

On taste as ethical-aesthetic notion in Kant

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Abstract. It may be that Kant's inherently communal concept of taste is a morally laden notion that blurs the line between the good and the beautiful, on the one hand, and moral evaluation and aesthetic appreciation, on the other. In particular, it can be shown how, on Kant's view, moralistic factors, such as considerations of social appropriateness, enter into estimations of aesthetic value. Moreover, Kant's tendency to overlap taste and morals suggests an underlying assumption operative in Kant's aesthetics. According to this 'decency assumption', as I have termed it, taste is first and foremost a trait of people with certain supposedly refined socio-moral characteristics. Kant also seems to think that having good taste and a morally good character go hand in hand. Even though we do find separate sets of ultimate principles in Kant's ethics and aesthetics, the aforesaid assumption nevertheless implies a shared ground between these two branches of philosophy and thereby links them tightly together, contrary to the common view that ethics and aesthetics are distinct enterprises. In addition, Kant's morally laden conception of taste will be shortly examined in relation to the Enlightenment project as Kant saw it and our contemporary world.

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1 Introduction

The modern distinction between ethics and aesthetics as two different branches of philosophy with a clear-cut division of labour presumes that there is a sharp line to be drawn between the good and the beautiful (and other aesthetic concepts) and, respectively, between ethical evaluation and aesthetic appreciation. Much Enlightenment thinking seems to share this assumption, and Kant's division of philosophy is easily treated in such a compartmentalising manner as well. Yet Kant is in many ways ambiguous in this regard. For example, Kant famously suggests in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that beauty is the symbol of morality, and that the experience of sublimity is also significant for our moral capacity (*KU*, AA 05: 264, 353-354). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in turn, Kant writes, for example, how "[i]t is very beautiful to do good to human beings from love for them and from sympathetic benevolence" (*KpV*, AA 05: 82; Kant, 2005, p. 206), even if this alone is not sufficient for truly moral conduct, and how "the cast of mind according to moral law" has "a form of beauty" (*KpV*, AA 05: 160; Kant, 2005, p. 168).

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As I aim to show in what follows, it is Kant's concept of taste that suggests that in the end there is no crystal-clear line between moral and aesthetic considerations.¹ At least, to put it more mildly, there is a sense in which the two types of considerations intertwine at the societal level, even if their respective governing principles – basically, the categorical imperative in ethics, and the feeling of purposiveness in aesthetics – can be separated when transcendently considered. More specifically, I argue that the tendency to overlap taste and morals suggests an underlying assumption operative in Kant's account of taste. I call this the *decency assumption*. The assumption says, roughly, that good taste is first and foremost a trait of well-raised, well-behaved, “decent” persons (e.g. people supposedly typically dominant in more or less bourgeois societal surroundings in eighteenth century Europe). What is more, to have good taste and to have a morally good character seem to go very much hand in hand in Kant's thinking. I also briefly examine these aspects of Kant's thinking in relation to the Enlightenment project and the contemporary world.

2 Prologue: On the epistemic ideal of the Enlightenment

Before we examine Kant's notion of taste more closely, let me say a few things about the Enlightenment. It is not easy to compress such a complex historical notion into a neat list of ideas. Still, it is safe to say that the following epistemic ideal is crucial for the Enlightenment project: namely, the idea Kant tries to capture in the phrase *sapere aude!* Basically, this famous motto says that people need to think for themselves (*WA*, AA 08: 35). For people to meet this requirement, authorities or tradition must not dictate everything on their behalf, limit their pursuit of knowledge, restrict what they should believe in, or prevent them from healthy criticism of socio-religio-political conditions.

The epistemic ideal also brings about a certain tension in the Enlightenment project as Kant conceived it. On the one hand, the Enlightenment promotes individual liberty: think for yourself, do not blindly trust tradition, do not be easily led, gain your own understanding on the matter. In this aspiration to break away from the old ways, the Enlightenment is both tolerant and pluralistic: to have people think for themselves comes with an implicit approval for letting many voices be heard and taken into account, including those in conflict with the establishment.²

On the other hand, the Enlightenment aims at the cultivation of human reason in general. In part, this aim builds on individual liberty, too: only if people are granted freedom – freedom of thought in particular – can they escape their child-like state and fulfil their potential as fully rational agents (see esp. *WA*, AA 08: 35-37).³ At the same time, the Enlightenment ideal is anti-individualist in the sense that it seeks the universalisation of reason or the expression of universal reason, which, in a way, has nothing to do with you or

¹ The idea that good and beauty are intertwined, or even to a certain extent one and the same, is age-old. Plato, for example, does not seem to make a strict distinction between the two. It seems rather to be the case that for Plato true beauty expresses all that is appropriate, harmonious, and good in nature and society (see e.g. *Rep.* VIII 561b-c; *Laws* II 667c). Of course, Kant is not a Platonist, but it can still be argued that there are remnants of this kind of holistic approach in Kant – just as, for example, in Hume, who would be a closer point of comparison (see esp. Hume, 1757).

² Perhaps it should be noted that I am obviously using the term in the contemporary sense that indicates the approval of the coexistence of multiple (possibly incommensurable) positions, whereas Kant himself uses the term ‘pluralism’ rather differently as the opposite of ‘egoism’ (*Anth*, AA 07: 130).

³ Cf. Christian Wolff in his *Ausführliche Nachricht* about fifty years earlier: “Freedom of thought consists in this, that in judging truth one depends not on what others say, but on one's own mind. For if one is constrained to consider something to be true because someone else says it is true, and must acknowledge the proof of it to be convincing because someone else gives it out to be convincing, then one is enslaved” (cited in Saine, 1997, p. 133).

me as individuals. On the contrary, what we are supposed to achieve through the process of enlightenment ought to hold good for everybody everywhere. For Kant, the ultimate goal of this process seems to be no less than a global moral community (see e.g. *TP*, AA 08: 277, 308-309; see also e.g. Baumeister, 2000, pp. 53-54). Such a goal is not so much pluralistic but unitary. In this sense, to think for yourself is to think on behalf of everyone.

3 On Kant's communal notion of taste and its moralistic undertones

We find similar ambiguity in Kant's notion of taste. On the one hand, taste is basically a capacity to appreciate beauty (*KU*, AA 05: 211). Even though Kant is against the idea that taste is merely subjective, to a certain extent this is nevertheless true: you exercise your capacity of taste through a proper kind of sensuous, subjective response in the presence of an object, without ever being able to prove the object's beauty to a person who disagrees with you. Indeed, due to the lack of rules of beauty, it is impossible, it seems, to express what exactly makes the object beautiful (*KU*, AA: 05, *passim*).

While one might regard this much as liberating – a kind of license to rejoice and welcome differing opinions and outlooks – this is not how matters stand in the end. This is mainly so because for Kant taste is inherently social: it makes no sense to speak of taste in a Robinson Crusoe-like scenario, because taste requires a community (*KU*, AA 05: 297). It also seems that for Kant the community of taste ultimately consists of humankind at large. To speak with a “universal voice”, as required by the judgment of taste, is to speak on behalf of everybody (*KU*, AA 05: 216). Put differently, taste requires a capacity to rise above one's private point of view, all the way to a universal point of view that “abstract[s] from charm and emotion” (*KU*, AA 05: 294; Kant, 2000, p. 174). In this regard, taste behaves somewhat like cognitive knowledge and very much like morality.

It is for the same reason that Kant thinks that the judgment “This object [...] is beautiful **for me**” is ridiculous (*KU*, AA 05: 212; Kant, 2000, p. 98). Judgments of taste simply are not to be relativised to individual *tastes*, but can only be valid in relation to a collective taste, which Kant also regards as a kind of common sense or “communal sense” (*KU*, AA 05: 293; Kant, 2000, p. 173; *cf.* Goldman, 1998, p. 142). Moreover, it is for the very same reason that taste appears as a moral or “moralistic” notion. First of all, taste and morality behave normatively roughly in the same way. Taste – or, rather, possessing *good taste* – implies that you can at least be assumed to judge correctly and make correct decisions in aesthetic matters, given that you contemplate your object in a proper way. This includes your not letting personal factors cloud your judgment. Morality, or being a truly moral agent, in turn, implies that you can at least be assumed to act in the morally right way, given that you base your actions on the right kind of extra-personal, duty-fulfilling maxims and act “from” them, not merely in accordance with them (through sheer obedience, say) (see e.g. *GMS*, AA 04: 400-401, 421n, 440).

Secondly, when you take a look at some of Kant's examples, I cannot avoid the feeling that for Kant there is something socio-morally inappropriate in certain aesthetic responses and enterprises. Indeed, the ultimate issue in matters of taste does not seem to be simply whether something is beautiful *per se*, but whether or not the thing in question is truly *tasteful*. Moreover, since taste is a social phenomenon, the issue goes beyond the examination of some or another particular object. It is rather the case that there are some established criteria – a kind of hidden set of background principles – that limit the domain of good taste, even if it is next to impossible to state those criteria. This is also the juncture at which the ‘decency assumption’ mentioned in the Introduction reveals itself: judging something as tasteful is partly determined by considerations of social appropriateness and decency. Such considerations obviously have a moralistic undertone, which obscures the seemingly clear line between aesthetic and ethical value considerations.

Let me give an example. In section 16 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant writes: “One would be able to add much to a building that would be pleasing in the intuition of it if only it were not supposed to be a church; a figure could be beautified with all sorts of curlicues and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattooing, if only it were not a human being” (*KU*, AA 05: 230; Kant, 2000, p. 115). As I read this, Kant thinks that *because* the object is a church and *because* the object is a human being, the criteria of taste that might apply in one circumstance do not apply in the given ones. In other words, the background assumption in the passage is that churches simply are not supposed to be altogether pleasingly pretty sights, even if that would be acceptable with other kinds of houses. Similarly, in the case of the human being, Kant seems to suggest that there are implicit restrictions in making someone beautiful. In the example, even if the images are beautiful when considered on their own, they do not achieve the same result when inked on someone’s skin. Such aesthetic choices simply are not fitting, because tastefulness demands otherwise.

Of course, the tattooed person might disagree with Kant’s judgment, and Kant would have a hard time proving him wrong. Ideally speaking, one of the two judgments should nevertheless turn out to be mistaken.⁴ Or perhaps we should say that the one person’s cruder taste should converge with the other person’s better taste. In any event, the demand for the “assent of everyone” (*KU*, AA 05: 289; Kant, 2000, p. 169) remains. As one might put it, absolute pluralism is not a valid option in matters of taste. However, the next natural question to ask is this: Do we actually have any such further condition available that would secure Kant’s assurance about his view?

The answer seems negative, as it seems that we must instead admit that even if there were conditions for a correct way of judging – starting from disinterestedness toward the object of appreciation (see esp. *KU*, AA 05: 204-205) – the possibility of error is nevertheless always present. Moreover, Kant’s position is open to the worry that perhaps his own judgment simply reflects certain socio-cultural attitudes or ideology. This in turn would make the validity of Kant’s judgment relative to a certain culture-bound model, and thus make it far from universal – unless one assumes that the model itself is the right one (because, perhaps, it demonstrates the highest degree of culture).⁵

At this point, one might remark that the beauty of a church or human being is a matter of *adherent* beauty (*KU*, AA 05: 229).⁶ This is to say that, in appreciating these objects in regard to their aesthetic value, we take into account what kind of objects they are or what purpose they serve. Consequently, our judgments of taste are not “pure” in this case (see *KU*, AA 05: 229-230). This opens up the possibility, although not pursued by Kant himself, that we should simply accept that in non-pure cases our judgments get saturated with cultural conventions, codes of conduct, habits and the like. This is so because these can be seen as affecting the content of our empirical concepts, and therefore what kind of objects we ultimately take them to be, including what kind of perfections we are prone to attribute to them.

However that might be, Kant’s view on appreciating *free* beauty – the beauty of raw nature in particular – has similar moralistic undertones.⁷ Kant writes, for example, “that to

⁴ For more on what a mistaken judgment of taste amounts to, see e.g. Cohen (1982, pp. 223-224).

⁵ Kant does seem to think that the more enlightened a culture becomes, the higher the degree of culture it achieves (see e.g. *IaG*, AA 08: 21; *V-Lo/Dohna*, AA 24: 713). He did not think, however, that the Enlightenment project was completed in his time – probably far from it (see *WA*, AA 08: 40).

⁶ One might also point out that the more or less implicit rules of taste implicit in the cases of adherent or dependent beauty are not rules of taste as such but “merely rules for the unification of taste with reason, *i.e.*, of the beautiful with good” (*KU*, AA 05: 230; Kant, 2000, p. 115).

⁷ For more on eighteenth century attitudes toward nature as an object of admiration, which typically had theological undertones, see e.g. Saine (1997, pp. 49-60). On Kant’s crucial role in the history of aesthetics of nature, see Budd (2002).

take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature [...] is always a mark of a good soul” (*KU*, AA 05: 298-299; Kant, 2000, p. 178). A little later he continues: “[T]he mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it. Because of this affinity, however, this interest is moral, and he who takes such an interest in the beautiful in nature can do so only insofar as he has already firmly established his interest in the morally good. We thus have cause at least to suspect a predisposition to a good moral disposition in one who is immediately interested in the beauty of nature” (*KU*, AA 05: 300-301; Kant, 2000, p. 180). Here, Kant suggests fairly strongly that someone who appreciates nature aesthetically probably possesses a morally good character as well. He does not say it, but such a claim could also be read as suggesting that someone who is not keen on marvelling at the beauty of nature might actually show a lack of good moral disposition. Presumably, such a person would lack good taste as well, given that for Kant the appreciation of natural beauty is the exemplary of genuine aesthetic appreciation free of “charm and emotion”.

Here is a similar passage from the *Logik Philippi* that links taste with moral character: “Selfish people have no taste; for they attend only to what is charming to them; but what is essential with the beautiful is that one attend to what pleases generally” (*V-Lo/Philippi*, AA 24: 353-354; cited from Guyer, 1982, p. 46). This makes a selfish person asocial in a double sense. Not only does he lack one of the key moral virtues required for a beneficial communal life, but he fails to recognise a crucial demand of taste, namely rising beyond one’s private point of view. It is not too far-fetched, I think, to generalise on this point and claim that for Kant the moral community and the community of taste are more or less one and the same, good taste and morality being the two overlapping value foundations of the enlightened society of refined human beings (see e.g. *KU*, AA 05: 297; *IaG*, AA 08: 21).

4 Conclusion

If, as seems to be the case, the decency assumption is in fact operative in Kant’s model of taste, then Kant draws on something contingent and particular in order to promote something that is supposed to be universal and at least in some sense necessitating. This can turn into quite a problem, especially by Kant’s own standards. One might even see irony here, given that one of the goals of the Enlightenment was to question the establishment and promote the pluralism of views.

Certainly, we can also understand the kind of pluralism saluted by the Enlightenment as follows. Let all possible views be freely expressed in public but also subjected to rational evaluation. In this view, pluralism can be wholeheartedly accepted as the most fruitful starting point. Yet, the ultimate goal is nevertheless to find out the best views that promote the good of society and, eventually, make society and its members truly enlightened. Then again, even if we regarded such a goal as noble, it does not fix the issue at hand: in matters of taste, it seems outright impossible that a standard of measure would show up in the Enlightenment court of reason.

Of course, neither you and I nor Kant can make value considerations in a vacuum. The major question then is, to what extent the empirical or factual level can be bracketed off in laying out value principles. Kant’s philosophy as a whole is an excellent example of the power of abstraction. Perhaps his moral philosophy is the best example, as it tellingly draws our attention to the fact that we can perfectly understand the universality demand of morality (whether or not we accept it as the best basis for an ethical theory), and that a universal projection of values would not be possible by grounding value principles in empirical data. Perhaps something similar is also possible in aesthetics.

Certainly, one might just as well regard Kant’s notion of taste as arrogantly elitist. This is especially easy to do from the modern point of view from which aesthetic differences, generally accepted as less troublesome than diverging moral views, may appear rather

insignificant. Indeed, antithetically to Kant's aspirations, it appears that aesthetic relativism has become common sense (Zemach, 1997, pp. 41-42; cf. Meskin, 2004, p. 81). Such a stance on aesthetic differences entails two assumptions: that taste in the general or universal sense does not exist, and that there is no overlap in aesthetic and ethical matters. As we have seen, Kant would reject both of these assumptions.

Are these assumptions and therefore taste in Kant's ethical-aesthetic sense simply outdated? It surely seems that the common concept of taste has become relativistic once and for all. At the same time, it seems that we can still perfectly recognise the same tension as Kant and Hume and others did. It is not that 'anything goes': total subjectivisation of aesthetic value would be wrong even by today's standards. For example, not all works of art are equally good as works of art. It would be just as absurd to claim otherwise as it would be to maintain – to use Hume's point of comparison – that "a pond [is] as extensive as the ocean" (Hume, 1757, p. 210). Perhaps the more crucial question is whether our conception of taste has been completely "aestheticised". For Kant and some other Enlightenment thinkers, the ultimate reason for not accepting a relativistic or pluralistic notion of taste seems to be the socio-moral status of taste. I am inclined to think that there is a hint of truth in their way of thinking in this respect as well, even if harnessing such a 'moralistic' idea to the promotion of some unitary societal goal seems both far-fetched and obsolete from the contemporary perspective.

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