**Autonomy and Community in Kant’s Theory of Taste**

Jessica J. Williams

Forthcoming in *The* *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Kant has a far more communitarian theory of aesthetic life than is usually acknowledged. I focus on two aspects of Kant’s theory that might otherwise be taken to support an individualist reading, namely, Kant’s emphasis on aesthetic autonomy and his characterization of judgments of taste as involving demands for agreement. I argue that the full expression of autonomy in fact requires being a member of an aesthetic community and that within such a community, judgments of taste are issued as invitations to others to engage their faculties towards the goal of shared aesthetic appreciation.

1. **Introduction**

In a recent paper, Nick Riggle distinguishes between aesthetic individualism and aesthetic communitarianism. The individualist “thinks of aesthetic life as aimed at developing expertise or connoisseurship” and “treats an aesthetic claim as a verdict or a demand for agreement” while the communitarian, by contrast, thinks of aesthetic life as “aimed at developing aesthetic community” and sees aesthetic claims as “invitations to joint engagement” (2022a, 23). Riggle claims that Kant counts as an aesthetic individualist, but he doesn’t say much to defend this claim. I take it that this is not just because the concern of his paper lies elsewhere—namely, in examining the communitarian approach to aesthetic value—but also because he doesn’t think this claim needs much argument. It will just be obvious to anyone who has read Kant’s aesthetic theory that Kant is an individualist.

At first glance, Kant certainly seems to fit Riggle’s characterization of an aesthetic individualist. To begin, Kant’s focus in the first half of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is on aesthetic judgment, and he characterizes pure judgments of taste in terms of demands for agreement. Kant writes that when someone finds an object beautiful, they “demand” agreement from others and “rebuke them if they judge otherwise” (CJ §7, 5:213). Indeed, pure judgments of taste “demand universal assent,” just as cognitive judgments do (CJ §22, 5:240).

Furthermore, Kant emphasizes the importance of aesthetic autonomy for making judgments of taste, and there is certainly an individualist flavor to much of what Kant says about autonomy. What seems to matter most, for Kant, is that everyone develops their own taste, even if this places them at odds with their wider aesthetic community. Kant writes, for example, that “it is required of every judgment that is supposed to prove the taste of the subject that the subject judge for himself” (CJ §32, 5:282) and that “if someone does not find a building, a view, or a poem beautiful…he does not allow approval to be internally imposed upon himself by a hundred voices who all praise it highly” (CJ §33, 5: 284). On one interpretation, autonomy even requires that one resist the judgments of others about great works of art, lest these serve as either a distorting influence or a constraint on one’s own judgment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yet, I don’t think we should be so quick to label Kant an individualist. My goal in this paper is to argue that Kant in fact has a far more communitarian account of aesthetic life and aesthetic judgment than is usually acknowledged. Of course, as will ultimately become clear, autonomy and community are not opposed values for Kant. Instead, they are mutually conditioning. Genuine autonomy requires community, just as genuine community requires that members are autonomous agents who can judge for themselves.

The paper proceeds as follows. In §2, I suggest that aesthetic judgment, even if it takes center stage in the third *Critique*, is not at the center of aesthetic life for Kant. Even in the third *Critique*, Kant indicates that the goal of aesthetic life is to share the pleasure of beauty in a community of judging subjects. Most readers of Kant’s third *Critique* would be happy to grant that Kant acknowledges the social importance of aesthetic judgments, but they would likely insist that the social aspects of taste are merely ‘empirical,’ and do not belong to its a priori analysis.

In the second half of the paper, then, I suggest two ways that pure judgments of taste have a communitarian dimension. In §3, I turn to recent work on aesthetic autonomy and self-legislation in Kant to suggest that aesthetic autonomy in the full sense requires aesthetic community. On my view, full aesthetic autonomy requires that agents adopt the regulative principle of common-sense, which in turn requires subjects to engage with the judgments of others. Aesthetic common sense is not only a shared capacity for determining the beauty of objects through a feeling of pleasure, it is also a regulative principle that guides agents to produce “a unanimity in the manner of sensing” and thus serves as the ideal norm of aesthetic community. In §4, I argue that although pure judgments of taste involve demands for agreement, they are not verdicts to be copied, but invitations to others to engage their own faculties in aesthetic appreciation. This allows us to see that even those parts of Kant’s theory that might otherwise be taken to support an individualist reading are better read through a communitarian lens, one that, at the same time, acknowledges the importance of judging for oneself. Finally, in §5, I offer a few remarks on the distinct kind of communitarianism that we find in Kant.

1. **Kant on Aesthetic Community in the third *Critique***

There is no doubt that Kant’s primary concern in the Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment, the first half of the third *Critique*, is to articulate the conditions for making pure judgments of taste and thus that the locus of his analysis is the individual judging subject. Yet, we should distinguish between Kant’s account of the conditions of pure aesthetic judgment and his account of aesthetic *life* more broadly. Aesthetic life certainly includes aesthetic judgments, but is also includes much more than this, including aesthetic actions, such as decorating one’s home or person (CJ §41 5:297), choosing to seek out experiences of beauty (CJ 42, 5: 300), preserving beauty (CJ §42, 5:299), cultivating taste (CJ §41, §83), training in the arts (§47, 5:310; §83, 5:433), engaging in aesthetic discussion and debate (CJ §56, 5:338) and so on.

Kant clearly recognizes that aesthetic life is deeply social, often in the context of explaining the role that taste plays in fostering social life. Although Kant is clear that pure judgments of taste must themselves be disinterested, that is, not based on any desire that the object satisfies, he also notes that we take a subsequent interest in both “objects of taste and in taste itself”(CJ §41, 5:296-7). In the General Remark that follows §29, Kant notes that it is because a pure judgment of taste has the property of universal communicability that it “acquires an interest in relation to society) in which it can be communicated” (CJ 5: 275). The actual communication of our judgments promotes social life, because through this communication we share our feelings with others, thus creating and reinforcing social bonds.

Kant’s most extended discussion of the social dimension of taste occurs in §41 of the text, where he further describes the way that having taste (and objects of taste) promotes our natural inclination to society. In this section, Kant defines taste as “a faculty for judging everything by means of which one can communicate even his **feeling** to everyone else, and hence as a means for promoting what is demanded by an inclination natural to everyone” (CJ 5: 297, emphasis in the original). Taste promotes our natural inclination to society by making us, as he later puts it, “better mannered for society” (CJ §83, 5: 433). And Kant thinks that it is only in society that we take an interest in objects of taste. In a well-known passage, he writes:

For himself alone a human being abandoned on a desert island would not adorn either his hut or himself, nor seek out or still less plant flowers to decorate himself; rather only in society does it occur to him to be not merely a human being, but also, in his own way, a refined human being (CJ §41, 5:297).

For Kant, the refined human being, the person of taste, “is not content with an object if he cannot feel his satisfaction in it in community with others” (CJ §41, 5:297). This suggests that the goal of aesthetic life is not just to make judgments that are in principle universally communicable, but to in fact experience the pleasure of beauty in common with others.

On a standard reading of Kant’s aesthetic theory in the third *Critique*, Kant allows that we can take an interest in objects of beauty and in sharing our judgments about such objects, but this interest is merely empirical and must be subsequent to the pure judgment of taste itself.[[2]](#footnote-2) In order to make a pure judgment of taste we should not consider the aesthetic views of others. While it is right that the empirical interest we have in the way that taste promotes social life must be subsequent to the judgment of taste, and that we can never ground a judgment of taste on someone else’s judgment, I nevertheless think that there is a way in which pure judgments of taste do involve a consideration of the aesthetic responses of other judging subjects (not as a means of promoting our interest in social life but as part of the aesthetic reflection that belongs to a judgment of taste). As I hope to show, the full expression of aesthetic autonomy requires adopting a principle that pushes us to consider the judgments and aesthetic reasons of others as we pursue the goal of aesthetic agreement.

1. **Aesthetic Autonomy and Aesthetic Community**

In §31-32 of the third *Critique*, Kant emphasizes the importance of aesthetic autonomy as a condition for making pure judgments of taste. Kant writes that the universal validity of judgments of taste “is not to be grounded on collecting votes and asking around among other people about the sort of sensations they have, but is as it were to rest on an autonomy of the subject judging about the feeling of pleasure in the given representation, i.e., on his own taste” (§31, 5:281). In §32, Kant writes that “it is required of every judgment that is supposed to prove the taste of the subject that the subject judge for himself, without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others” and that “to make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one’s own would be heteronomy” (CJ § 32, 5:282-3).

As Samantha Matherne notes, many commentators, especially in the context of discussions of aesthetic testimony, emphasize the ‘negative’ condition of autonomy, namely, that autonomy requires *freedom from* the judgments of others (2019, 2). C. Thi Nguyen, for example, articulates the autonomy principle (in the aesthetic domain) as follows:

*The Direct Autonomy Principle*: One ought to arrive at one’s aesthetic judgments through the application of one’s own faculties and abilities, without the use of testimony (2020, 1136).[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is clearly a central component of Kant’s account of aesthetic autonomy; the judging subject must use her own faculties to make an aesthetic judgment and cannot rely on the testimony of others.[[4]](#footnote-4) Some Kant scholars take this a step further. According to Paul Guyer, for example, the source of pleasure in a pure judgment of taste must be “an explicit feeling of freedom in the experience of something beautiful” (1996, 284). Guyer understands this not only as freedom from the constraint of other judging subjects, but also as freedom from “any antecedently determined rule” that would constrain one’s judgment (1996, 285).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although agreement with others is not incompatible with aesthetic autonomy, there are ways in which it can sometimes threaten it. Kant, as we have seen, recognizes the deep social importance of aesthetic judgments. But he is also keenly aware of the ways in which social forces can shape and influence our judgment. Because we are social beings, we have a powerful interest in “fitting-in” with those around us and achieving social recognition. As Kant notes in his discussion of the young poet (an example to which we will return), the “desire for approval” can lead us to “accommodate” ourselves to the judgments of others (CJ§ 32, 5:282). There is thus an obvious way in which aesthetic community might threaten autonomy: our interest in shared social life with others might motivate us to voice agreement with their judgments, even to conform our judgments to theirs, in the service of social integrity and shared pleasure.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Focus on the negative condition of autonomy supports the ‘individualist’ reading of Kant, at least in the sense that what seems to matter for Kant is that the individual judging subject develop her own taste, even if this places her at odds with those around her. But if we turn to recent discussions of the ‘positive’ condition of aesthetic autonomy, not only does a richer notion of aesthetic autonomy emerge, but we can also see the way that positive autonomy requires aesthetic community.

* 1. From Negative to Positive Autonomy

In his moral philosophy, Kant emphasizes that autonomy requires more than the negative condition that one be free from external authority in using one’s own faculties. In the *Groundwork*, Kant defines autonomy as “the property of the will by which it is a law itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)”(G 4:440). Autonomy, in this positive sense, is usually interpreted in terms of the self-legislation of the moral law.[[7]](#footnote-7) To give a *law* to oneself—that is, to self-legislate— is to adopt a principle that holds for every rational agent. If one were to adopt a principle that was limited by subjective and contingent conditions of the subject, this might count as adopting a principle for oneself, but it would not count as giving oneself a *law*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Recently, Samantha Matherne (2019) and Dominic McIver Lopes (2021) have argued that aesthetic autonomy likewise requires self-legislation in addition to freedom from external authority. They further argue that the key to aesthetic self-legislation lies in Kant’s account of common-sense. Although I agree that Kant’s discussion of common-sense is the key to understanding aesthetic self-legislation and thus unlocking a positive account of autonomy, I’ll argue for a different interpretation of aesthetic common sense than what we find in Matherne and Lopes. In particular, I want to suggest that agents express positive autonomy when they adopt the regulative principle of common-sense, which is the “demand of reason to produce a unanimity in the manner of sensing” (CJ § 22, 5: 240). Adopting this principle requires that agents participate in an aesthetic community in which aesthetic reasons are exchanged.

*Common Sense and Aesthetic Self-Legislation*

Let us begin by looking at the passage where Kant discusses the autonomy of the young poet. Kant writes:

Hence a young poet does not let himself be dissuaded from his conviction that his poem is beautiful by the judg­ment of the public nor that of his friends […]Only later, when his power of judgment has been made more acute by practice, does he depart from his previous judgment of his own free will, just as he does with those of his judg­ments that rest entirely on reason (KU §32, 5:282, Matherne 2019, 2).

While most commentators take the young poet to be autonomous because he resists the judgments of others, Matherne argues that it is only once the young poet has cultivated his own taste and made his power of judgment “acute through practice” that he fully expresses aesthetic autonomy (2019,18). What the young poet acquires through practice is aesthetic common sense, “the ability to reflect on the grounds of our aesthetic judgments from a universal, rather than a merely private, point of view” (2019, 15). Only once he has cultivated this ability can the young poet make autonomous judgments of taste.

For Matherne, it is precisely the principle of aesthetic common sense that we legislate to ourselves to make autonomous aesthetic judgments. When Kant introduces common sense, he characterizes it as a feeling, a principle, and as a faculty. Qua feeling, it is the “effect of the free play of our cognitive powers” (CJ 5: 238), which we know from §9 to be a disinterested feeling of pleasure in the harmonious free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding.[[9]](#footnote-9) Unlike feelings of sensual pleasure, which vary from person to person, Kant thinks (for reasons that will not concern us here) that this is a feeling of pleasure that we can attribute to all judging subjects.[[10]](#footnote-10) But Kant also characterizes common sense as the *principle* of taste, which allows us “to determine what pleases or displeases only through a feeling and not through concepts” (5: 237-8). He writes that the principle of common sense, “though only subjective, is nevertheless assumed to be subjectively universal (an idea necessary for everyone), which, as far as the unanimity of different judges is concerned, could demand universal assent just like an objective one—if only one were certain of having correctly subsumed under it” (§22, 5: 239). On Matherne’s view, the principle of common sense “demands that our judgments of taste be grounded in the universally communicable form of disinterested pleasure that results from free play” (2019, 17). When we judge autonomously, we hold ourselves accountable to this principle, which is to say that we ground our judgments of taste on the essentially shareable pleasure in free play instead of merely subjective pleasure or interest.

Legislating the principle of common sense, on this view, requires that we have first acquired a *faculty* for common sense, which Matherne understands as a capacity for hedonic discrimination. On her reading, aesthetic common sense *as a faculty* enables us to distinguish between different sources of pleasure (e.g., merely sensual pleasures and the mental pleasure of free play) (2019, 9).[[11]](#footnote-11) We develop this capacity through aesthetic education, in particular, through practice with examples of classical works of art and natural beauty. When we practice with great works of art—works we know have been taken by others as exemplars of beauty—we learn how to reflect on objects from a universal point of view, and thus get better at sifting between the aspects of our own aesthetic response that we think are merely subjective versus those we think can be shared (2019, 15). Once this faculty of hedonic discrimination is in place, we can adopt the principle of common sense—that is, to base our judgments on free play—as the standard by which we make aesthetic judgments. Thus, while the young poet’s initial judgment of the worth of his poetry is guided by subjective interest (e.g., the satisfaction he takes in having written it or his egoistic interest in recognition as a writer), once he has acquired the faculty of common sense, he can reflect on the merits of the poem from a universal point of view.

Although Matherne is right to emphasize that aesthetic autonomy has both a negative and a positive aspect, there are two worries for her account of positive autonomy. First, the principle of common-sense that we legislate to ourselves on her account appears to be identical with the demand to make judgments of taste. Recall that she understands this principle as the demand “that our judgments of taste be grounded in the universally communicable form of disinterested pleasure that results from free play” (2019, 17). But a judgment that is not grounded on this universally communicable feeling of pleasure would not be a pure judgment of taste. So, the principle guiding our judgments of taste seems simply to be the principle: “make (pure) judgments of taste.” On its own, such a principle provides very little guidance. This is not, then, a fully satisfying account of positive autonomy, at least in terms of policies or maxims that the agent adopts to guide her aesthetic life.[[12]](#footnote-12) This brings us to a second worry.

In his account of aesthetic autonomy, Lopes distinguishes between autonomy at the level of *principles* and autonomy at the level of *policies*. Kant characterizes the faculty of judgment as having its own form of autonomy (“heautonomy”) insofar as it legislates a principle to itself, specifically, the a priori principle of purposiveness.[[13]](#footnote-13) Aesthetic judgment is a species of reflective judgment that is guided by this a priori principle; to judge that an object is beautiful is to judge that it is purposive (or “fit”) for human faculties, which we do through aesthetic common sense. That is, we can only judge that an object is subjectively purposive through a sense or feeling (in this case, the feeling of pleasure in free play). But as Lopes notes, this is autonomy at the level of a faculty. It is because judgment is governed by the a priori principle of purposiveness (which as I see it is manifested in aesthetic judgments through the principle of common sense) that judgment is autonomous (or “heautonomous”). But when Kant is talking about autonomy in §§32-33, he has in mind the autonomy of an agent, e.g., the young poet. Thus, when Matherne says that autonomy requires that we legislate the principle of common-sense to ourselves, this seems closer to autonomy at the level of the faculty of judgment, rather than at the level of the agent.

According to Lopes, agents express autonomy when they adopt certain policies to guide their aesthetic life. Lopes turns to Kant’s discussion of the maxims of logical common sense, which corresponds to what we normally mean by “common sense,” that is, the capacity to make sound judgments. For Kant, this form of common sense is guided by the following maxims or policies:

1. To think for oneself; (“the maxim of the unprejudiced way of thinking”)
2. To think in the position of everyone else; (the maxim of the “broad-minded” way of thinking)
3. Always to think in accord with oneself (the “consistent way” of thinking) (CJ §40, 5:294).

Kant writes that these maxims “do not belong… as parts of the critique of taste, but can nevertheless serve to elucidate its fundamental principles” (CJ 5: 294). Following through on Kant’s remark, Lopes suggests that agents express aesthetic autonomy when they adopt these maxims as guides to aesthetic life.[[14]](#footnote-14) Doing so “facilitates the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding” (2012, 12).

Lopes’ account has the following advantages. Such policies or maxims provide further guidance than the principle “make judgments of taste.” Furthermore, they reflect the autonomy of the agent (rather than of the faculty of judgment). There are, however, several problems for Lopes’ interpretation. First, he identifies the relevant policies with the maxims of *logical* common sense, yet Kant clearly distinguishes aesthetic common sense from its logical cousin. He writes for example that:

taste can be called *sensus communis* with greater justice than can the healthy understanding, and that the aesthetic power of judgment rather than the intellectual can bear the name of a communal sense, if indeed one would use the word ‘‘sense’’ of an effect of mere reflection on the mind: for there one means by ‘‘sense’’ the feeling of pleasure (CJ §40, 5: 293).

And in a note to this passage, Kant writes that “one could designate taste as *sensus communis aestheticus*, common human understanding as *sensus communis logicus*.” Although Kant says that the maxims of logical common sense can help elucidate the principles of taste, he also says that they do not themselves belong as part of the critique of taste.

Second, it’s not clear how the logical maxims of common sense guide aesthetic life on Lopes’ account. How do these maxims operate in a specifically aesthetic context? And how does that unlock the harmonious free play of the faculties (since the use of the same maxims in other domains clearly does not)? What we need, then, is an account of the aesthetic maxims that autonomous agents adopt as guides to aesthetic life. In the remainder of this section, I want to suggest that the principle through which agents express aesthetic autonomy is the regulative principle of common sense, which provides the aesthetic correlate of the logical maxims of common sense. This, in turn, explains why Kant says that the logical maxims can help elucidate taste without themselves belonging to the critique of taste.

* 1. The Regulative Principle of Common Sense

At the end of §22, Kant considers the question of whether common sense is a constitutive or regulative principle, which Kant also identifies with the question of whether taste is a natural or acquired faculty. To say that common sense is a regulative principle is to say that, “a judgment of taste, with its expectation of a universal assent, is in fact only a demand of reason to produce such a unanimity (*Einhelligkeit*) in the manner of sensing” (CJ §22, 5: 240). I take it that common sense is both a constitutive and a regulative principle. As we have seen, it is constitutive of the possibility of judgments of beauty; Kant thinks that we can only make such judgments if we have a common sense, a faculty for sensing the purposiveness of objects through the feeling of harmonious free play. But common-sense also serves as a regulative principle when we strive to bring about a “unanimity in the manner of sensing” through aesthetic exchanges (that is, aesthetic discussion) with others in our community.

In support of the importance of aesthetic discussion and debate with others, consider Kant’s remarks in the Antinomy of Taste. In this section, Kant considers the contradiction that arises when we consider aesthetic disagreement. On the one hand, judgments of taste do not rest on concepts of the object, and thus it is not possible to dispute about matters of taste. Hence the adage “Everyone has their own taste.” On the other hand, we do in fact argue about matters of taste, which presupposes some ground of agreement. Importantly, Kant distinguishes between disputing and arguing. While both try to “bring about unanimity (*Einhelligkeit*) in judgments through their mutual opposition,” disputing “rests on determinate concepts as grounds of judgment” while arguing merely requires “hope of coming to mutual agreement” (CJ §56, 5:338). Yet, this very hope seems to require conceptual grounds of judgment. Kant resolves the antinomy (judgments of taste are and are not grounded on concepts) by suggesting that while judgments of taste are not grounded on determinate concepts, they are nevertheless grounded on an indeterminate concept of the supersensible. The details of Kant’s resolution are not important here. What matters for our purposes is the claim that the way that we bring about “unanimity” is through aesthetic discussion and debate, not in order simply to accept the judgments of others, but as a way of cultivating shared modes of attention to and appreciation of aesthetic objects.[[15]](#footnote-15)

How does aesthetic discussion and debate accomplish this? I take it that in aesthetic discussion, we offer each other aesthetic reasons for our responses to objects. By “aesthetic reasons,” I mean the properties of the objects in question that subjects cite in their explanations and justifications of their aesthetic responses.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Oak tree is beautiful *because* of the delicate pattern of its bark; the painting is beautiful *because* of the striking contrast between light and dark; and so on. Although Kant is clear that aesthetic reasons can never compel agreement, this doesn’t mean that we cannot offer such reasons to each other. Indeed, it is hard to make sense of Kant’s claim that we argue about matters of taste if we do not think of this as involving the exchange of aesthetic reasons. When we exchange such reasons with others, and are guided by the goal of aesthetic agreement, we can alter and shift our own response to the object, coming to see previously overlooked aspects or details of the object.

In support of my appeal to common sense as the norm that guides aesthetic exchanges, consider what Kant has to say about the aesthetic egoist in the *Anthropology*:

The aesthetic egoist is satisfied with his own taste, even if others find his verses, paintings, music, and similar things ever so bad, and criticize or even laugh at them. He deprives himself of progress toward that which is better when he isolates himself with his own judgment; he applauds himself and seeks the touchstone of artistic beauty only in himself (Anthro 7:129–30).

The problem is that the aesthetic egoist does not take seriously the judgments of others; he isolates himself from them. Kant contrasts egoism in general with pluralism, “the way of thinking in which one is not concerned with oneself as the whole world, but rather regards and conducts oneself as a mere citizen of the world” (*Anthro*, 7: 130). Thus, to be an aesthetic pluralist is to regard oneself as a member of the community of aesthetic judgers.

Although Kant is clear that we should never assent to a judgment of beauty if we do not feel pleasure in the object,[[17]](#footnote-17) we can still take seriously the judgments of others by attending to the objects to which they direct our attention and trying to see in these objects what they see. In this way, we “make progress towards that which is better,” by learning to reflect on objects from a universal point of view. In doing so, we cultivate taste and in turn produce a “unanimity in the manner of sensing.” Common-sense is the norm that drives us to produce this unanimity through shared judgments and shared reflection.

I want to suggest that the regulative principle of common-sense provides the aesthetic analogue of the second maxim of (logical common sense). Recall that this is the maxim to “Think in the position of everyone else.” In the aesthetic case, this becomes the maxim to “Feel in the position of everyone else.” But this, in turn, requires engaging with the aesthetic reasons that other subjects offer in aesthetic discussion and debate. Unlike the aesthetic egoist, we must try to see what others see and how they see it. In doing so, we unlock our own aesthetic response, because seeing what others see in the aesthetic context requires engaging our own faculties in aesthetic reflection.

At this point, one might agree that aesthetic common sense requires adopting a universal point of view but deny that this involves actual aesthetic exchanges with other judging subjects. After all, Kant defines the sensus communis as “a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought” and claims that “this happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others” (CJ §40, 5: 293-4). We should be careful in how we read this passage, however. As Kant makes clear elsewhere, the ability to hold one’s judgments up to the *possible* judgments of others requires prior engagement with the *actual* judgments of others. As Kant notes in the “Orientation” essay, in response to the claim that the freedom of thought would remain even if freedom of speech were curtailed, “Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!” (8: 145). The faculty of common-sense is something that we must cultivate in a community with others. At the same time, once we cultivate this faculty, it allows us to engage not only with the actual judgments of others, but with the possible judgments of others. Indeed, because the regulative principle of common-sense pushes us to ever-expand the circle of actual aesthetic exchange and agreement, it requires that we be able to extend reflection beyond the actual judgments of those with whom we are currently in an aesthetic community. But this does not diminish the importance of membership in such a community.

The autonomous aesthetic agent, then, is not only someone who judges for herself and bases her aesthetic judgments on her aesthetic response (the negative condition of autonomy), but also someone who adopts the regulative principle of common sense, which requires her to offer aesthetic reasons for her responses to other judging subjects and to in turn engage with the aesthetic reasons that they offer her, towards the goal of shared aesthetic appreciation. This brings us to a second way in which judgments of taste have a communal dimension, even on Kant’s a priori analysis.

1. **Judgments of Taste as Invitations**

When we make a judgment of taste, Kant says that we “demand” agreement from others. Indeed, this is one of the reasons that Riggle labels Kant an individualist. Yet, careful attention to what this “demand” amounts to, especially in light of the above account of common-sense, reveals that judgments of taste are invitations to other judging subjects to engage their own faculties in free play.

The key to unlocking the invitational structure of judgments of taste lies in Kant’s claims that judgments of taste have (1) exemplary necessity and (2) must be based on the subject’s own aesthetic response. Kant describes pure judgments of taste as having exemplary necessity, i.e., the “necessity of the assent of **all** *to a judgment* that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce” (CJ §18, 5:237). Although Kant has also made it clear that this involves a demand for agreement, it is equally clear that if another subject merely accepts my judgment without basing it on her own aesthetic response, then she will not have made an *aesthetic* judgment. Thus, to make an aesthetic judgment that agrees with my own, the other subject must exercise her own faculties and feel the pleasure of beauty for herself.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Aesthetic judgments, then, are exemplary in the way that great works of art are exemplary for subsequent artists: they prompt them to exercise their own faculties and thereby exercise their own aesthetic freedom. In support of this claim, consider the following passage. Kant writes:

**Succession,** related to a precedent, not imitation, is the correct expression for any influence that the products of an exemplary author can have on others, which means no more than to create from the same sources from which the latter created, and to learn from one’s predecessor only the manner of conducting oneself in so doing. (§32, 5:283)

Although this passage is ostensibly about the influence of artists on other artists, the wider context makes it clear that Kant is equally concerned with the influence of judgments about the canon of great works of art on those who would make autonomous judgments of taste. Kant has just raised the worry that praising ancient works of art (i.e., having a canon of great works of art), “seems to indicate *a posteriori* sources of taste and to contradict the autonomy of taste in every subject” (CJ §32, 5: 282). In response to this worry, Kant claims that “there is no use of our powers at all, however free it might be…which, if every subject had to begin entirely from the raw predisposition of his own nature, would not fall into mistaken attempts if others had not preceded him with their own,” not, he adds “in order to make their successors into mere imitators, but rather by means of their method to put others on the right path for seeking out the principles in themselves” (CJ §32, 5:283). This wider context suggests that Kant has artistic exemplarity in mind as the model of the exemplarity of aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic judgments serve as rules for others by inviting them to engage their own faculties in the exercise of aesthetic appreciation. We do not just want others to adopt our aesthetic judgments; we want others to *feel* what we feel, which requires that they similarly engage their faculties.

I suspect that an even deeper connection between aesthetic judgment and artistic creation is behind Kant’s comparison. As is well-known, Kant holds that the disinterested pleasure in a judgment of beauty is grounded in the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. At one point, he characterizes the freedom of the imagination in reflecting on natural objects counterfactually, in terms of what we *would* create if we were free to design the world.[[19]](#footnote-19) When we find a (natural) object beautiful, it is as if the object has provided us “with a form that contains precisely such a composition the manifold as the imagination would design in harmony with the lawfulness of the understanding in general if it were left free by itself” (CJ, 5: 241). Although we do not in fact create these objects, our judgments of their beauty reflect what we would create if we were the artisans of nature, but not artisans who would design a world for our private pleasure, rather, ones who would create a world for human faculties in general.

At this point, however, one might note the following disanalogy between artistic exemplarity and the exemplarity of a judgment of taste. A great work of art invites subsequent artists to produce *their own* works of art, but in making a judgment of taste, even if one is inviting another to engage their faculties, one is inviting them to make the same judgment, namely, “*This* is beautiful.”

There are two suggestions I want to make in response to this disanalogy. First, we need not view the free play of the faculties as the same process in every subject. Indeed, the richness of aesthetic ideas (in the case of fine art) and the richness of detail in objects of beauty more generally would suggest that different subjects, while both experiencing a free play of the faculties, can be doing so while attending to different parts of the work and relating these parts to each other in slightly different ways. Thus, even if two subjects agree about the beauty of a particular object and ground this judgment on the free play of the faculties, each expresses aesthetic individuality by picking up on different aspects of the beautiful (which in turn figure in the differing aesthetic reasons that agents can give for the same aesthetic judgment). Another, perhaps more controversial and speculative, suggestion is that we can think of free play as an activity that is at least sometimes *distributed* across agents. That is, we might see the activity of joint attention to a beautiful object as a form of free play, where different judging subjects make different observations about it and each subject, in doing so, is able to see things they might not have otherwise seen or to see certain details in a new light. Each participant expresses individuality through their contribution to the “play,” but is nevertheless guided by the norm of common sense, that is, the goal of shared pleasure in the exercise of human faculties.

1. **Conclusion**

I have argued that even those aspects of Kant’s theory of taste that might be taken to support an

‘individualist’ interpretation are better read through a communitarian lens. If this is right, then

Kant has a far more communitarian account of aesthetic judgment and aesthetic value than is

usually acknowledged. Furthermore, we need not see individualism, at least understood in terms

of the value of autonomy, as opposed to communitarianism. As we have seen, autonomy and community are mutually-conditioning. Genuine aesthetic community requires that agents have developed their capacity to make aesthetic judgments (and formulate aesthetic reasons) for themselves, and when we “demand” that others agree, this is always a demand that others use their own faculties to make judgments for themselves. And genuine autonomy, although it requires us to judge for ourselves on the basis of our own aesthetic response, also requires that we adopt the principle of common-sense, which leads us to pursue shared judgments with others.

In this way, Kant’s version of communitarianism is noticeably different from the kind of aesthetic communitarianism for which Riggle advocates. For Riggle, aesthetic community is organized around the mutual appreciation of individuality, understood in terms of the expression of individual style, rather than universal agreement in matters of taste (2022 a, 26; 2022b, 53). Yet, for Kant, universality is at the heart of aesthetic community, at least those communities that are organized around the appreciation of beauty.

While it is tempting to reject the universalizing aspect of Kant’s theory, it is worth

acknowledging some of the advantages of this brand of communitarianism. To begin, Kant is

aware of the potential dangers of the social importance of taste. Our desire to “fit-in” with others and to signal social advantage are powerful driving forces in human psychology. Hence Kant’s sometimes disparaging remarks about lovers of art as “vain, obstinate, and given to corrupting passions” (CJ §42, 5:288). There is thus a worry that aesthetic communities organized around individual style can succumb to cliquishness and snobbery. For Kant, the individuality at stake is not individual style, but the capacity to make judgments for oneself on the basis of one’s own aesthetic response, yet in such a way that one aims to share these responses with others. Although not without its own problems, the goal of universal agreement in matters of beauty requires an openness to the aesthetic reasons of *every* judging subject who is genuinely engaging their faculties in aesthetic reflection, and communities of beauty must be, at least in principle accessible to all.[[20]](#footnote-20)

References:

Allison, Henry. 2001. *Kant’s Theory of Taste*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gorodeisky, Keren (2010). “A New Look at Kant’s View of Aesthetic Testimony,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (1): 53-70.

Guyer, Paul. 1979. *Kant and the Claims of Taste*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guyer, Paul. 1996. *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hopkins, Robert. 2001. “Kant, Quasi-Realism, and the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgment,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 9 (2): 166-89.

Kalar, Brent. 2018. “Subjectivity and Sociality in Kant’s Theory of Taste,” *Kantian Review* 23 (2): 205-227.

Kant, Immanuel (1902-) *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Deutsche Akademie der

Wissenshaften zu Berlin (and predecessors), 29 volumes. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

-------(1996) “What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, A. Wood and G. Giovanni (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Abbreviated: Orientation).

-------(2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Eds.)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

-------(2007) *Anthropology, History, and Education*, G. Zöller and R. Louden (Eds.)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

------(2018) *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason And Other Writings*, Revised Edition. A.

Wood and G. Giovanni (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kneller, Jane. 2007. *Kant and the Power of Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

Longuenesse, Beatrice. 2006. “Kant’s Leading Thread in the Analytic of the Beautiful,” in *Kant on the Human Standpoint*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lopes, Dominic McIver. 2021. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle: A Kantian Aesthetics of Autonomy,” *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics*, LVII/XIV (1), 1-18.

Matherne, Samantha. 2019. “Kant on Aesthetic Autonomy and Common Sense,” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 19 (24), 1-22.

Nguyen, C. Thi. “Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement,” *Mind*,Vol 129, Issue 516, 1127-1156.

O’Neill, Onora. 2003. “Autonomy: The Emperor’s New Clothes,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 77, 1-21.

Riggle, Nick. 2022a. Toward a Communitarian Theory of Aesthetic Value. *JAAC* 80, 16-30.

Riggle, Nick. 2022b. “Aesthetic Lives: Individuality, Freedom, Community” in *Aesthetic Life and*

*Why it Matters*, D. McIver Lopes, B. Nanay, and N. Riggle. Oxford: OUP.

Reath, Andrews. 2006. Agency and Autonomy in Kant’s Moral Theory: Selected Essays. Oxford: Clarendon.

Schneewind, Jerome. 1998. *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sethi, Janum. 2019. “Two Feelings in the Beautiful: Kant on the Structure of Judgments of Beauty,” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 19 (34), 1-17.

Stoner, Samuel. 2019. “Kant on Common Sense and the Unity of Judgments of Taste,” *Kant Yearbook*, 11 (1).

Vogelmann, Rafael. 2018. “Can we Make Sense of Free Harmony?” *Studi Kantiani,* 16 (1), 53-74.

Wood, Allen. 2008. *Kantian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1. Guyer (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed, at the end of §41, Kant writes that the empirical interest in beauty that arises from our inclination to society “is of no importance for us here, for we must find that importance only in what may be related to the judgment of taste a priori, even if only indirectly” (CJ 5:297). But I think we must keep in mind the context of this remark. Kant is addressing the question of what, if anything, could ground a *duty* to feel the pleasure of beauty (CJ §40, 5: 296). He will go on to argue that only a moral interest in beauty can ground such a duty. But this should not lead us to overlook either the social importance of taste on Kant’s account nor the communitarian elements of Kant’s a priori analysis of taste. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Hopkins 2001 (168-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For discussion of Kant’s rejection of aesthetic testimony, see Hopkins (2001) and Gorodeisky (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For Guyer, aesthetic consensus in one’s community—especially concerning the “canon” of great works of art—will be felt as a constraint on the freedom of the judging subject, even if she is not an aesthetic poser merely trying to conform her judgments to those of others so that she might gain their approval. This is because anything that is “manifestly a rule” threatens aesthetic freedom (1996, 293) and the judgments of others are offered as a standard or rule of taste. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, because a (pure) judgment of taste must rest on a disinterested feeling of pleasure, a judgment that is grounded on a motivation for approval will not in fact be a genuine judgment of taste. As Kant notes, however, we cannot always be sure whether a purported judgment is a pure judgment of taste (5: 216; 5: 239). Kant is consistently concerned with the way in which prejudices lead us to mistake subjective causes of judgment for objective ones, where the main sources of prejudice are inclination, imitation, and custom (JL, 9:75-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, O’Neill 2003; Schneewind 1998; Reath 2006; Wood 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See O’Neill 2003 for further discussion of this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some commentators identify common sense as a feeling with the ability to sense the relation of the faculties through feelings of pleasure or displeasure. See Stoner (2019) and Sethi (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In §20, where Kant is concerned with the modality of judgments of taste, he claims that the necessity of pure judgments of taste presupposes a common sense. If we think that satisfaction is necessarily combined with an object—that every judging subject ought to feel pleasure in it—there must be a feeling of pleasure that can be assumed in all judging subjects. We cannot assume that feelings of pleasure will always accompany the physical sensations of different judging subjects (after all—someone might find a certain color displeasing or find that chocolate tastes disgusting when they are sick). For Kant, the only feeling of pleasure we can assume in all judging subjects is that which accompanies the “free play” of the faculties of imagination and understanding. Thus, pure judgments of taste presuppose common sense as a feeling. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Many commentators emphasize that common sense is indeed a sense or feeling, usually understood as the sense we have of the relation of our mental faculties (Allison 2001; Longuenesse 2006; Kneller 2007; Sethi 2019; Stoner 2019). On Matherne’s view, common sense as a feeling or sense is the result of the free play of the faculties; as a faculty it is the capacity to distinguish between different feelings of pleasure; and as a principle it is the standard we give ourselves in making judgments of taste (namely, that they be grounded in the universally communicable feeling of free play). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Matherne could reply that because this principle requires that we have developed the faculty of common sense (understood as hedonic discrimination), which requires practice with examples, etc., it does provide a certain amount of guidance, as adopting this principle will push us to engage with great works of art. I think this is on the right track but doesn’t go far enough and that we should prefer an account of aesthetic self-legislation in terms of the regulative principle of common-sense, as adopting the latter principle includes engaging with great works of art, but also includes other aesthetic actions and thus provides more guidance to agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kant calls this “heautonomy” to distinguish it from the kind of autonomy that belongs to the faculties of understanding and reason. Understanding and reason legislate principles to their respective domains (nature and freedom), while judgment only legislates to itself. In other words, the a priori principle of purposiveness does not *determine* any objects (CJ Introduction, 5:186). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to Lopes, when the agent adopts the maxims above as guides to her aesthetic life (even though they apply more generally to other contexts as well), this facilitates the harmonious “free play” of the faculties (2021, 11) and is an expression of autonomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Brent Kalar (2008) is one of the few commentators to emphasize the importance of aesthetic debate for the cultivation of taste. Kalar also takes the regulative goal of shared appreciation to structure aesthetic exchanges. Here I go beyond Kalar in suggesting that it is through adopting common sense as a regulative principle that agents express positive autonomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Here I am following Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018) who define aesthetic reasons as “features of the object that (seem to) make it worth liking; those features that (seem to) explain why it is to be appreciated” (2018, 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. To accept the aesthetic invitations of those with whom one stands in aesthetic community cannot does not mean that one simply agrees with their judgments. Instead, aesthetic invitations are always invitations for another to genuinely engage their own faculties and thus judge for themselves. Although we of course want others to share our judgments, we don’t want them to simply voice agreement, we want them to *feel* what we feel. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gorodeisky also emphasizes that the kind of agreement at stake in aesthetic judgment is different in kind from that which is at stake in theoretical or practical judgments. She writes, “In aesthetic judgment, the demand is not just to agree about facts, but to come to share a sensibility: not to assent to another judge’s verdict, but to share the judge’s feelings” (2010, 63). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Vogelmann (2018) argues that we should understand the freedom of the imagination in natural beauty in terms of what the imagination would create if it were free to design a world that fits human faculties. Here, I want to emphasize that there is a further way in which aesthetic experience can be modeled on artistic invention, namely, in terms of how we should understand what it means to follow the “rule” or example that is set by a work of art. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Acknowledgments. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)