

Rethinking Kant

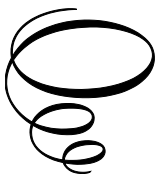
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KANT ON AESTHETIC NORMATIVITY

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From Kant's point of view, the puzzle about judgments of taste is that they make a claim to normativity—in Kant's terms, to intersubjective validity or communicability—but nevertheless have only a subjective basis or “determining ground [*Bestimmungsgrund*].” The task of §9 of the *Critique of Judgment* in particular is to delineate an account of aesthetic response that accommodates Kant's solution to this puzzle. If the aesthetic pleasure “precedes” the judgment—in other words, if the judgment is about the pleasure—then the judgment of taste would be merely private, like other judgments about things that cause us pleasure. So the judgment must precede the pleasure. But “nothing... can be universally communicated except cognition, and representation so far as it belongs to cognition. (5:217)¹ Therefore, the determining ground of the judgment of taste must be “the state of mind that is encountered in the relation of the powers of representation to each other insofar as they relate a given cognition to *cognition in general*.” (5:217) A bit later, he calls this state of mind a “feeling of the free play of the powers of representation in a given representation for a cognition in general.” The appeal to ‘cognition in general’ can do what Kant needs it to do only if it conveys the normativity of cognition *simpliciter* but not its conceptual determinacy. What can Kant mean by cognition in general, such that he can hope to solve the problem of aesthetic normativity by means of it? I want to propose that we take ‘cognition in general’ to mean ‘integration into a unified system of empirical cognition.’ If I am successful, it will have the consequence that the basis for the normativity of taste—that is, the expectation that others

¹ References to Kant's work indicate the volume number in the Akademie-Ausgabe and the page number in the volume, except in the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where I follow the standard practice of referring to the first and second editions with A and B respectively. The English rendering of the *Critique of Pure Reason* follows the translation of Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); for the *Critique of Judgment* I follow Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ought to agree with our judgments-- is the same as the basis for the normativity of cognitive judgments.

The account I am offering requires a balancing act of sorts. On the one hand, Kant's claim that only cognitions can be "universally communicated" makes it clear that 'cognition in general' must be cognition in a very robust sense. My proposal is to read the text literally, which means taking the normativity at work in aesthetic judgment to have the very same basis as the normativity of cognitive judgments, namely the imperative to represent the world accurately. On the other hand, interpreting the text this way invites objections to the effect that this erases the important difference between aesthetic and cognitive judgment². In the latter part of the paper I respond, albeit briefly, to two such objections: That this reading is incompatible with Kant's well-known doctrine of the subjectivity of taste, and that it has the consequence that all objects are beautiful.

And so to my first claim, that the systematic unification of empirical concepts constitutes cognition in a sense robust enough that 'cognition in general' conveys the normativity of cognition to judgments of taste. The key point is that on Kant's view, forming an empirical concept involves not just synthesizing a manifold but also weighing how that concept fits with other concepts. In the Jäsche Logic, for example, he says that

[t]o make concepts out of representations one must be able *to compare, to reflect, and to abstract*, for these three logical operations of the understanding are the essential and universal conditions for generation of every concept whatsoever. I see, e.g., a willow, and a linden. By first comparing these objects with one another I note that they are different from one another in regard to the trunk, the branches, the leaves, etc., but next I reflect on that which they have in common among themselves... and I abstract from the quantity, the figure, etc., of these; thus I acquire the concept of a tree. (94-5)

The concept of 'tree' thus involves a relation to concepts of narrower scope, e.g. 'linden,' and, at least potentially, to broader concepts such as 'plant.'

All of this reflecting, comparing, and abstracting culminates in the construction of a system of empirical concepts. In the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that "just as the understanding unites the manifold into an object through concepts, so reason on its side unites the manifold of concepts through ideas by positing a certain collective unity as the goal of the understanding's actions." (A644/B672) The systematization of empirical cognition described

² I am grateful to Eliza Little for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.

here involves a hierarchy of concepts, proceeding from relatively narrow concepts at the bottom to very general concepts at the top. The most general concepts of all Kant calls ideas of pure reason. The goal is a two-dimensional field of concepts in which every concept has a vertical and horizontal location—the vertical indicating its level of generality, the horizontal its relation to other concepts of similar generality. Lower concepts are supposed to be deducible from the higher. The system of empirical cognition is a rational reconstruction of the structure of natural science, which works to subsume observed phenomena under broader and broader empirical laws. A complete system would entail a complete science, which Kant envisions as a goal that we can approach “asymptotically” but never entirely reach.

Fitness for inclusion in a system—what Kant calls ‘purposiveness’—is the criterion for the truth of empirical propositions (A60/B85), and thus for theory choice in science. In the Transcendental Dialectic Kant says that the “hypothetical [i.e. system-building] use of reason is... directed at the systematic unity of the understanding’s cognitions, which, however, is the *touchstone of truth* for its rules.” (A647/B675) Kant is referring back to a passage near the beginning of the Transcendental Logic, in “On the division of transcendental logic into the transcendental analytic and dialectic.” His question there concerns the “criterion of truth.” He defines truth as “the agreement of cognition with its object” (A58/B82). On the basis of this definition, he then argues that there can be no “general criterion of truth.” His reasoning is that such a criterion would necessarily abstract from all content of cognition; but because truth concerns precisely the content of cognition, the idea of such a criterion is “self-contradictory.” The role of a transcendental logic is to provide “general and necessary rules of understanding [the categories],” which are criteria of truth: “that which contradicts these is false, since the understanding thereby contradicts its general rules of thinking and thus contradicts itself.” He notes, however, that this is a “merely logical” criterion, and thus a “negative condition” of all cognition: “Further, however, logic cannot go” (A59/B84). Because

[t]he mere form of cognition... is far from sufficing to constitute the material (objective) truth of the cognition, nobody can dare to judge of objects and to assert anything about them merely with logic without having drawn on antecedently well-founded information about them from outside of logic, in order subsequently to investigate its use and connection in a coherent [*zusammenhängenden*] whole according to logical laws (A60/B85).

Note that in explaining the role of transcendental logic as a negative criterion of empirical cognition, Kant clearly implies that coherence, or

more precisely “connection in a coherent whole,” is the *positive* condition. This is consistent both with some of his most important early modern predecessors and with his own work in the critical period.

The drive for systematic unity among empirical laws serves to provide coherence among, and thus justification for, empirical laws or concepts. The system of empirical laws figures as part of a larger structure that it is the task of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to construct. The purpose of that structure, described in the Architectonic, is to represent the proper place for every sort of representation in light of the result of Kant’s investigation into the possibility of cognition through pure reason. *Within* that structure, the system of empirical laws represents the proper place for well-grounded but *a posteriori* cognition. Laws integrated into this system are grounded, in the first place, with respect to the “negative criterion” of the categories—no scientific law that does not exclusively make reference to objects in space and their causal interactions has a place there. They are grounded in the second place by their coherence with other laws, which for Kant takes the form of a hierarchy of natural kinds, articulated according to the principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity (A658/B686). A maximally well-grounded law would be so in virtue of its place in the hierarchy: Each law would encompass some more particular laws, and ultimately a range of sensible intuitions to which the law applies. Also, each law would itself be subsumed under a more general law, just as Newton’s laws of motion are supposed to entail physical laws of narrower scope. Finally, and quite crucially, in addition to the vertical structure of the system, laws cohere horizontally as well. Insofar as, for example, the different subfields of biology—evolutionary biology, microbiology, zoology, etc.—are distinct from one another but on approximately the same vertical level, so to speak, in relation to the “idea... of the form of a whole of cognition” (A645/B673), the distinction between them would find expression in their corresponding location in the hierarchy. Each law incorporated into the system would be justified by deduction from higher-order laws.

Now, the unified system of cognition is composed of empirical concepts, the objective validity of which Kant says is a “mere consequence” (A114) of the objective validity of the pure concepts of the understanding.³ It is important to see that the categories are necessary but not sufficient for organizing empirical concepts into a system. It is perfectly coherent to maintain that we might have all the empirical concepts we do and yet be unable to find a basis for unifying them in the manner Kant foresees. The

³ I agree with Kenneth Rogerson’s view on this point. See Rogerson, “Kant and Empirical Concepts” *Journal of Philosophical Research* Vol. 50 (2015).

systematization of cognition entails a contingent proposition about appearances, namely that they are capable of being unified in the manner Kant describes. One might, for example, agree with the claim, made in different ways by Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Rorty, that scientific theories are incommensurable. The incommensurability thesis cannot be disproved through mere logic, nor empirically, since the ideas of pure reason are supposed to provide a criterion for judging empirical theories. The considerations Kant offers earlier in the *Critique*, for example in “On the Principles of a Transcendental Deduction in General,” why synthetic *a priori* concepts need to be grounded by means of a transcendental argument, apply equally to the ideas of pure reason. The purposiveness of nature is thus analogous to the “transcendental affinity of appearances,” namely as that property of appearances that makes it possible to subsume them under the relevant sort of concept.

Kant thus faces a normativity problem regarding the purposiveness of nature that parallels the problem with regard to judgments of taste: in both cases there is an important objective dimension that cannot be construed as a condition of the possibility of experience. I submit that the simplest solution here is to take the two problems to be one: In pure aesthetic judgment, we discover, to our pleasure, that things in nature are suited for integration into a system. The ‘in general [*überhaupt*]’ in ‘cognition in general’ denotes the demand for systematic unification, which belongs to the account of cognition but is not entailed by the objective validity of the categories. Reading the text in this way allows us to connect ‘cognition in general’ to cognition *simpliciter* while preserving the conceptual indeterminacy that is essential to judgments of taste. It also helps us make sense of the fact that the possibility of systematizing cognition takes center stage in the Introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the Introduction there, Kant introduces the (seemingly new) faculty of reflective judgment as a “means for combining [*Verbindungsmittel*]” speculative understanding and practical reason. (5:176) Reflective judgment, he says, legislates *a priori*, (5:179), and consequently its critique belongs to the overall project of the critique of pure reason. While this might look like a major revision of the official account of the critical project, it turns out that the business of reflective judgment is precisely the task I have said is left over from the first *Critique*: The systematic unification of empirical cognition. The “principle of the formal purposiveness of nature” is the proposition that “what is contingent for human insight in the particular (empirical) laws of nature nevertheless contains a lawful unity, not fathomable [*nicht zu ergründende*] by us but still thinkable, in the combination of its manifold into one experience possible in itself.” (5:183-

4) Of the two major divisions of the *Critique of Judgment*, the “part that contains the aesthetic power of judgment is essential.” (5:193) My proposal is that the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” provides the needed critical warrant for the principle of the formal purposiveness of nature by showing that in our pure aesthetic judgment of natural beauty we find evidence (albeit of an indeterminate sort) that nature is suited to our goal of systematic cognition.

To sum up: systematic unification is essential to the account of empirical cognition in the first *Critique*. It is also at the center of Kant’s explanation of the purpose of the *Critique of Judgment*. Reading ‘cognition in general’ as systematic unification therefore connects the account of taste both to the Introduction to the work and to the critical account of cognition.

It is only reasonable, though, to worry that this comes at the cost of erasing the important difference between cognitive and aesthetic judgment. Most obviously, one might object that the connection I draw between systematic unification and taste cannot be right, because the systematization of empirical concepts concerns cognition of objects, whereas judgments of taste, for Kant, are subjective. I think these facts can be reconciled. At the very beginning of the first section of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” Kant declares that a judgment of taste is “one whose determining ground [*Bestimmungsgrund*] **cannot be other than subjective.**” (5:203) I take the ‘determining ground’ to be the evidence that it is appropriate to give for the judgment. For judgments of taste, this evidence turns out to be the feeling of the harmony of the faculties. But this is quite compatible with the judgment being *about*—referring to—an object in the world. This reading is consistent with an important passage much later on, in the “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment.” The dialectic of aesthetic judgment, briefly, consists in the fact that judgments of taste seem both to involve concepts, because we can argue about taste, and not to involve concepts, because “everyone has his own taste.” Kant resolves this apparent contradiction by saying that the concept of beauty is an indeterminate one, by which he means a concept “from which... nothing can be cognized and proved with regard to the object.”⁴ (5:340) So judgments of taste, on my reading, are about objects, but because the only evidence for a judgment of taste is reference to the purely subjective harmony of the faculties, I cannot prove, e.g., that the rose is beautiful, as I can prove that it is red.

In fact, it is clear that for Kant, beauty is in nature. He says so quite clearly in at least one place, in the first section of the *Analytic of the*

⁴ See my “Symbolism and Cognition in General in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82 (3):266-296 (2000).

Sublime. “We express ourselves,” he says, “on the whole incorrectly if we call some **object of nature** sublime, though we can quite correctly call very many of them beautiful.” (5:245) This cannot be dismissed as an isolated slip on Kant’s part. His purpose here, after all, is precisely that the topic of beauty is essential to the task of the *Critique of Judgment* but the topic of the sublime is not. This fits with the treatment of beauty in the rest of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” where natural objects such as flowers are said to be beautiful. On the other hand, at no point does Kant give any indication that he is offering an error theory of beauty, as one might expect if he really thought that beauty is “only in the mind.”

A similar worry motivates the objection that if ‘cognition in general’ is really just cognition, then the objective validity of cognition carries over to taste. For example, Christel Fricke has pointed out that, given the fact that Kant thinks that all objects of experience are cognizable in the sense of being subject to the categories of the understanding, the claim that cognition in general really is cognition has the consequence that all objects of experience must be beautiful.⁵ Note that because on my reading, ‘cognition in general’ refers to systematic unification rather than subsumption under the categories, the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste does not entail that all objects are beautiful, only that the discovery of beauty gives us evidence of an apparently contingent fit between nature and our goal of systematic unity. Fricke’s own solution to the problem is to posit that an “aesthetic synthesis” of the sensible manifold figures in the account of aesthetic response. This synthesis involves faculties of cognition—imagination and understanding—but without issuing in a cognition. Thus the role played by the cognitive faculties serves, so to speak, to borrow the normativity of cognition for aesthetic judgment, but because the judgment of taste entails an aesthetic rather than a cognitive synthesis, there is no reason to think that Kant is committed to saying that all objects are beautiful. As Fricke herself notes, however, this leaves us still without an answer to the problem about normativity, since only cognition is universally communicable. Fricke takes this to be a problem with Kant’s theory, not with her interpretation of it.⁶

Hannah Ginsborg, on the other hand, attempts to solve this problem by taking every judgment of beauty to incorporate a “self-referential claim to its own appropriateness with regard to the object.”⁷ Every judgment of taste,

⁵ Christel Fricke, *Kants Theorie des reinen Geschmacksurteils* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1990), p. 4. Translation is my own.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷ Hannah Ginsborg, *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 125.

that is, in which an object is sincerely judged to be beautiful includes the implicit claim “this judgment is universally valid.” But Ginsborg’s account cannot explain a crucial fact about our experience of beauty, namely

(O) Not all objects are equally apt to occasion the harmony of the faculties.

My response to a given object can be appropriate only if it is sensitive to this fact. But on Ginsborg’s account, the appropriateness of the judgment is represented in a way that is equally applicable to any object at all, which leaves Ginsborg without resources for representing the differences among objects in their degrees of suitability for judgments of beauty. Now, I think that (O) is part of the common sense understanding of the idea of beauty. Kant clearly takes (O) for granted in the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment.” This emerges very clearly, for example, in the “comparison of the aesthetic value of the beautiful arts with each other” in §53. The “art of poetry,” Kant tells us, “claims the highest rank” of all the arts because of its tendency to let the mind “feel its capacity to consider and judge of nature, as appearance, freely, self-actively, and independently of determination by nature.” (5:326) Music, by contrast, “occupies the lowest place among the beautiful arts” because it “plays merely with sensations.” (5:329) Differences in aesthetic aptness are also presupposed in Kant’s account of the relation of taste to genius. For beautiful art, Kant writes, not only spirit [*Geist*] but taste is required, without which spirit “produces... nothing but nonsense.” Taste serves as a “discipline” for genius, “clipping its wings and making it well-behaved.” Taste thus “gives genius guidance as to where and how far it should extend itself if it is to remain purposive,” so as to “make the ideas tenable, capable of enduring and universal approval.” (5:319) The implication is that the genius’s works might well fail to produce disinterested pleasure in her audience. Finally, Kant’s commitment to (O) can be seen in the fact that, in judging the beauty of objects, we do not allow anyone to argue us into finding something beautiful, but rather each of us “wants to submit the object to his own eyes,” presumably because it is at least conceivable that we might not feel disinterested pleasure with regard to the same objects as others have. (5:216)⁸

This criticism of Ginsborg’s reading is not original with me. Jens Kulenkampff, for example, says of an earlier version of this view that it is “perverse [*abwegig*]” to suppose, as Ginsborg does, that “the judger desires of herself that she find herself in the state of mind in which she already

⁸ Jens Kulenkampff makes an argument along these lines in criticizing Ginsborg’s view. See *Kants Logik des ästhetischen Urteils* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 2nd. Edition, p. 179.

[*ohnehin*] finds herself.” Such a state of mind, he argues, must be “totally empty,” so that Ginsborg seems “to have lost sight not only of the beautiful object, but also Kant.”⁹ More recently, Rachel Zuckert has said that judgments of taste for Ginsborg are “peculiarly empty,” because as she sees it “aesthetic experience seems to be a rapt absorption in (perceiving) the object.”¹⁰ Ginsborg has answered these and similar criticisms in her book *The Normativity of Nature*. There she observes that, contrary to what Kulenkampff suggests, our state of mind in experiencing beauty “has a phenomenological specificity that is not exhausted by its incorporating a claim to its own universal validity.” Rather, “when we claim that all others should agree with us in our judging of the object, we are in the first instance claiming not merely that all perceivers of the object should feel pleasure in it or judge it to be beautiful, but, more specifically, that they should share the very experience we are having.”¹¹ Ginsborg emphasizes the role of the imagination in her account. She says that “the act of judging which I judge to be universally valid—and with it, the judgment of universal validity itself—is at the same time an imaginative activity which the object elicits on my part.” Thus “whether I make a judgment of this kind is not just up to me, but depends on the imaginative activity which—as a matter of empirical fact—the object elicits.”¹² Unfortunately, these elaborations do not make Ginsborg’s position any less vulnerable to the charge of emptiness. While it is a “matter of empirical fact” that some things are more apt than others to elicit the harmony of the faculties, this fact does not find representation within the structure of aesthetic judgment as Ginsborg analyzes it. That structure includes, according to what I’ve just cited, descriptive facts about the object (red, 3” tall, etc., plus the fact that that object has occasioned my disinterested pleasure) and the normative claim that the object is beautiful. But the latter claim, on Ginsborg’s analysis, still is (or incorporates) a “self-referential claim,” and this is *all there is* to the free play of the faculties.¹³ So the beauty of the beautiful object, so to speak, has no connection to that object, and thus the judgment of beauty has no means of representing the relevant difference between that object and others less apt to elicit disinterested pleasure.

Ginsborg’s influential view makes for a good contrast with my own because she is right to see the normativity of aesthetic judgment as having,

⁹ Kulenkampff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 181. Translation is my own.

¹⁰ Rachel Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 189 and 189n.

¹¹ Ginsborg, *Op. Cit.*, p. 125.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 91n.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

for Kant, the same basis as normativity in general. Kant himself urges the broader significance of aesthetic judgment with his claim that the judgment of taste rests on the conditions for “cognition in general.” (5:217) But insofar as Ginsborg’s account neglects sensitivity to the object judged, the normativity of aesthetic judgment in fact rests on a different basis than does (for Kant) cognition in general. Empirical judgments, even more obviously than judgments of taste, are supposed to be sensitive to differences in the objects. Indeed, that is the very point of empirical judgment. In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant expresses this by saying that the object of our judgment “is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily.” (A104) This is crucial to the normativity of empirical judgments: My reason for expecting you to agree that the cherry is red and the banana isn’t is, presumably, that that is how the world is, for me as it is for you and for everyone. This is the basis for normativity in cognition, what I have called the imperative to represent the world accurately. By leaving open the possibility that judgments of taste are determined arbitrarily, Ginsborg severs the connection between the judgment and the ground of its normativity. On my account, by contrast, the judgment of taste purports to detect a real distinction in nature, namely the felt suitability of a given manifold for incorporation into a system.

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