer and Matthews [2000] and Pluhar [1987].

³A textual basis for thinking that only *some* and not all experiences are able to produce this sort of phenomenology can be found where Kant says that only one of a number of possible ‘dispositions of the cognitive powers’ engenders aesthetic response [5: 238]. A few pages later he adds that the manifold of sense-intuition in such a case might be conceived as ‘the manifold as the imagination would design [it] in harmony with the **lawfulness of the understanding** in general if it were left free by itself’ [5: 241]. Clearly not all sensory manifolds will be like this.

subjects.⁴ In other words, Kant seeks to explain a putative fact about our judgements of taste—the fact that ‘a subject, merely on the basis of **his own** feeling of pleasure in an object, independently of the object’s concept, judges (*beurteilt*) this pleasure as attached to the representation of that same object **in all other subjects**, and does so a priori, i.e., without having to wait for the assent of others’ [5: 288, cf. 5: 290n].

Although there are some relevant remarks in the preliminary four ‘Moments’, the ‘Deduction of Judgements of Taste’ (§30 and following, especially §38 and the accompanying ‘Remark’) contains Kant’s most expansive discussion of this putative fact. Kant argues there that since the faculties in question are ‘required for possible cognition as such’, it follows that all human subjects who can cognize anything at all must possess these faculties. Thus, everyone is at least *susceptible* to the experience of the ‘formal purposiveness’ or ‘harmonious free play’ of the faculties, and to the concomitant aesthetic pleasure. As long as someone takes herself to be beholding an object in a way that abstracts from idiosyncratic aspects of her cognitive situation (i.e., from her particular interests or prejudices), she can defeasibly take her aesthetic judgement to imply that, in the same circumstances, other disinterested human subjects likewise would be pleased by it, and would judge it to be beautiful [5: 289–91].

This is obviously a crude sketch of the Deduction: much more has been written about it, and although I will have a bit more to say about it below, most of the intricacies will have to be set aside. It should already be clear, however, that whether or not the Deduction is successful in any regard, it certainly does not achieve all of the aims that Kant sets for it. For, as Paul Guyer has famously noted, the fact that everyone possesses faculties which make him or her capable of unifying manifolds under empirical concepts does not ‘imply that the special case of unifying a manifold without any empirical concept at all must occur in precisely the same circumstance for everyone’ [1997: 263; cf. 1993:12]. Put another way: Kant’s account shows only that the *form* of the subjective experience of beauty is universal, while leaving open the possibility that the set of *particular objects* experienced as beautiful will differ relative to different human subjects. I will refer to this as the *particularity problem* for Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement.

Kant would have disputed this conclusion, of course; he seems to think that the Deduction is wholly successful. Or, at the very least, Kant thinks that his argument is successful with respect to some paradigm set of cases—cases of ‘pure’ aesthetic judgement. By contrast, some of his commentators—Henry Allison in particular—think that the best way to defend Kant on this score is to deny that a solution to the particularity problem was ever in the offing. For Allison, Kant’s project is simply to ‘ground the subjective

⁴For example in [5: 191, 214, 288–9]. It is not always clear what Kant means by words like *fordern*, *ansinnen*, and *zumuten*: translators often render all three as ‘to require’, or variously as ‘to ascribe’, ‘to expect’, or ‘to impute’. In the second Moment, where Kant argues for the universal character of aesthetic judgement, this ‘requirement’ appears to be something like a rational *expectation* that others will agree (cf. §§7–8). In a few places, however, it can seem stronger—like a *demand* or a stipulation of a *duty* (cf. §40). In this paper, I focus on the weaker claim without taking a firm position on what Kant himself meant. That is, I will be concerned with the *rational expectation* that everyone else *will* share one’s judgement of taste rather than any sort of *demand* (ethical or otherwise) that they do so.

principle of taste or, what amounts to the same thing, *a sensus communis aestheticus*' [2001: 177]. In other words, Kant aims to show merely that since we all have the same cognitive faculties, we can all in principle find *some objects or other* beautiful, without making any claims about the universality of *all* judgements of taste, or even of some paradigm 'pure' cases.

Allison's reading seems *prima facie* implausible. In the sections preceding the Deduction, Kant repeatedly emphasizes the claim to universal validity that is implicated in our judgements about *particular* objects—a particular flower, poem, building, or vista [5: 281–4]. Moreover, Kant's acknowledgement in the Deduction itself that someone can never *know* that her judgement about 'the given object' (*das gegebene Objekt*) is in fact universalizable (which Allison cites in defence of his interpretation) does not in any way suggest that the argument isn't aimed at grounding the universality of particular judgements. It suggests merely that an individual can never be fully certain (from within, so to speak) that her judgement about a particular object has actually met the conditions for universal validity.

I said that Allison's reading seems *prima facie* implausible. It will seem *ultima facie* attractive, however, if we conclude that there are no other resources in the third *Critique* to solve the particularity problem. In his early book, Guyer denies that such resources exist. In more recent work on the topic, Guyer surveys the views of other commentators who have subsequently argued otherwise—in each case by trying to tie the experience of a particular beautiful object to the interest that we have in various moral ideas. According to Guyer, each of these attempts but one fails outright, for reasons that he enumerates. 'Only one author', Guyer writes,

has directly confronted the issue of how a connection between aesthetics and morality could advance the specific objective of the deduction of judgements of taste by trying to show that such a connection could justify the demand that different persons not just have some aesthetic sensibility in general but agree in finding particular objects beautiful. This author is Anthony Savile, in his book *Aesthetic Reconstructions*.

[Guyer 1993: 17]

It isn't clear to me how strong an affirmation of Savile's argument Guyer means to be making here, since he doesn't refer much to Savile in the rest of his book. My goal in the next section, in any case, is to show that Savilean-style attempts to solve the particularity problem (I will call them Content interpretations) undermine important principles of Kant's overall theory—principles regarding the *disinterested* and *subjective* character of aesthetic judgements. I think that Savile is on the right track, however, when he suggests that we look to Kant's later discussion of 'aesthetic ideas' and their connection to moral ideas of reason for the resources with which to salvage the Deduction. In subsequent sections of the paper, I provide an alternative interpretation of the role of aesthetic ideas—one that both remains faithful to the spirit of Kant's subjective universalism and provides resources to solve the particularity problem. A further advantage of the interpretation I offer here is that it construes the discussion of aesthetic ideas (in §49) as

complementary to the earlier Analytic and Deduction, rather than as an incongruous ‘confusion’ or ‘digression’ on Kant’s part (which is the way some commentators see it). The theory of aesthetic ideas, I will suggest is not in tension with Kant’s central claims about the subjective basis of the normativity of aesthetic judgement developed in the earlier and more influential portions of the third *Critique*. On the contrary, it provides them with crucial theoretical support.

II

An important tenet of any Content interpretation is that only an art object that has a certain kind of subject matter or theme allows an individual’s positive aesthetic judgements about it to be imputed legitimately to everyone else [Savile 1987: 168].⁵ The themes in question typically involve an ‘idea of reason’. This notion requires some unpacking.

For Kant, an idea of reason (also called a ‘rational’ or ‘transcendental’ idea) is a concept to which we are led ‘in an entirely necessary way by reason according to its original laws’, but which refers to something beyond our cognitive ken [A339/B397]. In the first *Critique*, Kant groups the rational ideas into four classes: psychological, cosmological/mathematical theological, and moral. Within these classes we find ideas such as that of the immortal soul, ‘the unity of the totality of all conditioned things’, the ‘ground of all being’ (i.e., God), and the moral law.

Unlike determinate empirical concepts such as *dog* or *house*, rational ideas cannot be adequately ‘exemplified’ by any empirical experience: ‘no congruent object can be given in the senses’ [A327/B383]. And unlike the categories, they do not have schemata in pure intuition. Moreover, speculative reason cannot prove a priori that these ideas have instances—Kant famously rejects the attempts of his scholastic/rationalist predecessors to use speculative considerations to prove that, for instance, God and the immortal soul exist. Kant concludes from all this that transcendental ideas can at most be ‘regulative’ for our manner of cognizing: they are heuristic principles or ‘rules for the continuation and magnitude of a possible experience, once its invalidity as a constitutive principle of appearances in themselves has been adequately demonstrated’ [A516/B544].

Consider the following example: empirical experience of things in the world and speculation on the conditions of their existence naturally lead cosmologists, via an ‘empirical regress’, to the idea of a ‘ground for appearances’ outside the realm of experience, the existence of which is conceived as ‘unconditionally necessary’ [A563–4/B591–2]. Yet the epistemological constraints put in place by the critical philosophy imply that no one can prove—empirically or a priori—that this idea of a first cause or ultimate ground is ‘constitutive’ of reality. Thus it must remain merely regulative: the argument licenses the cosmologist to consider such a being

⁵Crawford [1974] contains a somewhat older Content interpretation; for the sake of brevity I will focus on Savile’s version here.

logically possible—or ‘problematic’, as Kant puts it—but it does not provide a cognitive basis on which to affirm its real existence.

Despite the fact that we cannot have theoretical cognition (*Erkenntnis*) or knowledge (*Wissen*) of the objects of regulative ideas, we naturally find these ideas very interesting. On the one hand, postulating the objects of cosmological and theological ideas allows reason to meet its speculative ‘needs’ and ‘find rest’ in the contemplation of an idea of something that grounds a whole, say, or something that serves as the first cause of a series.⁶ Moral ideas, on the other hand, provide ideals by which we can guide our actions in the world. This natural interest in ideas will lead to major problems—the dreaded paralogisms and antinomies—if we start treating them as constitutive of reality, rather than merely regulative for our thinking about it. But if we avoid that sort of ‘transcendental subreption’ (as Kant thought few philosophers had) we can safely entertain ideas and use them as theoretical heuristics and ethical models.

I propose to set aside further explication of the role of regulative ideas in Kant’s philosophy (and in particular the difficult question of *why* exactly Kant thinks we can’t cognize or know anything about the objects of ideas) and assume that the foregoing sketch provides at least a rough-and-ready grasp of the account. Now according to Savile, the experience of a successful artwork will involve an *aesthetic* idea, which is, in turn,

one possible way of thinking about [a rational idea], and may be said to be an expression or presentation of that idea or theme.... On this account then, [aesthetic] ideas are identified as the concrete presentations of particular themes that are offered us by individual works of art. Consequently, whatever interest they have for us attaches to the particular work or object that embodies them.

[Savile 1987: 170]

The thesis here is that a successful artwork (one that is imbued with what Kant calls ‘spirit’ (*Geist*)) will offer an aesthetic idea to its beholders—i.e., a concrete mode or way of presenting a rational idea. In other words, the work will have as part of its theme references to ideas which reason in its speculative and practical capacities naturally finds interesting.⁷ Furthermore, the work will invite ‘the spectator or reader to extensively explore the theme in his thought in the mode in which it is presented’. Because the rational ideas are of great interest, such thoughtful exploration of them in artworks will be ‘of its very nature pleasurable’ to the ‘properly-situated’ spectator [176]. When she reflects upon the series of interesting thoughts and pleasures that she had upon confronting the work, she ‘shall not be able to do so without making reference back to the detailed embodiment that [the rational idea] is given in the work’ [170–1].

⁶These needs and the ‘drive for cognition’ from which they stem are discussed in e.g., *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* (1786) [8: 139].

⁷The rational ideas that Savile himself discusses in this connection are ‘moral ideas’—ideas that are of interest because they relate to our practical concerns and ethical vocations. But there is no reason that the model cannot be extended to almost all of the rational ideas: mathematical, religious, metaphysical, and moral. Indeed, making this extension renders the account more plausible than if it merely stipulated that *all* beautiful art must deal with specifically *moral* themes.

In response to the particularity problem, then, Content interpreters have to say that a successful artwork ‘that handles a given theme presents its *own [aesthetic] idea* of the theme’ [185, my emphasis]. In other words, each particular work presents a *unique* aesthetic idea—a unique way of thinking about or exhibiting a rational idea—and is valuable and interesting for that reason. If this is correct, then the subject can make the a priori assumption that any properly-situated and well-functioning spectator will likewise have her interest piqued upon encountering this particular object under the right circumstances. And so she can legitimately ‘impute’ her judgement of taste *about that particular object* to everyone.

Despite its obvious virtues, the Content interpretation’s response to the problem of particularity does not fit very well within the structure of Kant’s overall theory, and for at least two reasons. First, the account conflicts with Kant’s insistence that genuine aesthetic judgements be *disinterested*; second, it grounds aesthetic pleasure on the interest we have in the rational ‘themes’ contained in the work, rather than in the *subjective form* of the experience of the object. I will discuss each of these objections in turn.

(i) Regarding disinterestedness: We have seen that Content interpreters claim that the reason the experience of aesthetic ideas is pleasurable for us is because we find contemplation of the rational ideas they exhibit valuable or beneficial. Experience of aesthetic ideas meets certain needs that we have, needs stemming from our desire to have a comprehensive account of the nature of the world and ourselves, or from our sense of moral obligation. But here a familiar Kantian question immediately comes to mind: Don’t we have an *interest* in meeting such needs or acquiring such benefits? And if so, how will the judgement in question be disinterested?

Savile tries to evade this objection by depicting the logical structure of aesthetic experience in such a way that the pleasure does not arise ‘in recognition of the fact that the ideas are beneficial or meet a need’. Rather, it is ‘a pleasure in the object as it presents itself to us in meeting the need. What is so pleasing about it is the thought it offers us in meeting the need it does’ [1987: 177]. This is a very fine distinction; too fine, I think, to do the work that it is supposed to do. For Kant’s dictum is that ‘if a judgement about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste... All interest either presupposes a need or gives rise to one, and because interest is the basis that determines approval, it makes the judgement about the object unfree’ [5: 205, 210]. Insofar as the normativity of a particular judgement of taste is consciously *or* unconsciously grounded in the interest we have in gaining familiarity with rational ideas, the judgement will not be properly disinterested and thus hardly ‘pure’ or paradigmatic.

Note: I am not claiming that a correct interpretation of Kant will show that there are *no* interests whatsoever involved in the human experience of beauty. Apart from the fact that such a theory would lack plausibility, it is clear that Kant himself thinks we have an ‘empirical’ interest in communicating our judgements to others in society, for instance, and an ‘intellectual’ interest in the moral aspects of any experience (see §§41–2). These interests arise out of needs we have for community (the ‘natural inclination to society’) on the one hand, and for affirmation of our ethical

vocation and cultivation of our moral character on the other. Moreover, these needs *can* be partially met in the course of making and communicating aesthetic judgements. But these needs, the interests they evoke, and the pleasures we experience in having them met are supposed to be conceptually *external* to pure aesthetic judgements considered ‘in themselves’ [5: 205n]. The Content interpretation, by contrast, makes these interests *internal* to the logic of a judgement of taste: such judgements will indeed be universally imputable, but only because they are directly grounded on universal rational interests.

(ii) The second worry is related to the first: by linking an object’s beauty to its subject matter or theme, the Content interpretation departs from Kant’s thesis that it is the *subjective form* of aesthetic experience that grounds aesthetic judgements, even those that purport to speak with a universal voice. Kant emphasizes this in many places; I have quoted some of them above. The following provides a nice summary:

An aesthetic judgement is unique in kind and provides absolutely no cognition (*Erkenntnis*) (not even a confused one) of the object; only a logical judgement does that. An aesthetic judgement instead refers the representation, by which an object is given, solely to the subject, and does not bring to our attention any property of the object, but only the *purposive form in the way the representational powers are determined in their engagement with the object*. Indeed, the judgement is called aesthetic precisely because the basis determining it is not a concept but the feeling (in inner sense) of that harmony in the *play of the mental powers* only insofar as they can be sensed (*empfinden*).

[5: 228, my italics]

For Kant, the formal purposiveness of the aesthetic experience—the way the subject responds to the representation of certain objects—is the *only* direct basis of an authentic judgement of taste. It goes hard against the grain of Kant’s theory to base attributions of beauty directly on the fact that the *object’s* theme or content involves rational ideas.

That said, I should note that there are grounds in the text for the thought that the Deduction can be salvaged by forging a connection between aesthetic experience and rational ideas—particularly ideas of morality. The last paragraph of §60 contains the following sentence:

Taste is basically a faculty for judging (*Beurteilungsvermögen*) the sensible rendering (*Versinnlichung*) of moral ideas . . . from which, as well as from the greater receptivity for the feeling resulting from the latter (which is called the moral feeling) . . . is derived that pleasure which taste declares valid for humankind as such and not just for each person’s private feeling.

[5: 356]

And earlier Kant explicitly says that we must ‘connect the fine arts, closely or remotely, with moral ideas’ if they are to be worthy of aesthetic enjoyment [5: 326].

What are we to make of passages such as these? Guyer construes them as mere ‘confusions’ on Kant’s part—confusions ‘between the idea that

aesthetic judgment has moral significance and the idea that its objects must have moral significance' [1997: 390]. Alternatively, he suggests, Kant may not have been so much confused as he was desperate. Perhaps he recognized that 'neither the connections between aesthetic and ordinary cognitive judgement nor those between aesthetic and practical judgement could really justify the absolute and *a priori* claim to intersubjective validity which he required of a [particular] judgment of taste, and thus appealed to the intersubjective acceptability of moral ideas in desperation' [1997: 391]. Either way, Guyer claims that we must not take such passages seriously, for fear of undermining Kant's central thesis that the aesthetic value of objects is grounded in the *formal* character of human aesthetic experience. It is *how* we experience an object and not the *content* of the object of our experience that is important to Kant. Again, Content interpretations violate this principle by making the interesting content of artistic objects *constitutive* of their capacity to elicit aesthetic pleasure while relegating the harmonious interaction of the faculties to the status, in Savile's words, of a peripheral 'further benefit' [1987: 171].

In what follows, I outline a different interpretation of the role of aesthetic ideas—an interpretation that, I believe, solves the particularity problem in a way that is consistent with the overall spirit of Kant's account. It also allows us to view the connections that Kant makes between rational ideas and aesthetic normativity in §60 and elsewhere as *complementing* (rather than conflicting with) his earlier insistence that the subjective form of aesthetic experience is what grounds our authentic judgements of taste. It is thus possible to see the account offered here as a non-standard kind of Content interpretation, one that seeks to emphasize the crucial role of (subjective) Form.

III

To start, we first need to inquire further into what 'aesthetic ideas' are for Kant. Savile takes them, as we have seen, to be 'concrete presentations of particular themes that are offered us by individual works of art', where the 'theme' is a rational idea [170]. There are a number of passages in the third *Critique* that support this interpretation. For instance, in §49 Kant characterizes an aesthetic idea as 'a representation of the imagination which prompts much thought' but to which 'no determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, can be adequate, so that no language can fully attain to it or make it understandable' [5: 314, Kant's bold]. The reason that an aesthetic idea cannot be captured by a determinate empirical concept is that it is the sensible 'counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea'. Indeed, Kant says that the representation involved in aesthetic experience merits the name 'idea' just insofar as it 'strives toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience, and hence seeks to approximate an exhibition of rational ideas' [ibid.].

Although Kant speaks both here and elsewhere of an aesthetic idea as *a* representation (*Vorstellung*) in the singular, I want to suggest that one of the

essential features of an aesthetic idea is that it involves a *plurality* of representations or thoughts linked together. This is consistent with the passage just considered, for Kant says there that ‘much thought’ is prompted by the presentation of the beautiful object to the mind. There is other textual evidence as well: in one passage, Kant says that an aesthetic idea involves a ‘coherent whole of an unspeakable fullness of thought’ [5: 329]. Elsewhere he notes that the ‘supplementary representations of the imagination . . . which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words . . . yield (*geben*) an aesthetic idea’ [5: 315]. It seems plausible, then, to characterize an aesthetic idea that strives to exhibit a rational idea as constituted by an ‘inexhaustible’ and ‘non-exponible’ *series* or *multitude* of representations unified by a certain theme [5: 342]. It is this unified and yet never finalized series, rather than any individual mental representation, that aspires to exhibit a rational idea—an idea that, strictly speaking, cannot be exhibited *in concreto*.⁸

A corollary of this view about the manifold structure of an aesthetic idea is that the mental episode of *having* or *undergoing* an aesthetic idea will itself have a certain structure. In particular, a person who is having an aesthetic idea will experience a ‘quickening’ of her cognitive faculties as her associative imagination brings to mind a ‘wealth of sensations and supplementary representations for which no expression is found’ [5: 316]. I think this is another way of characterizing what Kant calls the ‘free play of the faculties’: the imagination runs through this series of ‘partial representations’ and associations which are connected to the object by the mind and yet somehow elude *determinate* conceptualization. In having an aesthetic idea, ‘the imagination, in its freedom from all guidance by rules, is nevertheless represented as purposive for the presentation of the given concept’ [5: 317]. The main point is that it is not the *content* of these thoughts that is of primary normative importance, but rather the *formal* manner in which these thoughts are strung together by the mind into a ‘coherent whole’ that has the phenomenological feel of both unity and inexhaustibility. This formal or structural property of mind is essential to the experience of an aesthetic idea, and it is on the basis of having an experience with this structure that we can judge the object that occasioned it to be beautiful.

The present reading of §49—according to which the *form* of the subjective experience of having an aesthetic idea is the ground on which we judge that the object that occasioned it is beautiful—finds a crucial textual basis in the discussion of the relationship between beauty and morality in §59. This is important, because §59 is often taken to provide the strongest support for standard Content interpretations according to which our interest in the *theme* of an artwork is what directly grounds its intersubjective appeal.

⁸Kant says that an aesthetic idea is an ‘intuition (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate’ [5: 342]. Because intuition (*Anschauung*) for Kant is always singular, I think we have to assume that Kant is speaking loosely here and that he means to say that an aesthetic idea is composed of multiple representations (which are after all quite fleeting in themselves), rather than being identical to just *one* intuition. Thanks to Dina Emundts for pointing out the need to address this issue.

In §59, Kant is concerned to show that we can think of ‘beauty as the symbol of morality’—that is, that aesthetic ideas are ‘indirect presentations (*Darstellungen*) of a [rational] concept’. This is supposed to occur by analogy, but by analogy of a particular sort:

[Symbolic presentations use] an analogy . . . in which the power of judgement performs a double function: first, it applies a concept to the object of a sensible intuition, and then, second, it applies *the mere rule* by which it reflects on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the first [object] is only the symbol.

[5: 352, my italics]

This is a difficult passage, but one of the examples of symbolization that Kant provides allows us to see what he means. The example is that of the relation between an absolute monarchy and a ‘mere machine’ such as a hand mill. Although there is no important similarity between the relata themselves, there is a certain similarity ‘between the rules by which we reflect on both and their causality’. Kant is referring here to the way both relata are directed by force stemming, on the one hand, from the will of the monarch and, on the other hand, from the movements of the mill’s operator [5: 352].⁹

This suggests that in order to discern the symbolic relationship between aesthetic judgements and moral judgements, we must look for the ‘rule’ or structure which is the same in both. So the question is: what if any structure is shared by aesthetic and moral judgements—what structure would allow us to think of them as symbols of one another? Consider first aesthetic judgements: here we find that there is *no determinate rule* connecting the faculties involved whatsoever. Instead, the imagination ‘freely plays’ through a series of thoughts and associations which cannot be pinned down by determinate concepts and yet seems somehow amenable to the aims of our understanding. Alternately, we might say that if there *is* a rule animating this activity, it is one that the imagination legislates or draws up for itself, yet in way that is in ‘harmony’ with the laws of the understanding. But precisely therein lies the analogy, says Kant, for proper moral judgements *also* possess a freedom from external constraint combined with an internally harmonious character: ‘In a moral judgement the freedom of the will is conceived as the agreement of the latter with itself according to the universal laws of reason’ [5: 354].

There are obviously significant differences between aesthetic judgements and moral ones: for instance, the latter are ‘interested’ and involve the application of concepts. But, again, the *formal* relations between the

⁹Consider also this passage from *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany Since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?* (written just after the third *Critique*, in the early 1790s): ‘The symbol of an idea (or a concept of reason) is a representation of the object by analogy, i.e., by the same relationship to certain consequences as that which is attributed to the object in respect of its own consequences, even though the objects themselves are of entirely different kinds; for example, if I conceive of certain products of Nature, such as organized things, animals or plants, in a relation to their cause like that of a clock to a man, as its maker, viz., in a relationship of causality as such, *qua* category, which is the same in both cases, albeit that the subject of this relation remains unknown to me in its inner nature, so that only the one can be presented, and the other not at all’ [Kant 2002: 370; cf. 20: 279–80].

relevant faculties in each case are the same: both the imagination (in aesthetic judgement) and the will (in moral judgement) exhibit a freedom from external, heteronomous determination by other influences or laws. And yet both operate in a way that is in ‘harmony’ with their partner faculty (understanding and reason, respectively). Thus it is not any specific content or theme in the object that is essential for forging the symbolic link in §59 between beauty and morality. Rather, the link is between the subjective form of the mental activity involved in aesthetic experience on the one hand, and the subjective form of moral experience on the other.¹⁰ It is in this way that an aesthetic judgement serves as a symbol of a moral judgement, and beauty as a symbol of morality.

Taking stock: we have seen that an important feature of the ‘non-exponible’ series of representations that constitutes an aesthetic idea is that it involves the imagination in a prolonged ‘free play’ relationship with the understanding. The aesthetic pleasure that accompanies such a harmonious interaction of the cognitive powers is based in the structural character of the subjective experience, rather than any interest we have in rational ideas. Moreover, although the interaction of the faculties in the course of such experience mirrors the interaction of the faculties involved in moral judgements, the basis of our aesthetic judgements should not be taken to consist in this symbolizing relationship. Rather, it consists in the experience of having an aesthetic idea and the uniquely aesthetic pleasures that result.

It should be clear that even given this analysis of aesthetic ideas, the particularity problem remains unresolved. For we have not yet identified something in or about *particular* objects which will reliably evoke aesthetic ideas in all subjects. That is my goal in what remains.

IV

Immediately after Kant introduces the notion of an aesthetic idea in §49, he moves to discuss the ‘aesthetic attributes’ that are together supposed to yield (*geben*) an aesthetic idea [5: 315]. Other commentators have made very little of this portion of Kant’s theory in connection with the particularity problem.¹¹ I hope to show now, however, that Kant’s remarks about these aesthetic attributes provide us with the resources to make a connection between a particular object and the aesthetic idea involved in our response to it.

According to Kant, aesthetic attributes by definition pertain *to the rational theme of the object of the aesthetic judgement*—they are ‘attributes of an object, of an object whose concept, as a rational idea, cannot be

¹⁰I do not mean to rule out the possibility that something in the *form* of the object elicits this sort of free play or harmony between the imagination and the understanding. Thus my interpretation of Kant’s *subjective* formalism is meant to be consistent with—though not equivalent to—‘formalism’ in the twentieth-century, Bellian sense of that term. It is thus also consistent with Kant’s remarkably Bellian comments in the four Moments. There is no question that early in the third *Critique*, at least, Kant does appear to be attracted to *both* kinds of formalism.

¹¹Allison does discuss aesthetic attributes, but he doesn’t use them to help solve the particularity problem (since he doesn’t think there is any such problem for Kant) [2001: 257–8].

adequately presented (*dargestellt*). But attributes of what sort? Kant distinguishes aesthetic attributes from ‘logical attributes’, noting that the former ‘accompany the logical ones’ and yet perform a distinct function [5: 315–6]. The logical attributes of the theme of an artwork are the attributes that are contained in this concept.

Under the right circumstances, the imagination does not just present these logical attributes of the theme of a beautiful work of art, however: it also ‘calls to mind’ a series of ‘supplementary representations . . . expressing the concept’s implications (*Folgen*) and its affinity (*Verwandtschaft*) with other concepts’. *These* are the aesthetic attributes of the object. The main example of an aesthetic attribute that Kant offers in connection with a painting of the Creator-God Jupiter is that of an ‘eagle with lightning in its claws’, an image traditionally associated with Jupiter in Roman mythology. Presumably, however, the imagination also conjures up countless other ‘related representations’ that it associates, in some loose fashion, with the rational idea of God and the ‘sublimity and majesty of creation’ that Jupiter symbolizes. These might include (and here I’m just guessing) representations of the queen of heaven, Roman gods, Greek gods, Zeus, divinity in general, omnipotence, worship, the numinous, and whatever else the work suggests by way of metaphor, catachresis, synecdoche, metonymy, and the like. Because Jupiter is an object whose concept is a rational idea—i.e., the rational idea of a creative deity—the painting will possess a richness such that the set of aesthetic attributes which ‘animate it’ by way of these mental associations will seem inexhaustible to the properly-situated subject [5: 315–6].

Of course, it is *possible* in principle for the imagination to call to mind a string of associations in connection with experience of any object or subject-matter. But Kant thinks that such an attempt with respect to a non-beautiful object will be neither easy nor pleasurable (he provides the ludicrous example of a human mimicking a birdsong at [5: 243]). Contemplation of such a thing ‘leaves nothing behind as an idea and makes the spirit dull, the object gradually disgusting, and the mind dissatisfied with itself and moody because it is conscious that in reason’s judgement its disposition is contrapurposive’. Only an object that the mind associates ‘closely or remotely with . . . ideas’ will prove rich enough upon contemplation to avoid this ‘ultimate fate’ [5: 326]. The series of representations brought to mind by the free play of the imagination in the presence of such an object will not exhaust its content, of course (there is always more to say about great art!), but each aesthetic attribute in that series ‘does, to be sure, pertain to the concept of the object’ [5: 315]. Moreover, the experience of running through these representations in imagination is *what it is* to have an aesthetic idea, and it is what gives us characteristically aesthetic pleasure.¹²

Consider another example that Kant discusses in this connection—that of a poem composed by Frederick the Great in which the proper attitude

¹²The contemporary concept of ‘free association’ is useful for grasping the mental phenomenon that Kant is describing. For while the aesthetic attributes are *of* (‘pertain to’) the object in question in that they are linked to it by chains of association, they are also produced freely. As Kant puts it: ‘in this process we feel our freedom from the law of [logical] association (which applies to the empirical use of the imagination)’—and it is this freedom that allows us to experience the object aesthetically [5: 314].

toward death is compared to the resigned and dignified passing of the sun over the horizon at sunset.¹³ For the sake of argument, let's set political motives aside and take Kant at his word when he says that the poem is beautiful and thus demands a positive judgement from all properly disinterested readers. But why does he say this? Clearly there are logical attributes of the object (subject-matter) of the poem: *being a sunset* is perhaps the major one; *being compared to human death*, and *being characterized as having gentle light* are some others.¹⁴ But the imagination of the well-functioning reader, in considering these logical attributes and in 'remembering all the pleasures of a completed beautiful summer day', will also (says Kant) conjure up a rich series of aesthetic attributes which it associates with the theme of the work—the idea of a perfect 'cosmopolitan disposition'. (This is an idea of reason, for Kant, because stoic cosmopolitanism is a virtuous trait, and perfect virtue is one of the moral ideas.) Conjuring up those attributes both gives us aesthetic pleasure, and symbolizes the making of a moral judgement in the way described above.¹⁵

Whatever we think of these examples, it should be clear that a resolution to the particularity problem is presenting itself. Kant's view is that there are links between an art object whose theme is a rational idea and the aesthetic attributes that those logical attributes call to mind. This set of aesthetic attributes—which the mind runs through upon perceiving the work—in turn constitutes or yields an aesthetic idea, and the whole process engenders pleasure. When the subject reflects upon the source of her pleasure, she will cite her experience of *that particular object*, and then judge with a universal voice that *that* object is beautiful.

The account as I have set it out is intentionally neutral between two more specific readings of Kant's view. According to the first reading, we can rationally expect a token of the *same* type of aesthetic idea to be present in the mind of every disinterested beholder of a particular beautiful object or state. An alternate, weaker reading has tokens of *different* types of aesthetic ideas being occasioned in different subjects by perceptual experience of the *same* state of affairs. On the weaker reading, it is not necessary that the set of representations that yield the aesthetic idea be exactly the same for every

¹³Oui, finissons sans trouble, et mourons sans regrets,
En laissant l'Univers comblé de nos bienfaits.
Ainsi l'Astre du jour, au bout de sa carrière,
Répand sur l'horizon une douce lumière,
Et les derniers rayons qu'il darde dans les airs
Sont ses derniers soupirs qu'il donne à l'Univers.
Translated into German at [5: 315–16].

¹⁴It's worth noting that I am taking the 'object' which possesses logical and aesthetic attributes to be the object or features depicted *in* the work rather than the work itself. This seems to be Kant's intent: the attributes are not of the poem but of the sunset depicted in the poem. The orientation towards content provides still further reason to think that Kant is not a formalist in the twentieth-century fashion (although as I noted earlier, there is no reason to say that the form of an art-object *cannot* also call to mind the 'supplementary representations' which comprise an aesthetic idea). It does not, however, conflict with Kant's *subjective* universalism about the normativity of aesthetic judgements.

¹⁵Kant thinks literature is particularly apt to evoke aesthetic ideas in this way: 'The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum' [5: 314].

beholder. Rather, every artwork that has *Geist* will necessarily be rich enough to provoke *some* set of ‘non-exponible’ associations in every properly-situated subject, and the fact that the object can evoke *some aesthetic idea or other* is sufficient to ground the aesthetic judgement’s intersubjective validity.

Because I think Kant himself is unclear on this point, and because the identity conditions for types of aesthetic ideas are hopelessly vague, I propose to remain officially neutral between these two interpretations. The weaker reading, however, seems much more plausible in its own right, and still manages to solve the particularity problem. That’s because the different aesthetic ideas evoked by an object will be striving to present a rational idea which *is* presumably the same for all of us. Thus, although the sets of associations which yield an aesthetic idea may be different for different readers and beholders, they must be sufficiently similar to be unified by the same rational idea.¹⁶

In any case, both readings I’ve just outlined meet the conditions set out by the early parts of the *Analytic*: aesthetic pleasure arises out of the form of the subjective experience and is not based directly in any moral or empirical interests. It happens that on Kant’s view rational ideas provide the only themes rich enough to evoke aesthetic attributes sufficient to yield aesthetic ideas in us. So the metaphysical, religious, or moral content of the artwork will be *indirectly* or, as Kant says, ‘remotely’ connected to the judgement that the object is beautiful [5: 326]. However, this content itself—whatever other interests it may satisfy or engender—is not the direct basis for a judgement of taste. Rather, the pleasure in experiencing the aesthetic idea is. Thus we can say—a priori, as Kant would have it—that only those objects which occasion an aesthetic idea will be beautiful for every properly-situated beholder.

An objection to this proposal might be brought on empirical or statistical grounds. It is simply not the case that the same objects throw everyone’s mind into the sort of phenomenological activity that for Kant marks the presence of an aesthetic idea. And people sometimes respond with apparently aesthetic pleasure to objects or vistas whose content does not involve any rational ideas—theological, moral, cosmological, or otherwise.

But here it must be reiterated that Kant did not mean this to be an empirical or descriptive account; rather, it is supposed to be *normative*. In other words, it is an a priori thesis about why and when aesthetic pleasure will *ideally* be felt by rational beholders. Kant himself anticipated this sort of empirical objection, and readily concedes that people often fail to experience a particular beautiful object *as* beautiful, or to experience a particular non-beautiful object as non-beautiful. Perhaps their cognitive faculties are not functioning properly, or perhaps they are the unwitting victims of ‘prejudice’ or ‘interest’. In fact, we may never know whether our judgements are truly disinterested, given the subconscious character of many of our interests and prejudices and the

¹⁶I am indebted to a referee for this journal for pressing me on this point.

resourceful capacity that the ‘dear self’ has for self-deception. Kant discusses the case of a young poet who is not swayed by others’ universal disapproval of his poem, and seems to applaud this stubbornness [5: 282–3]. It is a mark of autonomy to stick to one’s guns about the beautiful, as long as one is not wilfully deceiving oneself about the disinterested character of the judgement.

The central point here is just that in the account of aesthetic attributes and aesthetic ideas there is adequate ground for Kant’s thesis that a judgement of taste implies that *ideally* everyone will find beautiful an object that strives to exhibit a rational idea, even if not everyone actually does. And this provides a clue as to what Kant takes the primary role of the art critic to be: the Kantian critic would fastidiously seek to be a disinterested observer herself, and she would point out the possible prejudices and interests that might lead people to make an erroneous judgement about an object. She would also seek to draw the spectator’s attention to the way that rational ideas are subtly expressed (or not!) in a given work.

This solution to the particularity problem also demonstrates that Kant’s account of aesthetic ideas in §49ff. is not, as Eva Schaper has written, a ‘metaphysical digression from the theory of taste’ which ‘cannot be seen as contributing to the deduction of the claims of taste’ [1992: 379–81]. Nor does the account signify, *pace* Guyer, a kind of confusion or desperation on Kant’s part with respect to the particularity problem. On the contrary, the claims about aesthetic ideas and aesthetic attributes in these sections play an integral role in completing the Deduction, and do so without violating the principles of ‘subjective formalism’ developed in the Analytic.

It remains briefly to sketch a way in which judgements of beauty in nature fit into the account I have been developing here (I will have to set aside a discussion of the sublime altogether, though I hope to take it up elsewhere). Judgements of beauty in art and judgements of beauty in nature both count as aesthetic judgements, and both are grounded on the mental phenomenon that Kant dubs ‘the harmonious free play of the imagination and the understanding’. Thus we can, with Kant, ‘in general call beauty (whether it be beauty of nature or of art) the **expression** (*Ausdruck*) of aesthetic ideas’ [5: 320]. The locution here is slightly misleading; Kant would have done better to say that rational ideas are *expressed* in beautiful states and objects, while aesthetic ideas are *involved* in our experience of them. So how does the present account apply to judgements about natural beauties?

With respect to art, we have seen that when the features of certain objects express (however partially) rational ideas of God, freedom, the moral law, totality, immortality, infinity, and the like, experience of such objects may provoke the mind to run through a series of aesthetic attributes related to those themes. But it seems eminently plausible that our experience of some *natural* objects or vistas can likewise be associated in the mind with such a series of attributes and thus produce aesthetic ideas in us. Indeed, if Frederick the Great’s poem about a sunset expresses the rational idea of a ‘cosmopolitan disposition’ and thereby engenders an aesthetic idea in us, how much more certain features of an actual sunset?

Unfortunately, Kant says woefully little about the way that beautiful nature generates aesthetic ideas. There is this somewhat gnomic passage:

Thus the white colour of the lily seems to dispose the mind to ideas of innocence, and the seven colours, in their order from red to violet, to the ideas of (1) sublimity, (2) audacity, (3) of candor, (4) of friendliness, (5) of modesty, (6) of steadfastness, (7) of tenderness. The song of the bird proclaims joyfulness and contentment with its existence. At least this is how we interpret nature, whether anything of the sort is its intention or not.

[5: 302]

And throughout the two Introductions, Kant emphasizes that beautiful nature can lead us to contemplate one rational idea in particular—that of a natural world fully systematized under closed causal laws (he sometimes calls this the idea of ‘subjective purposiveness of nature’). This idea—which for Kant is regulative for our pursuit of knowledge of the causal nexus—is expressed by purposive-seeming beautiful forms in nature, since they suggest by way of analogy that nature has ‘a regard for our faculty of cognition’. Thus ‘we can regard **natural beauty** as the **presentation** (*Darstellung*) of the concept of formal (merely subjective) purposiveness’ [5: 193]. The symbolic or indirect presentation of this particular idea is so important, for Kant, that it might motivate his giving priority to beauty in nature over beauty in art [5: 300–1].

Further discussion is required to establish these points [Chignell 2006; Rueger/Evren 2005]. It is noteworthy, however, that standard Content interpretations of Kant’s theory cannot draw this strong parallel between judgements of artistic beauty and judgements of natural beauty, or make sense of Kant’s prioritizing of the latter. That’s because they are committed to the claim that an object’s expression of rational content *in itself* provides the warrant for judging it to be beautiful. Hence Savile has to privilege art—where ‘the concept of a theme or rational idea that is more or less richly treated’ is most at home—over natural beauty—where such a concept, as Savile admits, seems ‘pretty much out of place’ [1987: 174]. Kant, by contrast, consistently privileges natural beauty over artistic beauty: indeed, fine art is often deemed significant by Kant only insofar as ‘it seems at the same time to be nature’. He writes:

If a man who has enough taste to judge about products of fine art (*Produkte der schönen Kunst*) with the greatest correctness and refinement gladly leaves the room in which are to be found those beauties . . . to turn instead to the beautiful in nature, in order to find there, as it were, an ecstasy for his mind in a train of thought that he can never fully unravel, then we would consider this choice of his with esteem and presuppose in him a beautiful soul, to which no connoisseur and lover of art can lay claim on account of the interest that he takes in his objects.

[5: 299–300]

Savile’s interpretation takes him away from Kant’s clear sentiments here in such a way that he is backed into the extreme claim that *Geist*-filled *art*

objects are the paradigmatic beauties, and that Kant only means to privilege the beauty in nature over ‘art that is not expressive of [rational] ideas at all’ [1987: 174].¹⁷

V

In conclusion let me emphasize that any attempt to address the particularity problem in Kant’s aesthetics will involve a rational reconstruction of sorts. After all, Kant thought his Deduction as it stands is not only successful in all respects, but also ‘easy’! [5: 290]. My aim in this essay has been to show that, though the job is certainly not easy, we can locate resources within Kant’s overall theory to resolve the demands of taste with a particular object’s claim to intersubjective beauty.

These resources include the complex notions of an aesthetic idea and an aesthetic attribute—I have argued that they can be used to underwrite Kant’s claim that authentic aesthetic judgements about *particular* objects speak with a ‘universal voice’. If correct, the reconstruction offered here shows that the discussion in §§49–59 is an important supplement to the characterization of aesthetic judgement found in the earlier parts of the *Analytic*, and an essential complement to the argument of the *Deduction*. It also provides new insight into Kant’s unique and subtle account of the way that moral, metaphysical, and religious ideas impinge on the sphere of aesthetic taste.¹⁸

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¹⁷Contrast this with Heiner Bielefeldt’s equally extreme claim on the other side that ‘in order to have a symbolic significance beyond the merely aesthetic enjoyment, the beautiful *must* be an object of nature’ [2003: 124, my emphasis]. A major advantage of the interpretation I am offering here is that it offers a middle way between these two extremes by showing how both art and nature can express rational ideas and thereby ground aesthetic judgements.

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