

BOOK REVIEW

Katalin Makkai, *Kant's Critique of Taste: The Feeling of Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

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The perennial challenge for any Kant scholar is to offer close reading of a dense and often exceedingly abstract text that is faithful both to its driving philosophical insights and to something recognisable as human life. Perhaps it is with this in mind that Katalin Makkai breaks ground on her interpretation of Kant's theory of taste with a nod to Zadie Smith's reflections about how she came, one day, to love the music of Joni Mitchell after years of sheer bafflement that anyone could find it worth listening to. Her conversion was not brought about through any effort to understand the work, for example by learning what an open-tuned guitar is, or by repeated listening: it was simply 'a sudden, unexpected attunement' (Makkai 2021:1, quoting Smith). Suddenness is not essential to attunement, but a possible sign of the openness that is. Makkai describes this attunement as a readiness to be drawn 'into improvisatory engagement with' a work of art (3). It is an exchange requiring an active, playful receptivity. Attraction is necessary, too: 'I want to stay with it [...] to follow it out, to explore its character' (3). But this communion is not won through understanding. Even a sophisticated version of this thought, one that recognizes the singularity of the meaning of a work of art, gets things backwards. Any genuine understanding can only flow from a more basic recognition of it as meriting a distinctive kind of attention and engagement (7-8). That recognition, for Makkai, is aesthetic attunement.

Makkai appeals to Smith for an independently compelling picture of aesthetic attunement; her overarching aim is to show it to be Kantian. But the above picture, she acknowledges, may more naturally be associated with the Platonic tradition of the *Symposium*, which understands our appreciation of beauty in terms of praise, indebtedness, and erotic love — whereas Kant, by contrast, is 'often understood to regard the experience of beauty as a considerably more bloodless affair, consisting of a detached contemplation that is cut off from our ordinary modes of attachment to things and people, if it is not entirely sequestered within the mind' (3). In the final chapters of the book, Makkai argues that the activity of attunement — what we are doing when we make a Kantian judgment of taste, on her account — is *recognising* beauty, in somewhat the same sense in which we recognize another person, and which Makkai ultimately understands as a kind of loving attention or *care*. The resulting picture of Kantian aesthetics, as I will briefly indicate, bears resemblance to Iris Murdoch's distinctive way of thinking about value and its appreciation — a view that was likewise developed from an understanding of how Kantian and Platonic traditions run closer together than is often assumed.¹

Makkai frames the book around Kant's view of the 'twofold peculiarity' of the judgment of taste, that it is both *subjective* and yet demands *universal agreement* (14-15) — a problem that is often characterised in the secondary literature in terms of the 'presumptuousness' of taste. Much of the secondary literature and philosophical aesthetics that Makkai considers is assessed in relation to this problem. She distinguishes two broad kinds of approach. One aims to dissolve the appearance of a problem, arguing that the sense in which the judgment of taste is 'subjective' is not at odds with the demand for universal agreement. This deflationary approach draws on the aesthetic realism of John McDowell, which takes aesthetic value to be akin to secondary qualities inasmuch as it is 'not adequately conceivable except in terms of certain subjective states' (McDowell 1998, p.136) — a subjectivity that is compatible with its being objective in the sense of obtaining independently of any particular experience, or any particular perceiver. The other

¹ See Brookes (2012) for discussion. I am also reminded, in this vein, of Thierry De Duve (1995).

approach accepts the problem as genuine, and argues that the presumption of taste is legitimated in the *Critique of Judgment* either by relating its demand to the requirements of cognition or morality, or in relation to a distinctively aesthetic source of normativity (168). But they all err, Makkai suggests, in assuming that the problem calls for a solution at the level of philosophical theory. Even if we should suppose that the claim of taste draws on a distinctively aesthetic source of normativity — *prima facie* the position, among the above, closest to Makkai's own — nevertheless one's access to this normativity can only go through one's own, singular aesthetic experience. In this domain of our lives, Makkai urges, 'we *must* make, and so must be entitled to make, "excessive" claims upon one another' (169). Therefore the problem, when properly understood, is 'relocated, and refigured, as a problem to be negotiated between particular individuals in a particular case' (169).

This recasting of the problem of the presumption of taste has wide-ranging implications about what we are doing when we appreciate beauty. Makkai argues that we *recognize* beauty, in a sense similar to the recognition respect of Kantian ethics. Recognition is an acknowledgement of normative status that no one else can perform for you. And the recognition of beauty is inexhaustible: there is no possibility of taking its measure, once and for all. It resists such claims of mastery. 'The judgment of taste turns upon an aesthetic encounter with the object, in which I feel animated by the object, which is to say that I feel there is something in my experience of it beyond what there is to know about it, that deserves to be articulated' (177). Perhaps we hardly need add here that this recognition is not like respect for another rational being simply as such, but rather is like the recognition of a *particular* person to whom one is in some sense *committed* — and thus bears comparison to recognising 'one's soul mate or [...] a divine presence' (136).

The recognition involved, like its object, is essentially singular: 'one object's beauty has nothing in common with that of another — except, of course, for the bare fact of exemplifying beauty' (128). And so what I am doing when I appreciate the beauty of, say, this painting — my attunement with it — is not an instance of a universal: it is something that I can only do, as Iris Murdoch would say, 'alone and differently' (2001[1970]: 61) — differently not only from anyone else, but even from myself at other times (Makkai 177). Murdoch speaks there of artistic production, not appreciation; but Makkai in fact makes a kindred point, namely that aesthetic communication shares something with the 'autonomy-preserving emulation' (181) that Kant associates with genius. In aesthetic communication, 'I am trying to attract you to your own aesthetic encounter' with the work, which is 'why neither arguing nor communication is an intrinsic threat to the autonomy of taste' (180-1). Since the liking expressed in a judgment of taste is distinctively one's own and responsive to the reality of the object, which is conceived as akin to a rational being, this attunement can be conceived as 'open-ended commitment' (183) and, as a kind of loving attention or care, involves a willingness to allow the work 'to help shape my sense of what matters' (186).

I have only been able to indicate, in the barest of outline, what struck me as the main line of thought in Makkai's rich and interesting book. I found the description and analysis of aesthetic attunement genuinely compelling, and largely plausible as an interpretation of Kant (although I have not been able to enter into those interpretive details here). If I have a general complaint to lodge, it is that it is not made entirely clear the extent to which the argument does and does not break new ground. I have offered some indication of how Makkai's Kantian aesthetics resonates with the work of Iris Murdoch; but Murdoch is not mentioned, and thus it remains an open question whether this kinship is deliberate or accidental, whether it runs shallow or deep. Similarly, Makkai's discussion of secondary literature largely focuses on widely familiar contributions of an older generation, when much recent work on topics central to the argument of this book — the agency exercised in judgment, the presumption of taste, and the possibility of

a distinctively aesthetic source of normativity — went either unacknowledged or noted in too cursory a fashion.

In closing, I would like to register a historical question about Kant's relation to aesthetic rationalism that also goes unconsidered in this book. Makkai follows the widespread — and by my lights, somewhat unfortunate — practice of treating the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment as a stand-alone text, isolated from the wider context of the *Critique of Judgment*. Her effort, in the final pages of the book, to link her account to the framing concerns of the third *Critique* — the aims and unity of the work, which Kant presents in the Preface and two Introductions — was underdeveloped. But this relatively neglected material contains resources that, I believe, support Makkai's central idea that we *recognize* beauty in the judgment of taste. Kant makes clear in the Introductions that the principle of the power of judgment is the idea of the 'purposiveness of nature [*Zweckmäßigkeit der Natur*]' (e.g. 20:202-3; cf. Makkai 192). The idea is that nature is appropriate or suitable for the exercise and development of our cognitive capacity; and the appreciation of (natural) beauty is a *felt* recognition of this suitability, not in relation to nature as such, but one of her 'products'. The idea moreover draws on a conception of nature, prominent in the German rationalist tradition and rooted in the comprehensive natural teleology of the Stoic tradition, as rationally governed. As I understand Kant, the overarching aim of the third *Critique* is to offer a critical rehabilitation of this conception of nature in order to account for the systematic unity of the critical project itself. These background concerns help account for Kant's express concern with *natural* over artistic beauty in the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, and allow us to see that our appreciation of beauty should fall among the affective modes of rationality recognising itself. Despite the fact that Makkai, like most interpreters, openly disregards Kant's concern for natural over artistic beauty (12), her interpretation of our enjoyment of artistic beauty accords remarkably well with this more historically-minded approach to Kant's project in the third *Critique*.

References

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