Kant on Aesthetic Attention

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(Forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*)

ABSRACT In this paper, I examine the role of attention in Kant’s aesthetic theory in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. While broadly Kantian aestheticians have defended the claim that there is a distinct way that we attend to objects in aesthetic experience, Kant himself is not usually acknowledged as offering an account of aesthetic attention. On the basis of Kant’s more general account of attention in other texts and his remarks on attention in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, I reconstruct Kant’s account of aesthetic attention. On this account, aesthetic attention is simultaneously directed at the form of an object and at the judging subject’s own mental states as she attends to the object. In the experience of beauty, the subject specifically attends to the harmonious relation between the faculties of imagination and understanding.

My aim in this paper is to explore the role that attention plays in Kant’s aesthetic theory.[[1]](#footnote-1) The claim that there is a distinct way that we attend to objects when we experience them aesthetically takes center stage in a number of broadly Kantian aesthetic theories in the twentieth century, in particular, aesthetic attitude theories.[[2]](#footnote-2) Consider Jerome Stolnitz’s well-known characterization of the aesthetic attitude as ‘disinterested and sympathetic attention to an object for its own sake’, which he contrasts with the kind of practical attention that characterizes our everyday engagement with objects (Stolnitz 1960, p. 35). While the emphasis on disinterestedness is clearly inherited from Kant (and from eighteenth-century aesthetics more generally), Kant himself is not usually acknowledged as having an account of aesthetic attention. Nick Zangwill (1992) even suggests that the notion of disinterestedness in aesthetic attitude theories is ‘unKantian’, precisely because it concerns the motivations that drive attention, whereas for Kant, disinterestedness concerns aesthetic *pleasure*.[[3]](#footnote-3) One of the few scholars to highlight the role of attention in Kant’s aesthetics takes it to be continuous with the way we attend to objects in order to conceptualize them, which is thus, even if only implicitly, to deny that Kant endorses a notion of *aesthetic* attention (Zinkin, 2012).

Although Kant does not develop an explicit theory of aesthetic attentionin his analysis of judgements of beauty, we can nevertheless reconstruct Kant’s account of aesthetic attention on the basis of his remarks on attention in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* and the theory of attention he presents in other texts. On this account, Kant not only holds that aesthetic reflection requires sustained attention to an object, he also holds that the *way* we attend to objects in aesthetic reflection is different from the way we attend to objects in order to cognize them. There are two dimensions of this difference. First, when we attend to an object aesthetically, we are free to attend to the rich details of the object’s form that go beyond the general properties that would be salient for perceptual recognition and we are free to attend to the holistic interrelation of these details in forming a unique whole. Second, aesthetic attention is self-reflexive. That is, in aesthetic reflection, we are simultaneously attending to our own mental state as we attend to the form of an object.

The duality of aesthetic attention to the beautiful—that it is both object-directed and self-reflexive—reflects an important duality in Kant’s aesthetics. On the one hand, Kant defends a subjectivist theory of taste, which denies that beauty is a property of objects. When we judge that an object is beautiful, the ground for this judgement is a non-cognitive feeling of pleasure in the free play of our own faculties. But, on the other hand, the discernible properties of an object must ‘make a difference to whether that object is beautiful’.[[4]](#footnote-4) My interpretation of aesthetic attention accommodates this latter point without rejecting Kant’s subjectivism about taste. Beautiful objects are those whose forms can sustain our attention, even in the mere reflection on them, through the way that they entertain the faculties of imagination and understanding. But the basis of the judgement of beauty is nevertheless the feeling of our own harmonious state of mind (and its universal communicability) as we attend to the form of these objects.

A further advantage of reconstructing Kant’s account of aesthetic attention—on which attention is both object-directed and self-reflexive—is that it gives us resources for responding to George Dickie’s well-known denial that there is a distinct way that we attend to objects in aesthetic experience. The object-directed aspect of Kant’s account allows us to emphasize that abstracting from cognitive and practical interests when attending to an object often does make a perceptual difference, because it can alter the representational content of our perceptual states. But the self-reflexive aspect of Kant’s account also allows us to acknowledge that there is a significant non-perceptual difference that occurs when we attend to an object in the course of aesthetic experience.

**Section 1. Kant’s account of pure aesthetic judgement**

Before turning to the role of attention in Kant’s aesthetics, it will help to offer a sketch of Kant’s account of pure aesthetic judgement. For Kant, an aesthetic judgement in general is a judgement made on the basis of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure (KU, 5:204). The ground of these judgements is non-cognitive, because feelings of pleasure and displeasure do not contribute to our cognition of objects. Unlike judgements of the agreeable and the good, which likewise rest on pleasure, judgements of beauty (pure aesthetic judgements) are grounded in a *disinterested* feeling of pleasure, which does not rest on any desire for the object. Although Kant also provides an account of beauty in fine art, in his analysis of pure aesthetic judgements, he is primarily concerned with natural beauty, the experience of which gives us an indication of the purposiveness of nature, a reassurance, as it were, that nature is amenable to our cognitive and moral interests (KU, 5:246).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The disinterested feeling of pleasure that grounds judgements of beauty arises from the subject’s state of mind in reflecting on the form of certain objects. Kant describes this state of mind as one in which the imagination—which is responsible for the perceptual apprehension of the object—and the understanding—the faculty of concepts—are in a harmonious free play and are ‘enlivened through mutual agreement’ (KU, 5:217-19). The agreement of the faculties is a condition of all cognition and is thus a purposive relation, but when this agreement is brought about freely, it is a purposiveness without a purpose (KU, 5:222) We can likewise describe the natural object as being purposive without a purpose. It is *as if* it were designed to animate the imagination and understanding, although we do not actually take a natural object to be the product of any such design. When we judge that an object is beautiful, we do not merely report the pleasure we feel in our state of mind; we think others *ought* to feel this pleasure when apprehending the object. In this sense, we take our own state of mind to be universally communicable. In fact, as we will see, Kant ultimately claims that the judgement of beauty must be grounded in the universal communicability of our state of mind.

It is easy to overlook the role that attention plays in this account, especially because Kant uses the term attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) in only a few places in the text.[[6]](#footnote-6) To anticipate Dickie’s concern, one might think that Kant would simply grant the obvious point that we cannot experience an object aesthetically if we are not paying any attention to it. But I want to suggest that Kant would endorse a stronger claim: the way we attend to an object in aesthetic reflection is different from the way we attend to it when we are guided by cognitive or practical interest. To see why this is so, we must first begin with Kant’s theory of attention.

**2. Kant on Attention**

Kant’s theory of attention emerges from a number of texts throughout his corpus, including the B-Deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, the *Lectures on Logic*, and handwritten notes (*Reflexionen*). If we turn to these texts, we see that attention plays an important role in structuring empirical consciousness on Kant’s account.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Kant’s most extended discussion of attention is in the *Anthropology*, where the role of attention is to bring representations to consciousness. Following Leibniz, Kant thinks that we have representations of which we are not conscious. These are “obscure” representations. He gives the example of seeing a person from a distance and concluding that the parts of his face—eyes, nose, mouth, etc.—belong to one’s representation of the person even though one does not consciously perceive these parts (Anthro, 7: 135). This follows from Kant’s views about the nature of spatial representation, where a representation of a spatial whole already includes all of its parts, even if one has not yet distinguished them. Kant notes that out of the “immense field” of representations that sensibility makes available, only a “few places on the vast *map* of our mind” are illuminated (Anthro,7:135). That is, most of our representations are obscure.

Kant describes two mental operations that bring obscure representations to consciousness and further clarify one’s representations: attention and abstraction. He writes: “the endeavor to become conscious of one’s representations is either the *paying attention to* *(attentio)* or *the turning away from* an idea of which I am conscious (*abstractio*) (Anthro, 7:131). He identifies attention with the “the faculty of apprehending given representations in order to produce intuitions,” where an intuition is the immediate sensible representation of an object (Anthro, 7:138). Kant uses the familiar metaphor of illumination to characterize the effect of attention. This suggests that in perception, attention is responsible for selecting the sensible representations of which we are conscious in our perception of objects. Abstraction is the further ability to set aside representations that would otherwise be present or even dominate one’s perception or thoughts. And while Kant contrasts attention and abstraction, they are clearly complementary mental operations; as other scholars have noted, one can only actively attend to certain representations by abstracting from others.[[8]](#footnote-8) To borrow one of Kant’s examples, I cannot properly attend to a conversation with a friend if I cannot abstract from the gap in her teeth or the missing button on her coat, which might otherwise become the focus of my attention.

While abstraction is always a deliberate act, Kant acknowledges that attention has both a passive (or involuntary) and active dimension. As we will see in what follows, one cannot help but attend to certain representations, e.g., sensations of loud noises or bright colors.[[9]](#footnote-9) Certain objects or events simply grab our attention. In cases where this happens, attention is passive or involuntary. This leads Kant to claim that abstraction, which is always exercised deliberately, is “a far greater faculty than that of paying attention to a representation, because it demonstrates a freedom of the faculty and the authority of the mind, in having the object of one’s representations under one’s control” (Anthro, 7:131).

But this should not lead us to overlook the active dimension of attention. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that in every act of attention ‘the understanding always determines the inner-sense’ (B157n).[[10]](#footnote-10) Inner sense is roughly the *content* of one’s consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness of oneself as a thinking subject. Attention is thus an act of self-affection, because through it one ‘brings representations to consciousness’ (Anthro 7:141 n). As Melissa Merritt notes in her discussion of this passage, the content of one’s empirical consciousness is in part a function of that to which one attends (and that from which one abstracts). She writes, ‘any act of attention will affect one’s phenomenology: attention makes an immediate difference to the sensory character of one’s experience’ (Merritt, 2018, p. 93). Attention (and abstraction) determine one’s phenomenology by determining which representations get selected and combined in consciousness out of the immense field of available representations.

**Section 2. Aesthetic Attention in Kant’s Account of Beauty**

Now, let us turn to our central question. What role does attention play in Kant’s account of beauty? For Kant, aesthetic reflection is ‘mere reflection’ on the way that the form of an object relates to our cognitive faculties (imagination and understanding) (KU, 5: 190; KU, 5: 228). This, in turn, suggests two dimensions of aesthetic attention on Kant’s account. First, it is attention to the *form* of an object that is guided neither by cognitive interest in concept formation—we lack ‘any intention of acquiring a concept from it’—nor by practical interest—reflection is ‘without relation to a concept that contains any intention’ (KU, 5: 190). Second, in aesthetic reflection, attention is self-reflexive, in the sense that we reflect on how the form of the object relates to our own state of mind. In what follows, I explain each of these components of aesthetic attention.

2.1 Attention to an object’s form in aesthetic reflection

Let’s begin with the distinctive way that we attend to objects when we are trying to appreciate them aesthetically. As I noted above, Kant thinks that judgements of beauty are directed at an object’s *form*. He claims, ‘the beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object’ (*KU*, 5:244) and that aesthetic judgement more generally ‘concerns the satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the **form of the object**’ (*KU*, 5: 279, emphasis in the original). There is considerable textual evidence for the interpretation of form in terms of the spatiotemporal, and especially, the spatial features of an object.[[11]](#footnote-11) Kant writes that ‘all form of the objects of the senses […] is either **shape** or **play**: in the latter case, either play of shapes (in space, mime, and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time)’ (KU 5:225, emphasis in the original). He later glosses the ‘form’ of the object in terms of the object’s ‘shape’ (*KU* 5:279) and writes that ‘[b]eauty in nature […] is ascribed to objects only in relation to reflection on their outer intuition, thus only to the form of the surface’ (*KU* 5:375).

More specifically, Kant suggests that we attend to the spatiotemporal composition of the object, i.e., the way in which the rich details of the object’s form can nevertheless be grasped as a unified whole. Although Kant denies that there are any general rules for making judgements of beauty, he follows other eighteenth century theorists in characterizing the form of beautiful objects in terms of unity amidst variety. Consider the following passage:

among nature’s many products those can also be expected to be possible which, just as if they had actually been designed for our power of judgement, contain a form so specifically suited for it that by means of their variety and unity they serve as it were to strengthen and entertain the mental powers (which are in play in the use of these faculties), and to which one has therefore ascribed the name of beautiful forms.

(KU, 5:359)

In the ‘General Remark’ that follows his analysis of judgements of beauty, Kant likewise emphasizes that beautiful natural objects are those whose forms combine the kind of rich detail (variety) that entertains the imagination with the symmetry and regularity (unity) that pleases the understanding (KU, 5: 242).

With this point about form in place, we can better appreciate the role of attention in Kant’s account. The joint operations of attention and abstraction are required in aesthetic reflection precisely because Kant thinks that to make a pure judgement of taste, we need to attend to the form of an object, and must therefore abstract from concepts of the object, as well as from non-formal features of the objects (e.g., colors or pleasing tones in music) that might be gratifying, but which cannot ground a pure judgement of taste. Consider the following passage, in which Kant claims that we have to set aside our concepts of an object in order to appreciate it aesthetically:

Hardly anyone other than the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is supposed to be; and even the botanist, who recognizes it in the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no consideration (*keine Rücksicht*) to this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste.[[12]](#footnote-12)

(KU, 5: 229)

In a passage where Kant dismisses the claim that charms (e.g., pleasing colors or tones) can ‘heighten’ the beauty of an object, he nevertheless grants that ‘charms may certainly be added beside beauty to interest the mind’ especially for those who have yet to ‘cultivate’ taste (KU, 5:225). But he cautions that these charms ‘actually do damage to the judgement of taste if they attract attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) to themselves as grounds for the judging of beauty’ (KU, 5:225).

This suggests that part of what is involved in cultivating taste is learning to attend perceptually to the right aspects of an object, that is, to the *form* of the object and not to its merely agreeable qualities. For example, in judging that a rose is beautiful on Kant’s account, one should attend to the shape and arrangement of its petals, but not to its bright color or sweet smell. We must abstract from these other properties of the object when we actively attend to it in mere reflection on its form. Otherwise, the charms of the representation will ‘repeatedly attract[] attention, where the mind is passive’ (KU, 5:222). This is not to deny that in some cases (especially in works of fine art, to which I will return) colors can be aesthetically relevant properties of the work because of the way that they contribute to the expression of aesthetic ideas. Kant also allows for the possibility that color can contribute to the *form* of an object (KU, 5:224).[[13]](#footnote-13) But where colors and tones contribute to the “charm” of an object and attract attention passively, we must abstract from them as we attend to the spatiotemporal (and especially spatial) form of the object.

Melissa Zinkin (2012) is one of the few scholars to highlight the role of attention in Kant’s aesthetic theory.[[14]](#footnote-14) On her view, the pleasure we feel in “mere reflection” on the form of an object—that is, in aesthetic reflection—is what sustains our attention to an object, where sustained attention is a necessary condition of concept formation. While Zinkin is certainly right that sustained attention is a necessary condition for concept formation on Kant’s account, Kant indicates that the way our attention is guided in aesthetic reflection is different from the way it is guided when we reflect on objects in order to form concepts. Let us review these differences.

Logical reflection is aimed at the formation of concepts and laws, while aesthetic reflection is not. In this sense, logical reflection is constrained by the goal of concept formation, which will lead one to focus on certain aspects of an object’s form. Consider Kant’s example of how the logical acts of comparison, reflection, and abstraction work in generating the concept of a tree:

I see, e.g., a spruce, a willow, and a linden. By first comparing these objects with one another I note that they are different from one another in regard to the trunk, branches and leaves. Etc.: but next I reflect on what they have in common, trunk, branches, and leaves themselves, and I abstract from the quantity, the figure, etc. of these; thus I acquire a concept of a tree.

(JL, 9: 94-5)

As Béatrice Longuenesse (1998) notes in her discussion of this passage, when we are reflecting on the form of an object in order to generate a concept, we privilege features of the object that are similar to other objects we have seen, and we abstract from differences with respect to properties such as quantity and figure (p. 116). In other words, our attention is directed at features of the object that are familiar from others we have seen, and, even if might initially note (and thus bring to attention) the details of an object’s form, we abstract from these details in reflecting on the properties the object shares with others. Admittedly, if we are trying to generate a more specific concept, we will need to attend to the ways in which an object is different from others under falling under the same genus. Even in this case, however, our attention to the details of the object is geared toward finding distinguishing properties which can in principle be shared with other objects.

Aesthetic reflection, by contrast, involves the ‘mere reflection on the form of an object’ without ‘any intention of acquiring a concept for’ the object (KU,5: 190). The imagination is not under the constraint of the understanding but is ‘as it were in play in the observation of the shape’ of the object (KU, 5: 230). That is, we are free to attend to the rich details and intricacies of an object’s form from which we must abstract in logical reflection (or even in mere conceptual identification). Consider the experience of attending to the particular pattern of the arching branches of the willow tree next to the stream; the way that its slender and delicate leaves cascade to the ground or drape just above the water’s surface; the contrast between its wispy leaves and knotty bark. One is not attending to what the willow may have in common with the spruce or linden, or simply noting the different size and shape of its leaves or branches.

Furthermore, in aesthetic reflection, we often attend not only to the details of an object’s form but also the way in which these details are interrelated in forming a unique whole. An appeal to this different way of attending to the form of an object is implicit, if not explicit, in interpretations of Kant that suggest that in judgements of beauty, we represent the form of objects *holistically*[[15]](#footnote-15) On this view, our recognition of the object as a unique whole presupposes the recognition of the way that the *particular* properties of the object contribute to its beauty in their interdependent relation to each other (Gorodeisky, 2011, p. 426). What is important for my purposes is the way that attention is different when we experience an object in this kind of “holistic” manner. We attend not only to further aspects of the object’s form, but we also attend to their particular interrelation. In this case, we often shift our attention back and forth from the object as a whole to its particular properties (Zuckert, 2007, p. 285). By appealing to this kind of shifting attention, we can explain what Kant means when he says that the imagination is ‘as it were at play in the observation of the shape’ of a beautiful object (KU,5:230).

2.2 Aesthetic attention in the case of fine art

Importantly, aesthetic reflection is not just reflection on the object’s form, but also, and essentially, reflection on the way that the object relates to the subject’s own state of mind. Before we get to this point, however, I want to briefly address how this account of aesthetic attention applies to the case of fine art.

Thus far, I have been concerned with attention to the form of beautiful *natural* objects. We can classify this kind of attention as formal aesthetic attention, as it is specifically directed to the spatiotemporal form of an object. Kant also emphasizes the importance of formal attention in the context of fine art. In fact, one of the main differences between merely agreeable arts and fine arts is that the latter requires attention to the (spatiotemporal) composition of the object. Among the agreeable arts—*i.e,* those that are ‘aimed merely at enjoyment’—Kant includes table music, which he claims is an odd kind of music, because what is central to music as a form of art is composition, and yet table music is merely ‘agreeable noise’ (KU, 5:305). It ‘sustains the mood of joyfulness’ at a party, yet ‘without anyone paying the least attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) to its composition’ (KU, 5:305). In his discussion of the pictorial arts (which can include architecture and horticulture) Kant insists that ‘drawing is what is essential’ rather than the pleasing use of color (KU, 5:225).

But in the case of beautiful works of art, attention is not just directed at their form (the design or composition of the work), but also to the aesthetic ideas they present. Kant defines an aesthetic idea as ‘a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, to be adequate to it’ (KU 5:314). Kant claims that artists express aesthetic ideas in an attempt to symbolize ideas of reason, which, given their nature, cannot be directly presented, e.g., ‘invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc.’ (KU 5: 314). An artist cannot depict the logical content of these ideas directly, but instead uses aesthetic attributes to suggest these ideas, where an aesthetic attribute is a ‘supplementary representation of the imagination’ that ‘express[es] the implications connected with’ the idea. Kant gives the example of using an eagle (depicted with lightning in its claws) as an aesthetic attribute of Jupiter, ‘the King of heaven’ (KU, 5: 315).

Aesthetic attributes, taken together as an indirect presentation of a rational idea, ‘yield an aesthetic idea, which serves that idea of reason instead of logical presentation, although really only to animate the mind by opening up for it an immeasurable field of related representations’ (KU, 5:315). This suggests that in attending to a work of fine art, the subject attends not only to the details of the perceptual form of the work, but also to the rich associations and images that are *evoked* by its (usually representational) content, which enable the work to express an otherwise inexpressible idea.[[16]](#footnote-16) As Kant notes, in producing (or engaging) with the aesthetic idea of a work of art, the imagination is ‘free to provide… unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept’ (*KU* 5:317). Consider the chains of associations to which a Vanitas painting gives rise, e.g., Jan Van Kessel the Elder’s *Vanitas Still Life* (c 1665).[[17]](#footnote-17) This painting depicts a bouquet of roses and morning glories between a human skull wrapped in wheat and an hourglass. It is not enough to simply recognize the depicted items under the relevant concepts. One must consider how these items serve as aesthetic attributes that together express the ideas of the finitude of human existence and the vanity of earthly pursuits. In Kant’s words, one must attend to ‘the implications connected with’ the depicted objects. Morning glories, for example, serve as an aesthetic attribute of mortality because their flowers last only a day, but they are also a symbol of the Resurrection, because the buds open with the rising sun. For the work to express its idea, the judging subject who reflects on it must be able to explore these associations, and thus abstract from the logical content of her concepts.

2.3 Self-reflexive attention to one’s state of mind

Let us now return to the point that aesthetic reflection is not just reflection on object’s form (or its form and the ideas it presents), but also to the way that the object relates to the subject’s own state of mind. As we have seen, Kant distinguishes aesthetic reflection from logical reflection by emphasizing that in the former, we do not relate the object to other objects (i.e., in comparison), but ‘relate[] it to [our] cognitive faculties’ (KU, 5:192). This suggests that the structure of our attention to the object is self-reflexive; our attention to its form is at the same time attention to our own inner condition as we engage with it.

Kant emphasizes the self-reflexive dimension of reflection on beautiful objects in several passages. At the beginning of his analysis of beauty, Kant claims that in a pure judgement of taste, the representation of an object “is related entirely to the subject, indeed to its feeling of life, under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure” through which “the mind becomes conscious in the feeling of its state” (KU,5: 204). One might think that this is just to say that through the feeling of pleasure in the experience of beauty, we are aware of our harmonious state of mind. But as Kant indicates in a later passage, it is not just that we are aware of our harmonious state of mind. Instead, this state of mind itself becomes an object of our attention. Kant writes:

an aesthetic judgement is of a unique kind, and affords absolutely no cognition (not even a confused one) of the object, which happens only in a logical judgement; while the former, by contrast, relates the representation by which an object is given solely to the subject, and does not bring to our attention (*zu bemerken gibt*) any property of the object, but only the purposive form in the determination of the powers of representation that are occupied with it.

(KU, 5: 228).

Although Kant claims that the judgement ‘does not bring to our attention any property of the object’, this does not mean that we are not attending to the object and its properties in the experience of beauty. After all, as Kant notes at the end of the passage, our faculties are ‘occupied’ with the object, and as we have seen, this involves sustained yet playful attention to its form. But through the feeling of pleasure in our attention to the object, ‘the purposive form in the determination of the powers of the mind’ itself becomes the object of our attention. By ‘purposive form’ Kant means the harmonious relation of our faculties.

But why think that in addition to simply being *aware* of this harmony through the feeling of pleasure in our attention to the object, we are *also* attending to this pleasurable state of mind? The reason we must also attend to our state of mind is bound up with Kant’s insistence, in the infamous §9, that the judgement of beauty is not grounded in our pleasure in the object but in the pleasure in the universal communicability of our state of mind (KU, 5: 217). In fact, Kant claims that this point is the ‘key’ to the entire critique of taste, for if our pleasure were grounded in the object, our judgement would lack any normative force; it would simply be the immediate pleasure of gratification, not a pleasure we can demand that others feel.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, for Kant, when we make a judgement of beauty, “we are conscious that this subjective relation suited to cognition in general must be valid for everyone,” where this requires “consciousness of the separation of everything that belongs to the agreeable and the good from the satisfaction that remains” (5: 216-18). In other words, Kant is clear that aesthetic reflection is not just directed at the object, but at the *effect* of the object on one’s state of mind.

Let us see if we can summarize that which lies at the heart of Kant’s commitment that our own state of mind itself is the object of our attention in aesthetic attention: the mind is constantly simultaneous engaged in two parallel activities: taking in details of our perceptual manifolds and organizing this into a coherent understanding of the world. Much of the time, these two parallel activities are in tension. The one fights against the other. If there is too much detail, the understanding loses its grip, but too much abstraction for the sake of understanding and the imagination feels cheated. Aesthetic reflection occurs when the mind encounters in an object of experience a relaxation of this tension. Suddenly, the amount of detail present is just what is needed for these two impulses, which so often fight against each other, to be in perfect balance. Taking pleasure in this experience in unlike taking pleasure in the first order experience of an object, because the latter is inherently private and subjective. But a second order experience of feeling one’s faculties to be in harmony is one we can expect will be shared by anyone whose cognitive plight is our own, that is, any judging subject.

An advantage of this interpretation is that it offers us a way of responding to criticisms of subjectivist interpretations of Kant’s aesthetic theory. As Rachel Zuckert (2006) puts the worry, ‘most of us—at least in un-theory laden moments—would be loath to describe aesthetic experience as self-absorbed attention to our own mental states […] If anything, aesthetic experience of the beautiful seems to be a rapt absorption in the *object*’ (p. 608). On the view of aesthetic attention I have attributed to Kant, in the experience of beauty, we *are* attending to our own state of mind and its universal communicability. Importantly, however, attention to our own mental state is not divorced from attention to the details of an object’s form. Indeed, when someone fails to find an object (whether of nature or art) beautiful, usually, our response is to draw their attention to the details of the object. Ultimately, however, the subject can make a judgement of beauty only if she feels pleasure in her own state of mind as she attends to the object. It is a virtue of Kant’s account of aesthetic attention that it combines an objectivist emphasis on the importance of the *object* and its features—after all, it is these to which we appeal in explaining why the object sustains our attention—with the subjectivist emphasis on the fact that what matters is the way that an object *engages* our faculties.

**Conclusion: A Kantian reply to Dickie’s Challenge**

Kant’s account of aesthetic attention is not only of historical interest but should also be of interest to contemporary theorists who think that there is a distinctive way that we attend to objects in aesthetic experience. This is because Kant’s account provides us with resources for responding to a well-known criticism of aesthetic attention. As I noted earlier, a number of broadly Kantian theorists have appealed to aesthetic attention in their explanations of aesthetic experience.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, contemporary accounts of aesthetic attention, even if divorced from aesthetic attitude theories, must nevertheless confront George Dickie’s well-known denial that disinterested attention can make a perceptual difference to one’s experience (Dickie, 1964). Dickie grants that practical interests can sometimes *distract* us from attending to a work of art. But he does not think that the motivations we have for engaging with a work (or natural object) can actually change how we perceptually attend to it, provided that we are in fact attending to the object and are not simply distracted. Someone might listen carefully to a piece of music because she has an exam on it the next day while someone else listens carefully simply for the sake of enjoying the music. The *motives* of the listeners are different, but, for Dickie, there is no difference in their mode of attention. The distinction between ‘disinterested’ and ‘interested’ attention either collapses into the distinction between attention and *inattention* or is simply not a perceptual distinction at all (Dickie, 1964, p. 58).

Dickie’s criticism is aimed at aesthetic attitude theories, and there is an important difference between Kant and aesthetic attitude theorists of the twentieth century. Aesthetic attitude theorists emphasize that we can adopt the aesthetic attitude ‘to any object whatsoever’ (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 35). Kant, by contrast, is primarily concerned with the experience of beauty. He acknowledges that there is a much wider domain of aesthetic experience, but he thinks that most aesthetic experience is characterized by immediate feelings of gratification in objects, and hence does not involve aesthetic reflection on our state of mind in relation to these objects (nor presumably do such objects sustain our attention in the absence of any interest). It is the experience of beauty, in other words, that involves self-reflexive attention to our own state of mind as we attend to the object. I will leave it to another occasion to consider whether we can extend Kant’s account of aesthetic attention to a wider range of aesthetic experiences.

What I want to emphasize for now is that Kant’s account of attention to the beautiful offers us a combination of two different strategies for responding to Dickie that we find in the contemporary literature, where this combination itself makes the view especially attractive. First, along with recent theorists who have questioned Dickie’s overly simplistic model of attention, the Kantian can emphasize that attending to details of an object’s form—details that one would disregard for cognitive or practical purposes—makes a difference to one’s perceptual state (in this case, by bringing further representational content to consciousness). Furthermore, shifting one’s attention back and forth between the object as a unified whole and its particular properties clearly makes a phenomenological difference.[[20]](#footnote-20) But, second, even if one thinks that “non-aesthetic” attention could in some cases be indistinguishable from aesthetic attention in terms of the features to which one attends, the self-reflexive dimension of aesthetic attention would still make a difference to one’s experience, even if not a perceptual one. As Gary Kemp (1999) notes in his response to Dickie, we should reject the assumption that the motivations that drive attention must make a perceptual difference (p. 394). Two people might be closely attending to the details of an object or work of art, but only one of them might be attending to—and reflecting on— her own subjective state in relation to the object and the possibility of sharing this state with others.

We need not accept all of the details of Kant’s theory of taste to accept that what is significant about a great deal of aesthetic experiences is the way they enable us to attend to and reflect on our own cognitive, perceptual, and emotional states *as* we attend to objects. Consider the way that a Cubist painting draws attention to our perceptual process itself as a dynamic rather than static one through the way that we actively attend to the relation of the shapes on the canvas. Or the way that a good novel leads us to a second-order awareness of our own emotional reactions (on which we can then reflect). Or, indeed, the way that reflection on our own mental states can connect us to other judging subjects when we think that these states are not our own private responses but ones that can be shared. Moreover, by highlighting the importance of aesthetic attention in Kant’s account, we can explain at least some aesthetic disagreements in terms of the failure to attend, and to attend properly, to nature and to art.

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1. References to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the A and B pagination of the first and second editions (A/B). All other references to Kant’s other works are to the volume and page of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (KSG). I have used the following abbreviations, KU, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KSG 5); Anthro, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (KSG 7); VL, *Vienna Logic* (KSG 24); JL, *Jäsche Logic* (KSG 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Stolnitz (1960); Scruton (1974); Fenner (1996); Levinson (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While Zangwill is certainly right to emphasize the disinterestedness of pleasure in Kant’s account, I suggest that Kant also acknowledges that our attention to objects in mere reflection on their forms is also disinterested. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is from Brian Watkins’ (2011) gloss on objectivist theories (p. 319). For standard objectivist interpretations, see Jens Kulenkampff (1998) and Karl Ameriks (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kant also holds that artistic beauty gives an indication of the subjective purposiveness of nature, not, however, through the work itself (which, after all, is designed), but through viewing the genius of the artist as a gift of nature (KU, 5: 307). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. KU, 5: 187; KU, 5: 222; KU, 5: 225; KU, 5:305. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a contemporary account of the role of attention in structuring consciousness, see Watzl (2010). My discussion of attention in this section has been informed by Zinkin (2012); Merritt and Valaris (2017) and Merritt (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Zinkin (2012); Merritt and Valaris (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the *Vienna Logic*, Kant describes attention as being ‘excited’ by the liveliness of sensible representations (VL, 24: 842). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We find similar passages in handwritten notes, including *Refl.* 6354 (1796-98) and the *Anthropologie* *Handschrift* included in §7 of the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.*   [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Despite this textual evidence, many interpreters minimize or deny Kant’s aesthetic formalism. For example, Chignell (2007) claims that it is ‘misleading’ to classify Kant as a formalist, because ‘the formal characteristics of the *object* are not of primary importance for determining its aesthetic value’ (p. 415). For a helpful overview of criticisms of Kant’s formalism and defense of a ‘whole-formalist’ interpretation, see Zuckert (2006). For a recent interpretation that emphasizes the importance of spatial form in Kant’s account of beauty, see Geiger and Reiter (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I have modified the Guyer/ Matthews translation, which translates ‘Rücksicht’ as ‘attention.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Elsewhere, Kant refers to the ‘harmonious composition of colors (in the pheasant, in crustaceans, insects, right down to the commonest flowers), which are so pleasant and charming to our eyes’ (KU 5: 347). While not decisive (especially since Kant refers to these as ‘charming’ where charm is linked with the agreeable), this could be taken to suggest that in creating a certain spatial pattern, the colors belong to the form of the object. In this case, the pattern of colors could be an appropriate object of pure aesthetic attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also (Zuckert 2006, p. 621) and (Zuckert 2007, p. 285). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For the articulation of this view, see Zuckert (2006) and Gorodeisky (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Some interpreters have taken Kant’s remark that ‘beauty in general can be called the expression of aesthetic ideas’ (KU 5: 320) to mean that aesthetic ideas are central to the experience even of natural beauty. See, for example, Ruegen and Evren (2005) and Rogerson (2009). While I do not deny that natural beauty also involves the expression of aesthetic ideas for Kant, I take it that this expression is subsequent to the experience of beauty, because it is the beauty of nature that expresses the idea of nature’s purposiveness. By contrast, the beauty of fine art essentially depends on the expression of aesthetic ideas. This still leaves open the possibility that in *some* cases of beauty in nature, aesthetic ideas beyond that of nature’s purposiveness might enter more directly into the experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jan van Kessel the Elder, *Vanitas Still Life*, c. 1665, oil on copper, National Gallery of Art. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kant’s claim in §9 that the pleasure in the object is a consequence of the judgement of beauty has long puzzled commentators. To make sense of this, Paul Guyer (1997) appeals to two different acts of judgement: an initial judgement that the form of the object is pleasing and then a second judgement that determines that this pleasure is in the universally communicable harmony of the faculties (pp. 97-9). By contrast, Hannah Ginsborg (2015) suggests that there is only one act of judgement, ‘namely, the act of self-referentially judging that one’s mental state in the very act of judging is universally communicable’ (p. 42). Like Ginsborg, I want to emphasize the self-reflexive dimension of aesthetic experience (and thus the possibility of a single act of judgment). Unlike Ginsborg, however, I take it that this is self-reflexively attending to one’s own harmonious state as one attends to the object. Guyer’s two-act view separates out these two aspects of attention (attention to the object and attention to one’s own state of mind). For a different approach to the puzzle, see J. Sethi (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See note 2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For this response to Dickie, see Bence Nanay (2016). Nanay develops an account of aesthetic attention in terms of attention that is simultaneously *focused* on an individual object but *distributed* across the properties of the object. ‘Attending to one object only but to a large number of different properties thereof’, for Nanay, ‘is a very different way of allocating our limited processing resources from the standard case’ (p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)