

# Kant's Feeling: Why a Judgment of Taste is *De Dicto* Necessary

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Necessity can be ascribed not only to propositions, but also to feelings.<sup>1</sup> In the *Critique of Judgment* (KdU), Immanuel Kant argues that a feeling of beauty is the necessary satisfaction instantiated by the 'free play' of the cognitive faculties, which provides the grounds for a judgment of taste (KdU 5:196, 217-19). In contradistinction to the theoretical necessity of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the moral necessity of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the necessity assigned to a judgment of taste is *exemplary necessity* (KdU 5:237).

Necessity can also be assigned by employing the *de re/de dicto* distinction, namely, by ascribing entailments of what must necessarily hold to either a thing (*de re*) or to a proposition (*de dicto*). Although Kant does not use the distinction in any of the three *Critiques*, this omission has not prevented Kant scholars from applying the distinction in their analyses of the first two *Critiques*.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I examine the role that modality plays in Kant's third *Critique* and I attempt to bring the *de re/de dicto* distinction to bear on Kant's famous aesthetic theory. Ultimately, I perform a retrospective classification of the modality of taste by arguing that because a judgment of taste is not a statement about an objective fact, a judgment of 'x is beautiful' can only be read as *de dicto necessary*.

## I

Imagine two people, Mme. Bongoût and Hr. Alltäglich, at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art looking at Johannes Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (1662). Each one feels that the painting is beautiful, and, having read Kant's third *Critique* in their university years, both hold their judgments to be necessary. However, if we had access to their subjective feelings, we would find an important difference between the *kind* of necessity ascribed to their judgments. Herr Alltäglich states that 'Vermeer's painting is *necessarily* beautiful'; Madam Bongoût states that '*Necessarily*, Vermeer's painting is beautiful'. The difference between the two judgments is that in Hr. Alltäglich's case, the necessity is *de re* (said of the thing); in Mme. Bongoût's case, the necessity is *de dicto*, (said of the dictum). Only one of these necessary judgments is appropriate to the peculiar *subjective standpoint* and *feeling-exercising* language of Kant's aesthetic theory, and in the sections that follow, we shall endeavor to reveal why only one of these two judgments is faithful to Kant's theory.

## II

Kant distinguishes his theory of taste from his theories of knowledge and morality by writing: "[A] judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment...but an aesthetic one" (KdU 5:203). Cognitive judgments draw upon determinate concepts, which pertain to objects

in the domains of nature and freedom. Both of these domains are constituted by certain laws: "Legislation through concepts of nature takes place through the understanding, and is theoretical. Legislation through the concept of freedom takes place through reason, and is merely practical" (KdU 5:174).

However, in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, which provides a checklist of conditions that must be satisfied to formulate a judgment of taste, Kant carefully distinguishes the necessity of this judgment from the necessity in theoretical and practical *cognitive* judgments. In contradistinction to cognitive judgments, which are based on determinate or fixed concepts, a judgment of taste does not draw from determinate concepts because it pertains to the subject's "feeling of pleasure" (KdU 5:204), and is thus a reflective judgment.<sup>3</sup> As presented below, the distinction between cognitive and reflective judgments tracks the difference between determinate concepts, which attempt to subsume objects under the categories of the understanding, and indeterminate concepts, which, if they attempted to do the same, would find it a fruitless endeavor (*eine fruchtlose Bemühung*) (KdU 5:231).

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously stated: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without content are blind .... The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only from their unification can cognition arise" (KrV A51-B76). Here, 'content' (*Inhalt*) is representational content, i.e., the objects represented by our rule-bearing concepts (thoughts) and through the senses (intuitions). Kant argues that our knowledge of objects always takes the form of a judgment; however, before a judgment is made, it must be formally cast. For example, the judgments 'The rose is red' (KrV B70) and 'The rose is fragrant' (KdU 5:215) share a formal structure, they are both cast in the subject-predicate form 'The *a* is *F*'.

For Kant, however, beauty is not a property of objects and cannot be cast in a subject-predicate form in which *a* exemplifies *F-ness*. In order for a judgment to be grounded by a concept, it must correspond to an object with *determinate* properties. Objects comprise the *content* of concepts, and the correspondence between a concept and an object is verified by its relation to the actual facts. The empirical necessity that Kant explicates between concepts and objects in the First *Critique* is rearticulated in the Third *Critique*: "Objects of concepts whose objective reality can be proved are matters of fact (*res facti*)" (KdU 5:468). What, however, can count as the evidentiary criteria for an aesthetic judgment? Nothing, for Kant argues, "A judgment of taste...cannot be determined by bases of proof" (KdU 5:284).

This lack of empirical evidence is crucial for our understanding of the difference between determinate and indeterminate concepts because in a judgment of taste there is no strict correspondence between the judgment and a determinate concept. Yet, although judgments of taste are not formed from determinate concepts, and are indeed short of providing *res facti*, such judgments nevertheless possess a standard for universally valid aesthetic feeling, communicability, and agreement. But what is this necessary standard, and whence does feeling arise?

### III

When Kant uses the term 'feeling,' he is not referring to any of the body's five sensory modalities: "If a determination of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure is called sensation, then this expression means something entirely different" (KdU 5:206). According to Kant's aesthetic nomenclature, 'feeling' is a technical word with a connotation very different than "an objective representation of the senses" (KdU 5:206). Instead, 'feeling'

is the reflective satisfaction that grounds a judgment of taste (KdU 5:209). Kant argues that such judgments are facilitated (*erleichterten*) by the *a priori* constituents of “*imagination* to combine the manifold of intuition, and *understanding* to provide the unity of the concept uniting the [component] presentations” (KdU 5:217).

Kant calls this contemplative “mental state” the “free play of the faculties of cognition” (KdU 5:218) that takes place within a judging subject and provides the grounds for a feeling of beauty. Consequently, the free-play takes place from a unique *subjective standpoint* that does not aim to subsume objects under determinate concepts (KdU 5:217), and its upshot aesthetic feeling is perceived with disinterest and without the presentation of an end (*Zweck*), what Kant famously calls *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* or “purposiveness without a purpose” (KdU 5:220). Indeed, as Béatrice Longuenesse has put it, “aesthetic judgment *starts* where the search for [determinate] concepts *collapses*.”<sup>4</sup> However, although there is no single determinate concept underlying a judgment of taste, our experience still requires that an object appear *as if* it had an end designed for our awareness. These subjectively purposive feelings and harmonious interactions of the free-play provide the *necessary* grounds (KdU 5:237) that will be “valid for everyone and consequently universally communicable” (KdU 5:218). But it is precisely here that we must inquire as to the nature of this necessity, and how it is underwritten.

#### IV

Kant considers the modality of taste in the Fourth Moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. He writes that, “This necessity is of a special kind” (KdU 5:237), and perhaps it will be helpful to consider briefly what I call, respectively, *the necessity of moments* and *the necessity of feeling*. Kant’s *feeling* of beauty is, in a sense, both one and many. It is one by virtue of its unity and universality; it is many by virtue of the four conditions that *must* be satisfied for the possibility of arriving at a judgment of taste. These conditions are what might be called the *necessity of moments*: in *Quality*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be disinterested (KdU 5:211); in *Quantity*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be without a determinate concept and liked universally (KdU 5:219); in *Relation*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be perceived as subjectively purposive (KdU 5:236); and in *Modality*, it is necessary that feelings of the beautiful be capable of necessary satisfaction (KdU 5:240). All of these conditions are *necessary* insofar as the failure to obtain any one moment renders a judgment of taste *impossible*.

The *necessity of moments* is a crucial, *sine qua non* feature of Kant’s aesthetic architectonic, but it is not the only kind of necessary relations that make up a judgment of taste. There is also what might be called the *necessity of feeling*, or a *de rigueur* procedure in the constitution of a judgment of taste, which exhibits its own kind of necessary connections. Recall the peculiar subjective standpoint of the free play, i.e., that the free play of the cognitive faculties takes place within the judging subject, harmoniously quickens into a feeling of pleasure, and provides the grounds for a judgment of taste, which will be valid for everyone and universally communicable (KdU 5:221). Thus we have what appears to be a threefold schema of necessary entailments: (*á*) there is a necessary relationship between the free-play of the cognitive faculties themselves (i.e., imagination and understanding); (*â*) there is a necessary connection between the harmonious free-play and the concomitant feeling of disinterested pleasure; and (*ã*), there is a necessary tie between the feeling of disinterested pleasure and its expression as a judgment of taste. Moreover, the transitive move from (*á*) to (*ã*) is necessary insofar as (*ã*) would be impossible to obtain if not for the antecedent

moves in the series. In the following section, I should like to focus on how ( $\bar{a}$ ) ties in with yet another form of necessity, namely, the modality of taste.

## V

The modality of taste is what Kant calls *exemplary necessity*, i.e., “a necessity of the assent of *everyone* to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that we are unable to state” (KdU 5:237). Kant’s point about the modality of taste being “an example of a universal rule” cannot be overstated. Kant considers that because exemplary necessity obtains the assent of everyone to a judgment of taste,

[everyone] must have a subjective principle, which determines only by feeling rather than concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a *common sense* (KdU 5:238).

In other words, the feeling ‘*It is necessary that Vermeer’s Young Woman with a Water Pitcher is beautiful*’ makes a claim to universality by asserting that other subjects should find this composition beautiful (KdU 5:237), which itself presupposes a principle through which the subject possesses a sense for what we might call a feeling of inter-subjective “pleasurability” or what *ought* to be pleasurable for other subjects with similar attunements of the cognitive powers (KdU 5:238). Subsequently, this “ought” is always “uttered conditionally” (KdU 5:237), that is, on condition that we *share in common* the cognitive faculties: “Only under the presupposition...that there is a common sense...the effect arising from the free play of our cognitive powers...can a judgment of taste be made” (KdU 5:238).

Thus a principle of common sense is constitutionally required for a judgment of taste to be any kind of statement that is grounded by aesthetic feeling *and* be universally communicable. Consequently, a judgment of taste *necessarily* presupposes common sense as the subjective principle of the free-play, which is itself a necessary ground for an aesthetic judgment. On the basis of what has been said so far, it seems that common sense provides the subject with a certain feeling that implies the possibility for others to respond to a given representation as it does.

The inter-subjective moment of an aesthetic judgment is affirmed according to this preliminary conception of common sense in which the subject puts others in its place. However, this *sense* of common sense seems dangerously solipsistic because its conclusion can portray the subject as an aesthetic narcissist that fails to consider the aesthetic feeling of others in its judgment: “For although the principle [of common sense] is only subjective. It would still be assumed as subjectively universal (an idea necessary for everyone)” (KdU 5:239).

Fortunately, common sense receives further elaboration by Kant in his formulation of the *sensus communis*:

we must take *sensus communis* to mean the idea of a sense shared [by all of us], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting [something], in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones (KdU 5:293).

Here Kant adds another component to common sense, namely, that by forming a judgment of taste, we not only presuppose the assent of everyone else, but we also presuppose a culture wherein we compare our own aesthetic judgments with the possible aesthetic

judgments of others and thus “put ourselves in the position of everyone else” (KdU 5:294). This sense of *sensus communis* compliments exemplary necessity by completing the circle, as it were. In the first account of common sense, we imagine others in our place; in *sensus communis*, we put ourselves in the place of others. This aesthetic enclosure of judgment provides coherence by preventing exemplarity from dangling its feet off the edge of a relativist *de gustibus non est disputandum* cliff; namely, by making intelligible the *possibility* that others share aesthetic *feeling* just as we do by possessing the same power of reflective judgment (KdU 5:341).

By tying exemplary necessity to the two senses of common sense, Kant attempts to bring together the subjectively private and objectively public. Thus there is a syncretism between the common sense and the *sensus communis* that secures the *reflective* grounds which can underwrite exemplarity’s *inter-subjective* necessity.

## VI

After establishing the modality of taste, Kant proceeds to define beauty as that “which is cognized without a concept as the object of necessary satisfaction” (KdU 5:240). Therefore, since (i) what “is cognized without a [determinate] concept” can only be the harmonious relational activity of the free-play, and since (ii) the free-play is the ground for judgments of taste that are exemplarily necessary, then (iii) beauty *is* the necessary satisfaction one *feels* in forming a judgment of taste. Although a judgment of taste is grounded in feeling, it is not a free-floating pronouncement without consideration of some object; however, with regard to whether objects actually possess beauty, Kant argues that a judgment of taste functions in an *analogical* sense, that is, *as if* the quality of beauty were a real, objective property of the object being judged (KdU 5:212). No determinate object is beautiful in itself because beauty is not a property of objects; rather, if beauty is to be “found” anywhere, it will be within the subject, namely, in the feeling of pleasure.

A judgment of taste does not pertain to determinate concepts that have objects as their content because beauty is not a predicate of objects. The statements ‘This rose is red’ and ‘This rose is beautiful’ are different judgments: the former draws from determinate concepts; the latter from the free-play. Also, because the necessity in a judgment of taste is exemplary, it should be the case that if a judgment of beauty is affirmed by someone having formed a feeling of pleasure, then that feeling stands as *an example* which the subject demands others with similar reflective capacities to share in agreement.

Taste, then, pertains to this peculiar feeling, and not to pronouncements about a representational object. My argument here can be further elucidated by noting how different ascriptions of necessity come to bear on Kant’s theory of taste. In the following section, we will see how the *de re/de dicto* distinction can be applied in Kant’s aesthetic theory of judgment, and I will argue that for a judgment of taste to be coherently understood, it must be read only as *de dicto* necessary.

## VII

Recall our imagined visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Both find Vermeer’s painting necessarily beautiful. For Hr. Alltöglich, the necessity is *de re*; for Mme. Bongoût, it is *de dicto*. In order to apply the *de re/de dicto* distinction to our study of Kant’s theory of taste, we first have to establish that taste is expressed in language. Fortunately, Kant meets this criterion by stating that by forming a judgment of taste:

one ascribes the satisfaction in an object to everyone, yet without grounding it in on a concept...and that this claim to universal validity belongs so essentially to a judgment by which *we declare something to be beautiful* that without thinking this it would never occur to anyone to use the expression (KdU 5:214, my italics).

Hence a judgment of taste is expressed in a *feeling-exercising* language that, being reflective and not cognitive, conveys to others the satisfaction one experiences before an object. But here we can also ask: what kinds of statements are these “which we declare”?

When we express a judgment of taste, the representation goes together with a *feeling* that we require others to share. However, we should not interpret this expression in the same way we would the expression ‘This rose is red’ because, as we have seen, a judgment of taste, i.e., the expression ‘This rose is beautiful,’ is not asserting something objectively determinate about the rose:

The judgment of taste determines its object with regard to satisfaction (as beauty) with a claim to the assent of everyone, *as if* it were objective. To say “This flower is beautiful” is the same as merely to repeat its own claim to everyone’s satisfaction.... Now what should one infer from this except that beauty must be held to be a property of the flower itself... *And yet this is not how it is* (KdU 5:282, my italics).

To say ‘*x* is beautiful’ is coterminous with the claim ‘I have a *feeling* of satisfaction related to *x* that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to *x* as an example of a universal rule which I cannot quite state.’ Importantly, Kant writes: “For we can generally say, whether it is the beauty of nature or of art that is at issue: that is beautiful which pleases in the mere judging (neither in sensation nor through a concept)” (KdU 5:306). By “we can generally say,” Kant is alluding to universal statements or, more precisely, the *universality* that is expressed in judgments of taste. Thus what Kant means by “we can generally say...that is beautiful” is precisely the formulation I presented above with an emphasis on universality, e.g., ‘I have a feeling of satisfaction related to *x* that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to *x* as an **example of a universal rule** which I cannot quite state.’

Consequently, a judgment of taste can be understood as the expression of aesthetic feeling and its concomitant universal demand. Necessity is ascribed to this expression as follows: ‘*It is necessary that* I have a feeling of satisfaction related to *x* that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to *x* as an example of a universal rule which I cannot quite state.’ Or to contract the expression succinctly, ‘*It is necessary that x* is beautiful.’ These statements do not have determinate objects and *res facti* as their truth-bearers; instead, a judgment of taste expresses the feeling that arises from the free-play, and finds its necessary entailments in the disinterested pleasure that others are required to share. Having elucidated the universal statements exemplified by judgments of taste, let us see how we can apply the *de re/de dicto* distinction to these statements in Kant’s aesthetic theory.

## VIII

The *de re/de dicto* distinction can be classified as follows. With regard to ascribing necessity, *de re* necessity applies to the thing; *de dicto* necessity is assigned to the whole statement.<sup>5</sup> Thus consider two competing judgments about Vermeer’s *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (henceforth, YWWP):

1. *It is necessary that* YWWP is beautiful.
2. YWWP is *necessarily* beautiful.

In sentence 1, the scope of the necessity is *de dicto*; in sentence 2, the scope is *de re*. In other words, in sentence 1 the necessity ranges over the proposition as a whole, and not to the object YWWP, which, as we have seen, cannot, in Kant aesthetic theory, have the property of beauty; in sentence 2, however, the necessity falls on the subject of the proposition, namely, YWWP. Sentence 2 claims that it is Vermeer's painting, the thing, the *res*, which has the necessary entailment of beauty. However, sentence 2 cannot be the case because beauty does not belong to a determinate object, and YWWP is such a thing.

What makes YWWP a thing is, *inter alia*, its shape, color, texture, content, etc. By making the claim that 'YWWP is necessarily beautiful,' the compositional features of the painting form a set of attributes that YWWP must have in order to satisfy this *de re* claim of beauty.<sup>6</sup> However, all of these compositional features can be subsumed under determinate concepts, and thus are anathema to a Kantian judgment of taste. If a judgment of taste does draw from concepts, they have to be indeterminate by virtue of being subjectively purposive in reflection.

What is more, the *de re necessary* ascription of 'beautiful' in sentence 2 implies that beauty is a trait of YWWP, something that contributes to YWWP being what it is. This ascription also has its problems. Unlike YWWP's other compositional features, all of which are essential for YWWP to continue being YWWP, a pronouncement of, say, 'ugly' would do no harm to the *res* of YWWP. Thus, the *de re necessary* ascription of beauty is false, for the feeling of beauty (pleasure) or ugliness (aversion) is not an essential trait of Vermeer's painting.

However, the ascription of necessity in sentence 1, 'It is necessary that YWWP is beautiful,' which is a contraction for the expression, 'It is necessary that I have a feeling of satisfaction related to YWWP that I require others to share, *ceteris paribus*, in relation to YWWP as an example of a universal rule which I cannot quite state,' does not refer to YWWP directly, nor to any of its compositional properties. Instead, what sentence 1 expresses is a reflective judgment that takes place within the judging subject, which in turn provides the exemplary grounds for an aesthetic feeling that demands universal assent. Necessity, then, is ascribed to the *feeling* 'YWWP is beautiful', and not to the object YWWP.

Therefore, a Kantian expression of beauty can only be read as *de dicto* necessary. To make a *de re necessary* ascription of beauty would be to assign beauty as a property of a determinate object, but because a judgment of taste does not draw from determinate, cognitive concepts that have objects as their content, a *de re necessary* ascription of beauty would violate Kant's theory. So who is more faithful to Kant's aesthetic theory, Mme. Bongoût or Hr. Alltöglich? Mme. Bongoût, *naturellement*.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ascriptions of necessity apply not only to propositional contents but also to *unpropositional* contents. Feelings, imagination, memory, emotions, *etc.*, are examples of unpropositional contents. See Pinto (2001: 17).
- <sup>2</sup> E.g., *inter alios*, Guyer (1987: esp. 140); Howell (1992: esp. 180-81); and Keller (1998: esp. 162).
- <sup>3</sup> A reflective judgment seeks to find a universal for a particular, and stands in contrast to a determinate judgment, which works the other way around (KdU 5:179-80).
- <sup>4</sup> Longuenesse (2003: 146).
- <sup>5</sup> The use of this distinction has a long history going back at least to medieval philosophy: "The first full use of the terms *de re* and *de dicto* is due to Thomas Aquinas, who was also the first to define the terms syntactically .... Aquinas divides [a] sentence syntactically into the subject and the predicate. The subject may be a full clause (in the *de dicto* case) or a thing (in the *de re* case)." See Ezra Keshet and Florian Schwartz, "De Re/De Dicto" in *The Oxford Handbook of Reference*, ed. Jeanette Gundel and Barbara Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 169-70.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Eddy M. Zemach's (1997) discussion of an artwork's "good-making features" in relation to its ontology; esp., 116-21.

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