

Kant on the Pleasures of Understanding

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[This paper is forthcoming in *Kant on Emotion and Value*, ed. Alix Cohen (Palgrave Macmillan).]

πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει.
— Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 980a21

1.

Aristotle famously said that we all by nature desire to know, or understand.¹ He justifies this by appeal to the “delight” people take in having perceptions, especially by means of sight, which “most of all senses makes us know”. So, he suggested, there is a pleasure in knowing, or at least in certain modes of knowing. I am interested here in Kant’s endorsement of the basic idea that there is pleasure in knowing, and that we all desire by nature to know. Examining this should, I think, shed fresh light on Kant’s interest in the judgment of taste, which is his technical term for our enjoyment of beauty.² Since Kant was evidently no aesthete, it is unlikely that he devoted so much of the *Critique of Judgment* — indeed, its most important part (KU 5:169) — to the analysis of taste as an end in itself. Kant seems instead to have been propelled by the thought that he might unearth a hitherto elusive clue into the nature of our cognitive capacities. The judgment of taste, Kant gnominically proclaimed, “reveals a property of our faculty of cognition that without this analysis would have remained unknown” (KU 5:213).

We might wonder why our enjoyment of beauty should promise any such revelation, since taste is an aesthetic, and non-cognitive, mode of judgment. The answer must have something to do with Kant’s view that the judgment of taste is nevertheless an exercise of our cognitive capacities. This it shares with any mode of knowing, such as ordinary empirical judgment or sensible experience. The judgment of taste involves the “free play” of cognitive capacities, which Kant suggests is pleasurable in some way that ordinary cognitive business is not. That our cognitive lives are not shot through with pleasure is a simple and obvious fact that Kant rightly recognises should not be contested. Of course, a person will on occasion feel pleasure at coming to understand something in particular; but such pleasures are surely few and far between, and do not even begin to track the measure of our actual cognitive success. Moreover, and crucially, the distinctly pleasurable exercise of our cognitive capacities (the enjoyment of beauty) is not the paradigmatic one, the one in which they are set towards the end

¹ Aristotle (1984), 1552 [*Metaphysics* A.1, 980a26]. See Cambiano (2012) for scholarly discussion of this remark and its relation to different conceptions of knowledge in Aristotle.

² There is some debate in the literature as to whether the pleasure we take in the beautiful is *part* of the judgment of taste, or whether the two are one and the same. Hannah Ginsborg (1991) argues for the latter view, notably against Paul Guyer (1997 [1979]). I don’t mean to enter into the fray of that debate here; I simply draw on the point that for Kant, as for many of his era, “taste” refers to our appreciation of beauty (rather than, say, food), and I will use this simple term as shorthand for “enjoyment of beauty” and “judgment of taste”.

of actually knowing something. If we desire by nature to understand, why should we be pleased at an exercise of our cognitive capacities that does not lead to understanding anything? And why, in turn, should the fact that we can take pleasure in this way yield special insight into the *nature* of these capacities?

My thesis is that the judgment of taste reveals a pleasure that is not usually apparent in particular acts of understanding, but which is nevertheless proper to the activity of understanding as such. This thesis draws on another Aristotelian idea, that of a proper pleasure: i.e., one that belongs to an activity in the sense that it makes that activity “more precise and more enduring and better”.³ The judgment of taste lays bare the proper pleasure of understanding; and this pleasure, I will argue, points in turn to a standard of cognitive virtue.

2. *The desire to know*

First let’s look into the evidence for Kant’s endorsement of the Aristotelian claim that we all desire by nature to know. Then I will explain how the Aristotelian claim bears on Kant’s account of taste.

Kant mentions a “natural drive [...] to enlarge our cognition”, which he groups together with a natural drive “for honour” in a comprehensive list of natural drives that also includes the drives for food, sex, movement, and the like (MS 6:215). He draws a division in this list of natural drives that sets the epistemic drive and the drive for honour in a special sub-category. The point of segregating them in this way, I take it, is that they — unlike, say, the drive to eat — are potentially expressions of our essentially rational nature. That is, the drive to enlarge our cognition, along with the drive for honour, is part of what makes us *distinctively* human, in a way that the drive to eat does not. The latter might belong to an account of what it is to be a human being, but it is not something that allows us to distinguish the human being from other creatures. However, Kant also indicates that they are only *potentially* expressions of our rational nature: the natural drive to know requires some kind of cultivation.⁴

As Kant puts it in the *Anthropology*, the nature of a human being can be considered either as *animal rationabile* — “an animal endowed with the *capacity of reason*” — or as *animal rationale* (7:321). This distinguishes what we are by brute natural endowment from what we are when we make of ourselves what we ought to make of ourselves.⁵ Thus in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant

³ Aristotle (1984), 1858 [*Nicomachean Ethics* X.5, 1175b14-15].

⁴ As does the drive for honour, presumably with reference to moral (rather than epistemic) virtue. Some interesting recent work on the connection between honour and moral virtue in Kant includes Korsgaard (2008) and Anderson (2008).

⁵ This bears on the problem of the “*Bestimmung*” of the human being — a term usually rendered “vocation” in English translation — which was hotly debated in Germany in the 18th century; the details of this lie outside of the

presents the cultivation of one’s cognitive capacities as a morally obligatory end, or a duty of virtue (to oneself) (MS 6:387). And elsewhere, Kant presents the appropriate cultivation of our cognitive capacities, or enlightenment, as our “original vocation” (WA 8:39) and “essential end” (KU 5:294n). Yet the appropriate cultivation of the natural desire to expand our cognitions, Kant suggests, changes the character of the drive. At least this can be inferred from his rejection of a rival conception of enlightenment as the acquisition of information, placing it instead in developing the readiness to make good use of one’s cognitive capacities (WDO 8:139n; WA *passim*). This is how Kant endorses the Aristotelian claim that we all desire by nature to know.⁶

Let’s bring this point to bear on the account of taste. In Kant’s view, the delight we take in beauty could neither satisfy nor frustrate the desire to know. Taste cannot satisfy this desire because the judgment is non-cognitive: nothing is known through it. But taste cannot frustrate this desire, either: *that* cannot be the right gloss on its non-cognitive status, given Kant’s indications about its profound epistemic significance.⁷ We are creatures that desire by nature to know, and this fact about us is part of what makes the enjoyment of beauty possible, and epistemically significant, for us.⁸

It might seem that, in taking this approach, I must be losing sight of Kant’s central claim that the judgment of taste is “disinterested”. Disinterestedness is the distinctive quality of the pleasure that marks, or is the “determining ground” of, the judgment of taste. It means that one’s liking is not dependent on taking an interest in the real existence of anything, and hence in what one might do to sustain or bring about that existence (KU 5:203-211). Our appreciation of beauty rather seems to require some subdual of the demands of agency: this is why Kant presents it as “merely contemplative” (KU 5:204, 209, 222, 267). The botanist who knows full well the functional role of a flower, and presumably cares about it in his research, must bracket

scope of this paper, but for accounts of this topic in Kant and his contemporaries, see Brandt (2003) and Kuehn (2009).

⁶ Without appropriate cultivation, the natural desire to know is actually itself a cause of error: see *Logik Jäsche* (9:74), *Wiener Logik* (24:817), VL-Blomberg (24:187). Similar themes figure in Kant’s account of the special aims of the critical project, where he often suggests that the desire to know — *Wißbegierde*, usually translated “curiosity” in this context — gives rise to dogmatism. The natural drive to know needs to be restrained and guided by a “critical” appreciation of our epistemic limits and capacities: see KrV (Axiii; A856/B884), Prol (4:367), MAN (4:564-5), KU (5:294n).

⁷ Paul Guyer rejects one tradition of interpreting Kant’s view that taste involves a “harmony of the cognitive faculties” (namely what he dubs the “multicognitive” approach) because it is implicitly committed — if I may put his point in my own terms — to the idea that the judgment of taste involves a *frustration* of the desire to understand. As he sensibly points out, such a reading can’t make good sense of why such judgments should be intrinsically *pleasurable* (Guyer (2006), 177).

⁸ The idea that the pleasures of taste answer to the general desire to understand — though not to the desire to understand *this or that in particular* — is corroborated by Rachel Zuckert’s historical analysis of the lesson Kant draws from the rationalist aesthetics of Moses Mendelssohn: “just as Mendelssohn argues that we take aesthetic pleasure in perceiving beautiful objects *because* the subject is thereby in a state conducive to its perfection or its ‘positive’ power, Kant argues that this ‘quickening’ of the cognitive powers is conducive to the subject’s aims for ‘cognition in general’, and therefore explains our pleasure in the beautiful” (Zuckert (2007), 453).

this knowledge and these cognitive interests in order to take delight in its beauty (KU 5:229). But I don't think this means that the disinterestedness of taste entails a momentary erasure of one's desiderative proclivities. To explain why, allow me to introduce an abnormal case.

I once heard a story on the radio featuring an interview with an anonymous man (let's call him John) who for some unspecified medical reason lost his capacity to produce testosterone over a four-month period.⁹ "When you have no testosterone, you have no desire," John testified; "and when you have no desire, you have no content in your mind. You don't think about anything." Life without testosterone, and hence desire, he claimed, left him without the capacity "to distinguish between what is and is not interesting, between what is worth noting and what isn't." He then reports that *everything struck him as beautiful*. Surgery scars, bolts in hubcaps of cars, weeds: "all of it, it just seemed to have purpose; and it was like, 'that's beautiful'... [Laughs.] But you have to understand, the thought was expressed in the most flat-line boring way possible, 'oh, yeah, that's beautiful, that's beautiful...'" Mentally, he said, he would make a note of each thing he encountered, and "think 'oh, a brick in a wall'" — and it was all beautiful. Such ubiquitous beauty brought him no arresting sense of surprise; and nothing in particular seems to have stood out in such a landscape.

Kant's claims about the disinterestedness of taste might seem to imply that conation must go dead the moment we find something beautiful. Perhaps this is how things were for John over those four months. But he was ill — and that should tell us that such an interpretation has gone off the rails. Conation does not normally shut down like this. Thus when Kant presents the pleasure we take in beauty as a "feeling of life" (KU 5:204), and when he conceives of life as a capacity to be *moved* by one's representations of things (KpV 5:9n), I propose that we should read him as acknowledging the following. The desire to understand shapes each person in determinate and particular ways — ways that partly constitute one as a cognitive agent, and that give one's view of the world a certain texture. Kant's claims about the disinterestedness of taste can be accommodated without requiring that conation shut down when someone finds something beautiful. The pleasure we take in beauty must then be, even from a Kantian perspective, a certain way of finding things interesting.¹⁰

This last paragraph is offered more in the spirit of reconstruction rather than as straight exegesis. My basic point is that finding something interesting is not independent of the desire to know; and that finding something beautiful is a particular way of finding something interesting.

⁹ This American Life (2002).

¹⁰ Makkai (2009), Zuckert (2007), and Guyer (2006) have argued — in a variety of different ways — that while Kant says that beauty is not really a predicate of an object (although we speak as if it were), and that our pleasure properly bears on some state of mind that the beautiful object occasions in us, this does not mean that the judgment of taste is not an appreciation of *some object in particular*.

It is not a way of finding something interesting that engages a specified desire to understand p (say, the function of a flower). But it is a way of finding something interesting that somehow engages our desire to understand the world. The aim of this paper is to explain what that special engagement of the desire to understand involves.

3. *Pleasures, noticed and unnoticed*

Now we are going to look at what Kant explicitly says about the pleasures of understanding in a passage from the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*. As we will see, he claims there that some of these pleasures, at least, normally go unnoticed. The very idea of an unnoticed pleasure is puzzling; to interpret these remarks, I will link them to very similar remarks he makes about the pleasures of health. This will allow us to draw a provisional conclusion about the epistemic significance of the pleasures of taste.

As we saw in §2, Kant agrees with Aristotle that we all desire by nature to know. Does this mean that the satisfaction of this desire — the knowing of something in particular — is normally pleasurable? Kant, quite sensibly in my view, denies that this is the case. Sensible experience is arguably, and certainly for Kant, a mode of knowing; and it is not normally pleasurable.¹¹ Nor should we question the evident fact that particular acts of understanding — acts that involve sorting out that some x is F — do not typically give rise to pleasurable feelings. Of course, sometimes they do: I might be pleased to discover, to my surprise, that what I thought was a rat in my backyard is in fact a bandicoot.¹² Yet for the most part, the activity of knowing, even knowing that could be dignified with the title of discovery, does not tend to be overtly pleasurable.

Yet Kant thinks that there are pleasures of knowing, we just tend not to notice them. In the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, he seems to think that he can infer this from the basic principle that we normally take pleasure in the attainment of our aims. We desire by nature to know: and for this reason the activity of knowing must really be pleasurable, whether we are aware of this or not. To maintain this thesis Kant must of course find some way of handling the cognitive phenomenology that suggests otherwise. For this reason, he begins by suggesting that we distinguish between unintentional and intentional cognitive activity. Sensible experience is not an intentional mode of knowing, and so the basic principle that the satisfaction of an aim is

¹¹ Perhaps contra Aristotle, in the passage at *Metaphysics* A.1 (980a21-26).

¹² Such pleasure is not in the bare act of understanding itself, but (most likely) due to my estimation of the value of what I have learned: a value that might answer to a theoretical interest in Australian marsupials, or a practical concern not to have vermin in the yard.

pleasurable does not apply to it, he reasons.¹³ If it is palpable cognitive pleasure we are after, we should in the first instance restrict our search to intentional cognitive activity, where the satisfaction of an aim is in the offing.

Yet Kant's proposed restriction of scope to deliberate inquiry does not seem to be especially promising. Often we want to understand one thing so that we might in turn understand another, or else we simply find that settling one matter immediately suggests another for further inquiry. We don't normally dwell on these little cognitive successes, and it does not seem that any particular pleasure normally belongs to them. Perhaps a person will normally feel some sense of satisfaction at clearing away a vexing source of confusion that has stalled her progress; but if there is any overt pleasure in this, it is just a relief at having removed an obstacle to smooth functioning. There does not seem to be any particular pleasure in the smooth functioning itself.

Kant, though, disagrees with this conclusion — although, again, he might accept the observations that led to it. First, it is a particular sort of cognitive success that, in Kant's view, stands to be overtly pleasurable: namely, what we might call *comprehension*, and think of as the defragmentation of knowledge. To comprehend something is to have a surer grasp of it by seeing how it fits into a larger whole. What were previously isolated and seemingly unrelated bits of knowledge now stand together in a more clearly unified inferential whole: I can now move from one to another in an intelligent way.¹⁴ This point likewise accounts for the evident lack of pleasure in instrumental cognitive success. I may need to know one thing in order to know another thing, but these episodes of cognitive success do not by themselves entail comprehensive understanding of how things are in some particular domain of inquiry. Since such comprehensive understanding is usually achieved very slowly and incrementally, if at all, it is generally only experienced as pleasurable when we have a sudden insight or breakthrough: some piece of the explanatory story falls into place that immediately affords a noticeably more coherent grasp of the whole. Kant makes this point particularly with regard to inquiry in empirical natural science. Recognising that the empirical diversity and particularity of the natural world can be made sense of through its comprehension into a gradually more unified and systematic whole is, Kant insists, *pleasurable*. And surely we can grant that a scientist would normally feel some pleasure at recognising how several “empirically heterogeneous laws of

¹³ Kant claims that “[t]he attainment of every aim is combined with the feeling of pleasure”: for this reason, he suggests, we should not be surprised that unintentional cognitive activity, such as sensible experience, is not particularly pleasurable (KU 5:187).

¹⁴ I adduce the basis for this claim further in the discussion of the passage at KU 5:187, below. I also claim this on the basis of Kant's remarks about the unity of knowledge as a rational ideal at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A834-5/B862-3).

nature” — laws concerning disparate phenomena — are in fact united under a common principle. Such recognition, Kant maintains, “is the ground of a very noticeable pleasure, often indeed admiration” (KU 5:187).

But it is not obvious that we should follow Kant beyond that claim. For in stressing that the scientist enjoys a very *noticeable* epistemic pleasure, Kant points to the possibility of an *unnoticeable* one — or at least one that normally goes unnoticed in point of fact.

To be sure, *we no longer detect any noticeable pleasure in the comprehensibility of nature* and the unity of its division into genera and species, by means of which alone empirical concepts are possible through which we cognize it in its particular laws; but it must certainly have been there in its time, and only because *the most common experience would not be possible without it* has it gradually become mixed up in mere cognition and is no longer specially noticed. (KU 5:187; my emphasis)

When we put all of this together, we have two striking claims. First, pleasure in the comprehensibility of nature is said to be both “very noticeable” and yet not actually noticed much at all — very noticeable *in principle*, we might say, and yet largely unnoticed *in fact*. Can we make any sense of such a pleasure? Second, Kant is not making the thoroughly familiar and (in the era of the Enlightenment) largely uncontroversial claim that our cognitive practices depend upon the presupposition that nature, as a law-governed whole, is commensurable with our capacity to understand it. He is rather making the far more puzzling claim that ordinary empirical knowledge, including sensible experience, is actually “made possible” by this curious pleasure. The reason we tend not to notice it, Kant implies, is that human cognitive life depends so constantly and thoroughly upon it.

First, what sense can we make of the idea of an unnoticed pleasure? After all, pleasure and pain are modes of feeling. And on the face of it, it is not clear what grounds one would have for supposing that they exist unnoticed. The manner by which one notices a pleasure is through the feeling that is constitutive of it. Perhaps someone might counter that it is not uncommon to have the experience of suddenly realising that one has had a headache all morning: one *had* the headache all along, but was (e.g.) too busy with pressing work to notice it. But yet there still seems to be scope to insist, by way of rejoinder, that while there may have been something wrong with one’s head all afternoon, that condition was not felt as a pain.

Rather than pursue these abstractions, we might turn instead to an example. A little later on in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant points to a type of pleasure that presumably, in his view, goes unnoticed for the most part. Health, he says, is “immediately agreeable to anyone who possesses it (at least negatively, i.e., as the absence of all bodily pains)” (KU 5:208). This is to say

that a healthy person does not normally take any positive, visceral pleasure in her health.¹⁵ She may perhaps be pleased *that* she is healthy when she stops to consider this fact, for example if someone else's ill health reminds her of her fortunate condition, but that is not a direct pleasure *in* the health itself. If health is immediately agreeable, it is normally so only in a negative way: for this reason we often say that the pleasures of health are evident only in convalescence, just as the pains of ill health subside. We might then say that the pleasures of health exist, for the healthy person, not typically as a distinct positive feeling of some kind, but rather as the ease of unimpeded normal bodily functioning.

Hence we seem to have lit upon another pleasure that may be very noticeable *in principle*, but largely unnoticed *in fact*. Perhaps we can draw upon an analogy with health to make sense of Kant's puzzling suggestion that ordinary cognitive activity is in fact pleasurable — and indeed necessarily so — only we tend not to notice it. One sticking point is that in the epistemic case we are considering whether there are pleasures that are proper to cognitive activity: and if health is not an activity, but rather a state or condition of some kind, then its pleasures may not be appropriately analogous. It may help to note that, for Aristotle at least, the notion of a proper pleasure most fundamentally tracks the general activity of living a life of a certain kind: “Each animal is thought to have a proper pleasure,” he says, “as it has a proper function; namely that which corresponds to its activity”.¹⁶ The pleasure in question inheres in the activities that realise a certain form of life; and when that form of life is well realised, the creature will be healthy. If so, the pleasures of health might need to be understood in terms of the pleasures inherent in the activities that properly realise a certain form of life; and if that is right, then perhaps the idea that the pleasures of understanding are importantly like the pleasures of bodily health can be pursued. In fact, I take it that health is not a mere analogy here, but a model. The pleasures of understanding *are* pleasures of health, in an extended sense. I will return to this point shortly.

We should of course acknowledge the wide scope for variation in the healthy realisation of human life. Furthermore, the particular activities that any given person actually finds pleasurable, and which give shape to the way in which the life according to a rational principle is realised in her, can be largely, if not wholly, attributed to contingent facts such as genetic and cultural inheritance, the cultivation of habit, and other accidents of history. The pleasure that Jane takes in a vigorous ocean swim at dawn is no less contingent a fact about her than the pleasure that Jack takes in shooting heroin — even though, through these enjoyments, Jane arguably holds up a standard of human health and Jack surely does not. To pursue the analogy with the pleasures of health, we might need to embellish our account of pleasure, which so far

¹⁵ See Kant's remark that “*health* is only a negative kind of well-being: it cannot itself be felt” (MS 6:485).

¹⁶ Aristotle (1984), 1859 [*Nicomachean Ethics* X.5, 1176a4].

has simply been designated as a mode of feeling. Pleasure, we might now elaborate, is a way of being drawn to something: pleasure is, if not exactly attraction itself, then naturally bound up with it — just as pain is with aversion. So if we simply grant that some activities are more conducive to health than others, it follows that the pleasure that a person takes in such activities can be conceived as that person's relish not merely in those activities, but also indeed in the realisation of the form of life itself.

Admittedly no normal person thinks in these terms; but nothing in the way this has been set out entails that anyone's mental life should be particularly grandiose. Jane, we can sensibly say, takes overt and positive pleasure in her morning swim. If she enjoys the pleasures of health in this way, it is only because she swims with a certain ease of movement, one that gives her a sense of her own robust power. The positive pleasures, in other words, are normally the ones a person takes in a definite activity, like swimming. And if there is any sense in the idea of an unnoticed pleasure, it can only be because such pleasures serve a functional role — sustaining a person's interest in certain activities, the ones that are conducive to health. (Jack's sustained interest in heroin has a different source: it surely depends crucially on intense pleasures that importantly do not escape his notice.) Thus we have an analogue of Kant's unnoticed epistemic pleasures: for the pleasures of bodily health normally go unnoticed by the healthy person, and they conceivably make possible life itself by sustaining our interest in the activities that realise a life that is lived well.¹⁷ The epistemic pleasures are those that belong to the normal functioning of cognitive capacities, at least when they meet a normative standard of health. Such pleasures, like any pleasures of health, normally go unnoticed.

4. *Kant's standard of epistemic health: originality in judgment*

I am first going to provide an account of the standard of epistemic health that is drawn from Kant's remarks about the general rationale of the *Critique of Judgment* — at least as it bears on his gnomonic claim that the pleasures of taste should lay bare something about the nature of our cognitive capacities that we would have otherwise missed.¹⁸ I take Kant to be alluding, in his gnomonic claim, to earlier instalments of the critical project, particularly the *Critique of Pure Reason*. So we will need to ask ourselves what sort of account of the nature of our cognitive capacities was provided through the first *Critique*, and whether Kant gives us any indication that he came to regard it as lacking in something essential — and if so, in what? That will be my first order of

¹⁷ See also KU 5:277-8, where Kant indicates that “all representations in us” will be either painful or pleasurable, on the grounds that all representations must have some impact on “the feeling of life”. Hence no representation can be indifferent in feeling, but these feelings might nevertheless generally be “unnoticeable”. It is an obscure passage; but the view is reminiscent of Locke (1975), 128 [*Essay* II.vii.2].

¹⁸ See above: first paragraph of §1, citing KU 5:213.

business in this section. Once I identify the missing feature, I will present a thesis about the special insight that the analysis of taste is supposed to provide about the nature of our cognitive capacities. My thesis will claim that the pleasures of taste point to a standard of cognitive health, which is originality in judgment.

When Kant claims that the judgment of taste provides some new insight into the nature of our cognitive capacities, he says that the clue on offer is not going to be of interest to the *logician*, who is concerned with the necessary rules for coherent and consistent thought (regardless of what our thought might be about), but rather to the *transcendental philosopher*, who is concerned with the necessary rules for coherent and consistent thought *about objects*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* these rules are set out as the “principles of the pure understanding”. Thus it can seem as if, in establishing what these principles are, Kant has given an exhaustive account of the intrinsic nature of our cognitive capacities. But that is precisely what Kant is pulling back from in his gnomic remark: there is something that such an account misses. What does it miss?

In the first *Critique*, Kant claims that the understanding is characterised by a certain “spontaneity” in its cognitive operations, which he distinguishes from the “receptivity” of sensibility. He then sets out to identify the representations that are *constitutive* of our (theoretical) cognitive capacity — the principles of the pure understanding — and to show that they are the issue of the mind’s spontaneity, or its “faculty for bringing forth representations itself” as opposed to its capabilities for receiving representations through particular objects’ affecting the senses (KrV A51/B75). There does not seem to be any problem here about how any individual might possess a cognitive capacity so constituted: it seems to simply be a natural endowment, won by default.

That may be — at any rate, it is not my aim to question the constitutive status of the principles of pure understanding here. I simply want to point out that, even in the first *Critique*, Kant acknowledged that to possess an understanding, a genuine cognitive *capacity*, requires more than a mind outfitted with the right rules. Immediately after claiming the mind’s essential “spontaneity” in its cognitive operations, Kant indicates that certain facts about the human condition throw up obstacles to exercising, and in turn to cultivating, our cognitive capacities as we ought. One such obstacle is our susceptibility to prejudice (KrV A52-3/B77). Later, he points also to the limitations of instruction: through it, a person may be “equipped” with rules — and quite possibly cognitively robust ones — but may still fail to possess genuine understanding if she is not able to put those rules to use, independently and without prompting from others, by recognising their applicability in concrete situations (KrV A132-4/B171-4). Thus neither nature nor instruction can equip a person with a cognitive capacity. To possess

such a capacity at all, Kant intimates, is to be able to put it to use, in judgment. And if Kant is right that judgment is “a particular talent which wants only to be practiced, and not taught” (KrV A133/B172; my translation), then it should follow that the possession of genuine understanding, a capacity to know, can be realised only through certain efforts that each person can only make for herself.

This further point about what it is to possess an understanding — namely, to be able to make good use of it, in judgment — is not emphasised in the first *Critique*. But Kant says enough to indicate that, on his view, any account of what it is to possess a cognitive capacity must go beyond an account of its constitutive principles. It must acknowledge the practical problem of making good use of one’s cognitive capacities in judgment. Now, we need to consider how the judgment of taste might be connected to these claims that are otherwise muted in the context of the first *Critique*. My account of this begins with a point that I will make next about judgment that meets some essential normative standard. As we will see, Kant explicitly refers to that normative standard as a model of epistemic *health*; and in §5 I will further unpack Kant’s claims about what this standard involves.

With that plan in mind, let us pick up where we left off. I had pointed to Kant’s claim that judgment is “wants only to be practiced, and not taught”. Kant does not, I think, mean that there is no room for guidance in learning how to make good use of one’s cognitive capacities.¹⁹ His point is that a person can only meet a normative standard of judgment by exercising his own discernment, or seeing for himself how things are. Why does Kant think that this is required? The answer that he provides in this context (KrV A132-4/B171-4), and which is echoed when he sets out the problem of the *Critique of Judgment* in its front matter (e.g., at KU 5:169), is that there can be no rule for the application of rules. A doctor might be said to possess certain rules for the diagnosis and treatment of disease, Kant remarks, “even to the degree that he may become a profound teacher of them, and yet, nonetheless, may easily stumble in their application” (KrV A134/B173). However, it seems that the sort of rule a doctor might have in mind as she walks into an examination room may encode, as it were, the conditions of its own application: *if the patient has swollen lymph nodes in the neck, it might be scrofula*. Perhaps it is reasonable to suppose that a doctor is on the lookout for certain things, inasmuch as she aims to make a diagnosis; and this must mean that, in some sense at least, that her application of the rules follows a kind of formula.

Yet Kant insists that genuine understanding depends upon a person’s capacity to put a rule to use not as a “formula” but rather as a “principle” (KrV A134/B173). Although examples

¹⁹ His views on education make that clear; for an account of how Kant’s proposal for moral pedagogy turns on a kind of training in judgment, see Merritt (2011a).

are essential aids in guiding a person's efforts to put their cognitive capacities to use in the first place, ultimately they tend to do "damage" to these efforts, since examples "only seldom adequately fulfil the conditions of the rule" (KrV A134/B173). A skilled doctor will be able to identify a disease in its non-standard presentation. Although this points to a certain excellence in judgment, Kant's basic idea is that all judgment requires some originality in the capacity to recognise the relevance of a rule. The originality I am pointing to is basic, and required for any genuine use of one's cognitive capacities. A student presented with a problem to solve quite reasonably proceeds on the hunch that the answer must lie in one of the handful of principles he has recently been taught. A skilled doctor will be capable of much more. But still the student must see for himself, albeit in the epistemically sanitized setting of his exam problem, that *this* rather than *that* rule is applicable, and in *such-and-such* a way. Originality, in the sense in which I am using it, does not entail genius or exceptional insight; it is simply the capacity to put one's own understanding to use in the determination of particulars. Judgment cannot be taught because it requires originality; and originality involves an intelligent sensitivity to particulars, together with a measure of autonomy in one's capacity to then recognise the relevance of a rule.

It follows from this that we can only gesture towards what it might mean to possess the concept *scrofula*, can only give some indication of the conditions of its applicability, because its *relevance* can only be claimed in the act of judgment itself. And it is relevant only given certain cognitive ends: it is relevant to the pathologist who walks into the room, but not perhaps to the anaesthesiologist or the cleaner who follows. However, it would be a poor doctor who was always on the lookout for scrofula, and only scrofula — or even scrofula along with a set handful of other diseases. This is why Kant misleads us when he presents ordinary cognitive judgment as a matter of "determining whether something stands under a given rule [...] or not" (KrV A132/B171). Kant's gloss makes it seem as if judgment is a matter of being on the lookout for something; but this, I am suggesting, stands at odds with Kant's better insight about what it is to judge.²⁰ A good doctor needs some kind of openness to the facts before her, one that is not prejudiced to their determination in any particular way. The patient, after all, might not even be sick.

Let me recapitulate the line of thought that I have been pursuing in this section, so that we can then refocus on Kant's aims in the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's account of the nature of human understanding draws upon some conception of its fundamental spontaneity, or self-determination. It can then seem as if he has pointed to some fundamental fact about us, some

²⁰ Béatrice Longuenesse makes this mistake, at least rhetorically, when she presents Kant's view of "determinative" judgment as "when we have a concept [...] and we look for instances of that concept" (Longuenesse (2003), 145). That cannot be what cognitive judgment is, if it is to have any measure of the requisite originality.

way in which we are by default. But this is a mistake, for it overlooks something that Kant recognised (but admittedly did not dwell upon) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is that any account of the nature of human understanding must recognise that genuine understanding is a capacity that one can only come to possess through a certain practice and effort. The practice of judgment provides the field within which certain efforts of cognitive self-determination must take place. The upshot, then, is that we can only really begin to see what *human understanding* is when we make reference to what it is to judge: but the capacity to judge seems to admit of degree, or it depends on a quality of mind that admits of degree — what we might refer to in a word as “originality”, and understand as the capacity to put one’s own understanding to use, without prompting from others or slavish reliance on rules as formulas, by intelligently recognising the relevance — the *significance*, really — of a rule *in concreto*. And since this quality of mind admits of degree, then (taking it now from the top) it should follow that we can only really begin to see what *human understanding* is if we consider it in regard to some standard of its excellence. That standard of excellence, I am claiming, is originality in judgment.

It will become clear in the next section that this thesis is still too crudely put. What I want to underscore before we proceed, however, is that Kant’s model for this standard of excellence is *health*. When Kant explains the rationale for the *Critique of Judgment*, he remarks that the “correct use” of the power of judgment is something that is “so necessary and generally required” that it can be conceived as nothing other than “healthy understanding” (KU 5:169; my translation).²¹ The invocation of health might seem to suggest that something non-agential is at stake. Bodily health is largely a happy blessing, even though there are things one can do to promote it, and things that one can do to put it in jeopardy. For quite a few people are healthy in body without owing to any particular efforts of their own, and perhaps even in spite of many years of bad habits. But epistemic health is different, Kant thinks, because a person must necessarily make some deliberate effort to realise it. It requires the setting of ends. Later in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant spells out the basic standard of cognitive health as a set of three “maxims” of “*healthy*” human understanding (5:293; my emphasis). These maxims concern the “*way of thinking*”²² needed to make purposive use of” one’s cognitive capacity (5:295). For while we might all by nature desire to understand, we do not *ipso facto* necessarily have an adequate pragmatic grasp of what it is to aim at knowledge. To possess an understanding, we must be

²¹ The remark is curious, because he identifies *healthy understanding* with *the power of judgment*. Typically, Kant distinguishes the two in terms of potentiality and actuality; understanding is the “faculty of rules”, the power of judgment a readiness to exercise understanding in the cognitive determination of particulars, by “subsuming under rules” (KrV A132/B171). His point here is that there can be no “health” of understanding independently of a readiness to make good use of it.

²² *Denkungsart*, a term Kant consistently associates with virtue and character.

able to make good use of it in judgment; and to do that, we must meet some essential normative standard, which Kant conceives along a model of health. That requires the adoption — at least tacitly, through practice — of the right maxims.²³

5. *Maxims of cognitive health*

What do these maxims require? “1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself” (5:294).²⁴ As I have argued elsewhere (2011a), there are two themes at work in these maxims: originality and publicity (or communicability). Another point that cannot be overemphasised is that they are rules for making “purposive use” of one’s cognitive capacity. They express a practical orientation of mind that is required in order to do this. One has to care to be the source of one’s own thoughts (first maxim). And one has to care about the intelligibility of one’s thoughts to others, and also about the point of view of others on how things are and what is worth caring about (second maxim). More precisely, the second maxim says that one ought to think into the perspective of *everyone* else.²⁵ Finally, Kant claims that the third maxim is a kind of “combination” when one’s practice of judgment with the first two maxims has reached a certain fluency or readiness (*Fertigkeit*) (KU 5:295). Thematically, the third maxim returns to the claim about originality: but it adds that one ought to care to be the *coherent* source of one’s own thoughts. It makes this addition by way of the second maxim. Thus it calls for one to care to think coherently for oneself about how things are, and what matters in how things are, in a way that is open to anyone to appreciate — or independent of the proclivities of any particular point of view.

In §4, I made a first pass at accounting for Kant’s standard of epistemic health in terms of originality of judgment. One thing that I was trying to bring out was that this involves a certain openness to things, or a capacity to recognise as significant something that one was not expecting to see. This needs to be brought out in order to make, ultimately, a firmer connection with the judgment of taste. For Kant points out, through his analysis of taste, that beauty is necessarily somewhat arresting, or even surprising (e.g., KU 5:243). The analogue of this, for

²³ Rodríguez (2012) suggests that the maxims of common “healthy” understanding are “natural laws which this faculty of knowledge observes and presupposes without being conscious of them”, 198. Apart from the oddity of suggesting that it would be the *faculty of knowledge* that “observes” these rules rather than the *person* whose faculty it is, we should of course grant that the average person, even one of exemplary cognitive health, does not explicitly formulate these maxims to herself; but the same follows for any sensible articulation of a Kantian position about how maxims figure in a normal agent’s mental life.

²⁴ The three maxims also appear in the *Anthropology* (A 7:200 and 228-9) and *Logik Jäsche* (9:57). They also appear in various *Reflexionen* and other Nachlass material; see Ref 456 (15:188), Ref 1486 (15:716), Ref 1508 (15:820-22), Ref 2273 (16:294), Ref 2564 (16:419), VA-Busolt (25:1480). They also figure implicitly (though not set out as a complete package) in Kant’s popular essays as well; see WA (8:35 and passim) and WDO (8:144-5 and 146-7n).

²⁵ In the *Anthropology*, Kant gives the second maxim both an “ideal” formulation (think in the position of *everyone else*) and a “non-ideal” formulation (think in the position of *another*). Since KU has just the ideal formulation, I won’t enter into the complications of the two formulations here.

ordinary cognitive judgment, is a capacity to be struck by the cognitive significance of something unexpected: this is necessary, I was suggesting, because otherwise we have a picture of cognitive judgment as a matter of running around looking to apply some predetermined set of rules to particulars. I called this a matter of “being on the lookout” for something, and I think it makes a parody of what cognitive judging involves. Therefore, the idea that a person’s cognitive ends determine what ought to be salient for her in judgment needs careful handling. It cannot be the case that, in the ideal, a person is mechanically determined by her cognitive ends to pay attention to particulars only in certain predetermined ways.

The three maxims develop this suggestion. To see how, consider again the three professionals in the hospital room: the two doctors (the pathologist and the anaesthesiologist) and the cleaner. Each has different things that he or she needs to sort out; and different facts about the situation ought to register as salient to each, in light of these ends. The standard of epistemic health at issue in the three maxims claims that this is underpinned by some requirement to care about how things are — and what matters in how things are — that is not contingent on local cognitive ends. The three maxims call for originality in judgment that tends towards some greater comprehension, beyond the exigencies of one’s given point of view.

We have now prepared ourselves to revisit Kant’s gnomic claim that the judgment of taste promises to lay bare something about the nature of our cognitive capacities that would have otherwise remained hidden. I began my argument noting that Kant (a) takes there to be normally unnoticed pleasures of understanding, and (b) takes it that any pleasures of health normally go unnoticed (§3). This led to a proposal, that the pleasures of taste might be the normally unnoticed pleasures of epistemic health. To pursue this line of interpretation, we looked into Kant’s implicit (§4) and explicit (§5) account of epistemic health. Finally, to test the proposal, we need to see what this model of epistemic health has to do with the judgment of taste.

6. *The epistemic significance of taste*

We began with Kant’s gnomic claim that his account of taste promises to reveal a property of our cognitive capacities that would otherwise have remained unknown (KU 5:213). The clue, he indicates there, lies in the “particular determination of the *universality* of an aesthetic judgment” (my emphasis). This universality, he claims, is merely “subjective”. He draws this conclusion because the determining ground of a judgment of taste (i.e., that which makes it the special form of judgment that it is) is a feeling, rather than a concept. Moreover, on his account, to find something beautiful is to make a claim on all judging subjects: anyone ought to feel this way, in the face of this beauty. That’s why the judgment of taste has subjective universality.

Kant links the subjective universality of taste to the requirement of originality in judgment. This becomes clear through the way in which Kant draws upon, and endorses, ordinary thinking about aesthetic matters in his analysis of taste. No sensible person, Kant maintains, thinks that taste can be taught; and no one who takes himself to have taste readily allows the views of others to be imposed upon him on such matters (KU 5:284-5). Nor are we inclined to suppose that a claim about a thing's beauty could be passed along, and taken up, as *information* of some kind: one rather "wants to submit the object to his own eyes" (KU 5:216). No one thinks that it can be determined on principle, a priori or otherwise, "which object will or will not suit taste, [rather] one must try it out" (KU 5:191). In matters of taste we more readily appreciate that each person must "judge for himself" (KU 5:282). Taste, we ordinarily recognise, "must be a faculty of one's own" (KU 5:232), and this it can be only if it is cultivated through one's independent engagement with the particulars.²⁶

Second, the subjective universality of taste can be linked to the more robust account of epistemic health offered through the three maxims. For if the feeling is claimed as universal, then it cannot be one that answers to the satisfaction of the individual judging subject's discretionary cognitive interests. That I linger over this flower, or landscape — that I find it *interesting* in the particular way that belongs to taste — is not to be chalked up to my desire to understand this or that in particular. If the pleasures of taste do not depend on discretionary cognitive interests, on what do they depend? From the beginning, I have urged us to reject the assumption that we can enjoy beauty only when we do not desire anything. What we need to desire, in order to enjoy beauty, is not to understand this or that in particular; rather we need to desire understanding simply as such.

Hence my thesis that the pleasures of taste allow us to appreciate the normally unnoticed pleasure of understanding. I draw this conclusion because Kant claims both that the pleasures of *bodily* health normally go unnoticed, and also points to pleasures *of understanding* that normally go unnoticed (§3). This implies that the pleasures of understanding at issue may be pleasures of epistemic health. And indeed we find Kant saying quite a bit about epistemic health, first by reference to some remarks about originality in judgment in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to which Kant returns as he sets out the problem of the *Critique of Judgment* (§4). And then later in the third *Critique*, Kant explicitly presents a standard of epistemic health through the three maxims (§5). So there must be some (normally unnoticed) pleasure associated with exercising one's cognitive capacities in a way that answers to this standard. If my arguments are correct, the judgment of taste expresses the attraction that any of us ought to have to the appropriate

²⁶ Ginsborg (1998) brings this out under the heading of the "autonomy" of taste.

development of our cognitive capacities towards their natural end of knowing. The pleasures we enjoy with the beautiful are the normally unnoticed pleasures of understanding.

7. *Coda*

The upshot of the idea that the pleasures of taste just are the normally unnoticed pleasures of epistemic health is not that beauty gives our cognitive capacities their daily constitutional. Kant does admittedly suggest that getting the mind in motion in a certain way — any “changing free play of sensations (which is not grounded in any intention)” will do — gratifies us because “it promotes the feeling of health” (KU 5:331). Kant evidently holds that moving our minds is good for us, on the same principle that moving our bodies is. But when he says this he is not pointing to the pleasures of epistemic health that were at issue throughout his account of taste. This is made clear in his concluding remarks on the analysis of taste, where he points to the pleasurable entrancement we feel when we gaze at a fire or a rippling brook: he denies that the fire and the brook are “beauties” (KU 5:243-4). We like the fire and the brook because they move our minds in a way that provides an unbounded opportunity for invention. But there is no beginning or end to this, no conditions for coherence.²⁷ Our liking is for “what are strictly speaking the fantasies with which the mind entertains itself while it is being continually aroused by the manifold which strikes the eye” (KU 5:243). This tells us something essential about the judgment of taste. The fire and the brook sustain the mind in a free play, but not one that has any connection to, or in any way realises, the health of our cognitive capacities. Our entrancement with the fire and the brook is an indulgence in the play of fantasy, an occupation that in its very nature requires that we close our eyes to the way the world is. Our enjoyment of beauty does just the opposite: it opens our eyes to the world as it is.²⁸

²⁷ In this regard, Kant’s remarks about the fire and the brook remind me of Michael Fried’s distinctive claims about the “theatricality” of minimalist art and his ensuing scepticism about its aesthetic value (Fried (1998 [1967])).

²⁸ Ginsborg (1998 and 2003) rejects any sort of realism about taste on the grounds that pleasure cannot have intentional content. But her rejection of the nuanced aesthetic realism that she traces to the values-as-secondary-qualities model of John McDowell and David Wiggins would seem to leave her without the resources to distinguish the fire and the brook from genuine beauties, as Kant requires. This seems especially damaging, given that her broader interpretive aim is to explain the epistemic significance of taste.

I wish to thank Markos Valaris, Alix Cohen, and an audience of the University of Sydney Philosophy Seminar, for comments on this paper.

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