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**Recent Studies on Kant’s third *Critique*:**

Ido Geiger, *Kant and the Claims of the Empirical World: A Transcendental Reading of the Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 2022, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. xiv+225, £75.00 (hb), ISBN: 9781108834261

Kristi Sweet, *Kant on Freedom, Nature, and Judgment: The Territory of the Third Critique*, 2023 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. x +222, $99.99 (hb), ISBN: 9781316511121.

Rudolf Makkreel, *Kant’s Worldview: How Judgment Shapes Human Comprehension*, 2021, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, xii+284, $99.95 (hb), $34.95 (pb), ISBN: 9780810144309.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant claims to “bring [his] entire critical enterprise to an end” through the investigation of the newly discovered a priori principle of the power of judgment, namely, the principle of purposiveness (CJ 5: 170).[[1]](#footnote-1) In this text, Kant discusses a wide variety of topics— the search for empirical concepts and laws, the underdetermination of the empirical manifold by the categories; the gap between nature and freedom; natural beauty; sublimity; genius; fine art; the role of teleology in science, especially for making sense of the organic phenomena that pose a problem for mechanistic explanation; culture; the highest good; the relationship between natural teleology and theology—and it is not clear what unifies these discussions. Indeed, the two parts of the work, the ‘Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment’ and the ‘Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment’, are often read as two separate texts (one dealing with beauty, the other with biology).

One response to the question of unity is to simply see Kant as offering an analysis of different types of reflective judgement. Although there are striking and important differences in the interpretative frameworks they bring to the text, Ido Geiger, Rudolf Makkreel and Kristi Sweet all offer new insights by taking a deeper look at what unifies the third *Critique*. This is especially true of Geiger and Sweet, whose books are exclusively focused on the third *Critique* and are organized around the problem of unity, while Makkreel’s book is concerned with the role of judgement throughout Kant’s corpus. For this reason, I will focus more on the interpretations offered by Geiger and Sweet. In what follows, I briefly summarize each book and provide a critical analysis of the central interpretative claims of each, with an eye towards some of the common themes and topics of these works. I then offer some concluding remarks about the current state of research on Kant’s third *Critique*.

In *Kant’s Worldview*, Makkreel argues that the role of reflective judgement is to help us “attain a more comprehensive worldview” (243). While the task of comprehension is usually assigned to the faculty of reason, Makkreel claims that Kant increasingly assigns this task to reflective judgment. Makkreel’s book traces the development of Kant’s account of judgment within the context of a picture of Kantian philosophy as cosmical. By this, Makkreel means that Kant’s philosophy is ultimately concerned with “the reflective appropriation of wisdom” (209) in developing a “worldview that can give further meaning to his world-concept by exploring our proper place in the world” (243). I’m going to focus my remarks on chapters 9-12 of the book, which is where Makkreel addresses Kant’s account of judgement in the third *Critique*.

In line with his earlier work on Kant, Makkreel understands reflective judgement as primarily orientational. He writes that “in the third Critique, transcendental reflection is about how to properly orient ourselves within the phenomenal world we inhabit” (127). Because reflective judgement is orientational, rather than foundational—that is, it provides provisional horizons for making sense of ourselves and the world rather than determinate cognition—Makkreel suggests that it can help us “to comprehend more than we can understand” (134). For example, the symbolic presentation of ideas that belongs to the creation and reception of artworks allows us to make “interpretative claims that go beyond *our experience*” (122). Reflective judgements about sublimity, in particular, involve a kind of imaginative glimpse of an all-embracing world, even if such a thing is beyond the limits of cognition.

Some of Makkreel’s discussions in chapters 9-12 will be familiar to readers of his book *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*. In addition to the account of reflective judgement as orientational, Makkreel suggests that the concept of life serves as a unifying theme of the third *Critique*. According to Makkreel, the first part of the third *Critique* concerns the enlivening feeling in aesthetic judgements while the second part concerns the life of organisms. Moreover, he again suggests that the feeling of life in aesthetic judgements frames our understanding of biological life in teleological judgments (135).

One new feature of Makkreel’s account of reflective judgement concerns what he calls the modal dimension of orientation, which he locates in Kant’s metaphorical use of the terms ‘field’, ‘territory’, ‘domain’, and ‘habitat’, in the Introduction to the third *Critique*. Makkreel claims, “An analysis of how Kant uses these terms here indicates that a field is a sphere of mere possibilities, a territory defines what is possible for us, and thus actualizable; a domain is governed by necessary laws; and a habitat is a local sphere of contingent but familiar order” (115). He characterizes these divisions in terms of judgemental contexts: “Kant’s four contexts of field, territory, domain, and habitat specify the empirical world in modal terms but still belong to it. …Since these contexts can intersect and partly converge, the problem for judgment becomes that of asking what each context can add to our comprehension of the world” (127).

While it is true that Kant uses modal language when introducing this terminology, it seems to me that what he is primarily concerned with is normativity, in particular, Kant wants to explain the distinct kind of normativity that belongs to the power of judgment, even though this faculty “can claim no field of objects as its domain” (Kant, CJ 5: 177). Understanding and reason both have their domains, that is, the parts of the territory of possible experience over which they are legislative. Although reflective judgment lacks a domain, because it is not legislative over objects, it nevertheless has a “territory”, that is, reflective judgements are about the same objects of possible experience over which understanding and reason are legislative. I take Kant’s point to be that judgements of reflection are normative, even if they do not determine these objects. For example, a judgement of beauty is directed at an object about which we can also make cognitive judgments. And although a judgement of beauty does not add to our cognition of the object, it makes a normative demand on other judging subjects. Another worry I have for Makkreel’s account is that he at times characterizes reflective judgement as “supplemental” to determinant judgement and suggests that the role of reflective judgement is to set priorities, interpret “the extent to which our overall experience should rely on each of these contexts” (127), and “assess the most relevant factors in a situation” (128). But this characterization makes it sound like reflective judgement is playing a merely pragmatic role that is downstream of cognition, rather than playing an essential, if only regulative, role in cognition itself.

In her well-written and engaging book, *Kant on Freedom, Nature, and Judgment*, Kristi Sweet adopts a similar interpretative framework to the one we find in Makkreel, while also providing a highly original interpretation of the text. In her Introduction, Sweet notes that interpreters tend to fall into one of two camps: those who approach the text with broader systematic concerns and those who are more narrowly focused on epistemological problems. Makkreel and Sweet are certainly in the first camp; they are both concerned not just with our understanding of nature, but with larger questions of meaning and orientation. Makkreel and Sweet emphasize the more expansive conception of nature that belongs to reflective judgement and the role this plays in making us feel at home in the world.

Sweet argues that the “interpretative master key” for unlocking the unity of the third *Critique* lies in the problem of hope (*Kant on Freedom, Nature, and Judgment*, 2). This is a striking claim, for as Sweet acknowledges, Kant only mentions hope a few times in the text, and on the face of it, this is not at all what Kant is concerned with. But as the discussion proceeds, it becomes clear that what unifies the text is Kant’s concern with an expansive, or cosmic understanding of nature, one that answers to the problem of hope. Hope is required to fill in the gap between what reason demands (e.g., an unconditioned whole of nature or the realization of the highest good) and what we can legitimately know. The primary object of hope, for Sweet, is that nature is amenable to our moral interests (29). In its theoretical register, reason hopes for a completed system of nature; in its practical register, reason hopes that this very system of nature has a moral cause that will thus allow for our moral ends to be realized. In both cases, hope helps to rationalize reason’s pursuits, by presenting reason’s ends as possible. But to present these ends as possible, there must be some ground for hope. This is where reflective judgement enters the picture.

Reflective judgement suggests the real possibility of a supersensible unity to nature and freedom even though such a unity is beyond the limits of cognition (*Kant on Freedom*, 57). Sweet goes further than Makkreel in mining Kant’s geopolitical metaphors to advance her argument. According to Sweet, “judgments of reflection form a third independent sphere of human life that functions as both *transition between* and *ground* of nature and freedom” (3) This sphere is what Kant refers to as a “territory”, which Sweet characterizes as “the portion of land that while not under the authority of any particular enforcement may still be subject to lawfulness in general; it is the region of rightfulness as such” (43). This relates to the problem of hope as follows. For Sweet, hope requires real possibility. Reflective judgements, she claims, can suggest the real possibility of the supersensible ground of nature and freedom because they are directed at empirical representations (which are required to establish real possibility), yet are made in the territory, and thus not under the domain of the understanding and not limited by its boundaries (57-65). For example, when we make a judgement of beauty, the object appears to us as if it were created in accord with some end. Of course, we cannot make a determinate judgement that there is any such end. But reflective judgement is not limited by this constraint; thus, at the level of reflection, the beautiful object suggests that the ground of appearances is ordered or orderly.

Although I was initially skeptical of Sweet’s claim that the problem of hope is the unifying thread of the third *Critique*, I found myself increasingly sympathetic to it. There is certainly a lot of interpretative pay-off to Sweet’s approach, for she connects otherwise disparate topics by seeing them as concerned with the expansive or cosmic understanding of nature that speaks to the problem of hope. Judgements of beauty reassure us of a fittingness or accord between our faculties and nature (75). Kant’s discussion of genius and fine art appeals to a conception of nature that is “communicative, expressive, excessive, and life and spirit-giving” and that “answers the question of hope with the portrayal of nature as superabundant, generous, and gift-bestowing” (132). The *sensus communis* reassures us of sharing a world with others, it is “the sense we have that our judgment is shared, that we belong to a community of those who have the world the way that we do” (126). Organisms point toward the purposiveness of nature as a whole, with human morality as its end (176). And although we cannot prove the existence of God, the meaningful and ordered nature that reflective judgement presents us with warrants our faith “in a God that causes such an order” (199), which thereby supports the hope that our moral interests can be realized in this world.

I did, however, have some questions about the details of her interpretation, beginning with her claim that reflective judgement suggests the real possibility of the supersensible. It seems to me that any judgement about real possibility is a determining judgement of the understanding. It may be that the reflection on nature somehow points to the idea of a supersensible ground that allows for the unity of nature and freedom, but this idea belongs solely to reflection and is not suitable for a determining judgement, which, as Kant argues in the first *Critique*, requires that something “agrees with the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with intuitions and concepts” (A218/ B265). Even though reflective judgments are directed at empirical representations, as Sweet emphasizes, this does not mean that they can ground a judgment about the real possibility of a supersensible ground of those representations. I do not take Sweet to claim that they do. My point is that if hope requires a *judgement* of real possibility, then what reflective judgement provides will not be enough.

In her discussion of judgements of beauty, Sweet argues that the Ideal of Beauty “is the highest measure, and thus also the pattern, of all judgments of taste” (92) and claims that “all judgments of taste follow this pattern and thus invoke the notion of life and refer to it as their measure” (92-3). For Kant, the archetype of human beauty is a figure that is not just physically attractive, but through which an underlying morally good character is made visible. Because the ideal in part depends on a representation of the standard or characteristic features of the species, judgements of beauty made in accordance with it are not pure. Furthermore, the Ideal of Beauty is limited to judgements of human beauty, because only the human being “has the end of its existence in itself” (CJ 5:233). It is thus hard to see how this ideal can be the pattern or measure of all judgments of taste. Nor do I think it is right to say that we judge that all beautiful things are “lifelike”, as Sweet claims (92). Yet, I think there is something to the connection that Sweet draws between the Ideal of Beauty and pure judgements of taste. After all, Kant says that all beauty expresses aesthetic ideas (CJ, 5:320), and in the case of natural beauty, what he seems to have in mind is the way that moral ideas are made visible through natural beauty. There is, then, an analogy here to the Ideal of Beauty: just as we can somehow ‘see’ underlying moral character in the features of someone’s face, we can ‘see’ in natural beauty an expression of moral ideas.

Finally, while I found Sweet’s normative analysis of Kant’s geopolitical metaphors to better accord with the text than Makkreel’s, some of her claims about the territory of judgment were perplexing. Consider the following passage:

The objects that belong to the territory of the power of judgment—that reside outside the city walls—and the judgments that arise there are explicitly about the ground the territory offers to the theoretical and practical domains. Thus, judgments of reflection are about the appearance of the ground of the two parts of philosophy; this ground is what allows for a transition between them, and between freedom and nature. (*Kant on Freedom*, 48)

Even if our reflection on certain objects *suggests* a ground of nature and freedom, this doesn’t mean that judgements of reflection (e.g., about beautiful objects or organisms) are “explicitly about” the appearance of the ground (at least not if we understand this de dicto). When I judge that an eye is for seeing (a reflective teleological judgement), for example, this is not a judgement about the appearance of the ground of nature and freedom. Nor do I know what it means to say that theoretical and practical philosophy “are both established or erected on this ground” (45), unless this is just to say that determining judgements also depend on reflective judgement.

Ido Geiger emphasizes the latter point in *Kant and the Claims of the Empirical World*. Geiger is among those who take a primarily epistemological approach to the third *Critique*, and his book is essential reading for anyone interested in Kant’s account of the conditions of empirical experience. Although the categories provide us with the conditions of experience in general, crucial questions remain about how we form and systematize the empirical concepts and laws through which we cognize nature in its particularity. Geiger provides an original and thought-provoking interpretation of the third *Critique* that attempts to answer these questions.

According to Geiger, the unifying thread of the third *Critique* is Kant’s concern with establishing that the a priori principle of purposiveness is, although regulative, nevertheless a transcendental condition of the possibility of our particular experience of nature. Geiger argues Kant’s “deduction” of the principle of purposiveness begins in the Introduction to the third *Critique* but is only completed in the ‘Critique of the Teleological Judgment’. Although Kant appears primarily to be concerned with the role of teleology in our reflection on organisms in this part of the *Critique*, Geiger argues that Kant’s ultimate concern is in fact the conceptual purposiveness of nature as a whole, namely, the assumption that nature is organized as a system that we can grasp. In Chapter Four, Geiger presents a detailed argument for the claim that Kant grounds the assumption of the conceptual purposiveness of nature in the discursivity of human understanding. In Chapter Five, Geiger argues that pure aesthetic judgements not only depend on the same capacities as cognitive judgements but in fact play a role in the process leading to empirical cognition (140). For Geiger, this explains why the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgment’ belongs to a work that is concerned with the problem of empirical experience and judgement.

As Geiger is well-aware, the most controversial part of his interpretation is the claim that “pure aesthetic judgments belong among the transcendental conditions of empirical knowledge” (5). What leads Geiger to this striking claim is the following line of reasoning: pure judgements of taste are primarily directed at the spatial forms of objects; the spatial forms that give rise to aesthetic pleasure are often the characteristic shapes of natural kinds; because of this, we are more perceptually attuned to the shapes of natural kinds, which in turn allows *“for a first non-conceptual sorting of natural objects, which underwrites our conceptual grasp of natural kinds”* (147). Thus, although pure judgements of taste are nonconceptual, they are a condition of empirical experience because they ground our initial perceptual sorting of objects into kinds, which is necessary for empirical concept formation.

There is certainly lots of textual evidence (which Geiger cites) for the claim that pure judgements of taste primarily concern the *spatial forms* of natural objects (see for example: CJ 5:225; 5:244; 5:279; 5:375). And as Geiger also notes, many (although not all) of Kant’s examples of beautiful objects are natural kinds (trees, birds, plants, crustaceans, etc.). Prima facie, however, Geiger’s interpretation is hard to square with Kant’s insistence that a pure judgement of taste is neither “grounded on any available concept of the object *nor does it furnish one*” (CJ 5:190, italics added). Or that we make such a judgement through mere reflection “without any intention of acquiring a concept” from the object (Kant, CJ 5:190).

There are further concerns as well. Geiger focuses on the aesthetic pleasure that we feel when apprehending spatial forms that are characteristic of natural kinds. Even if it is right that we often respond to the forms that are characteristic of natural kinds with pleasure, this does not mean that we are making pure aesthetic judgments when we do so. A pure aesthetic judgement, after all, involves more than a sub or even semi-conscious aesthetic response to an object, it requires conscious reflection on the form of the object and its relation to one’s own mental state. Furthermore, the pleasure at stake is not the first-order pleasure in the object, but pleasure in the universal communicability of our mental state (CJ, 5:217). In other words, we might grant that aesthetic pleasure plays a role in the initial hypotheses we make about where the joints of nature are to be found without thinking that pure aesthetic judgements themselves play a role in this process (an alternative that Geiger himself acknowledges in his conclusion).

Yet, it is worth noting that Geiger is motivated by a deep problem in Kant’s account of empirical concept formation. According to Kant, we form empirical concepts through the logical acts of comparison, reflection, and abstraction. In the *Jäsche Logic*, Kant offers the following account of this process:

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, the branches, the leaves, etc.; but next I reflect on that which they have in common among themselves, 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, 9:95).

As is often-noted, Kant’s account is unsatisfactory. Why, for example, do we choose the spruce, the willow, and the linden as the appropriate objects of comparison (and focus on the trunk, branches and leaves rather than any other number of features these objects might have in common) if we don’t yet possess the concept <tree>? One tempting way to supplement Kant’s account is to claim that natural dispositions to associate explain our initial grouping of objects for comparison. In a series of articles collected in *The Normativity of Nature*, Hannah Ginsborg argues that this naturalistic approach lacks the normativity that is essential to a Kantian account of concept formation. Ginsborg appeals to what she calls “primitive normativity”, the feeling that we are associating as we ought even in the absence of a determinate concept, to explain how natural dispositions to associate acquire their normative flavor on Kant’s account (*Normativity of Nature*, 84-88). And Ginsborg appeals to Kantian judgements of beauty as the model for this kind of normativity. In such a judgement, we take our mental activity to be in line with a rule that is universally valid yet without being able to articulate the rule.

Although I do not think that Geiger is right to claim that aesthetic judgements themselves play a role in empirical concept formation, several features of his account provide an attractive alternative to Ginsborg’s appeal to primitive normativity. First, I think Geiger is right that many of our initial groupings of objects–the input, as it were, to the logical acts of comparison, reflection, and abstraction—are based on our natural responses to the characteristic spatial forms of objects.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same time, Geiger also emphasizes that the aesthetic pleasure that mediates our initial responses is not “a brute natural fact about us of the kind that we share with animals” (209). We might go a step further here and say that even though our initial responses to objects are nonconceptual (and can thus non-circularly explain how we form empirical concepts), they are still informed by our cognitive capacities.

Second, and this brings me to my final point, Geiger emphasizes that our initial groupings are not *conceptually* normative, and that full normativity only arises when we take rational responsibility for the way we group objects, which in turn requires commitment to revise, refine, and correct for our initial groupings as we systematize our concepts and search for the underlying causal explanations for the similarities we observe. Thus, rather than take the normativity at stake to be primitive, Geiger takes it to depend on the downstream negotiation of conceptual norms that occurs within a community of judging subjects who take rational responsibility for their initial perceptual responses to objects. This, I think, is as it should be and is one of many reasons that scholars interested in empirical concept formation and normativity in Kant are well-advised to look carefully at Geiger’s account.

In conclusion, I want to say a few things about what these books indicate about the current scholarship on Kant’s third *Critique*. First, the originality of the interpretations that Geiger and Sweet present will likely produce welcome new lines of questioning among scholars. Indeed, I was excited to see discussions of topics that are relatively neglected in other interpretations in both of their accounts e.g., the Ideal of Beauty (Sweet) and aesthetic normal ideas (Geiger). Second, one thing that was missing from all three works was a more historical approach to some of the puzzles of the text. For example, we cannot fully understand Kant’s discussion of the role teleology in judging organisms without situating this in the context of Georg Forster’s earlier criticisms of Kant’s methodology of science.

This is not, however, a criticism of these books. One of the things that struck me when reading them together is that Kant’s text calls for a variety of different approaches: systematic, epistemological, and historical. In the 1787 letter to Reinhold, in which Kant describes the discovery of “a new sort of a priori principles” that will become the subject matter of the *Critique of the Power of Judgmen*t, he writes that the analysis of the faculties of the human mind “allowed me to discover something systematic, which has given me ample material at which to marvel and if possible to explore, sufficient to last me for the rest of my life” (Br, 10:514). It is equally true that Kant has given scholars ample material at which to marvel and explore. The different interpretative frameworks and approaches that we find in Sweet, Makkreel, and Geiger’s books all reveal the depth and richness of Kant’s third *Critique*.

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1. References to Kant’s works are given by volume and page number of the *Akademie* edition. Translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As I have argued elsewhere, it is no accident that Kant’s example of an empirical schema in the first *Critique* (that which belongs to the concept <dog>) is that of the characteristic *shape* of a quadruped (Williams, “The Shape of a Four-Footed Animal”).  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)