**Kant on the Cognitive Significance of Beauty and Genius**

by Ted Kinnaman

In this paper I will defend two closely related claims. The first claim, to which the first section of the paper is devoted, is that for Kant taste is a sort of cognition, that is, a form of awareness of reality for which questions of justification are appropriate. Nevertheless,

In our appreciation of natural beauty we are aware of the suitability of appearances for inclusion in a rational system, albeit in a way that is subject to important limitations in comparison with scientific cognition. In the second section of the paper, I will use this reading of Kant’s theory of taste to throw new light on Kant’s account of genius later in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.”

Kant equates the concept of beauty with that of “subjective formal purposiveness.” (§15) In order to understand the cognitive significance of taste on Kant’s view, it is essential to understand what he means by ‘purposiveness.’ In the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* Kant says that the purpose of that work is to complete his philosophical system by providing a transcendental deduction for what he calls the “principle of the purposiveness of nature.” (Intro., §IV) This principle is the proposition that

particular empirical laws must [...] be viewed in terms of such a unity as if they too had been given by an under­standing (although not ours) so as to assist our cogni­tive powers by making possible a system of ex­perience in terms of particular natural laws. [V:180]

Hereafter I will refer to this as the PPN. To say that something is purposive or *zweckmäßig* is to say that it is well suited for a particular end or purpose; for Kant, to say that nature is purposive is to say that the objects of our experience are well suited for the end of being integrated into a unified system. The goal of the *Critique of Judgment* is thus to give an argument for the purposiveness of nature, and thus of the possibility of constructing such a system. Specifically, he says that, even after the completion of his theoretical philosophy, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and his moral philosophy, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, there still remain two crucial questions. The first concerns the possibility of unifying theoretical understanding and practical reason, or of making a “transition” from one to the other. Put in less Kantian terms, Kant is asking whether we can have grounds for thinking that it is possible to achieve in this world the goals that moral reason sets for us. (Intro., §III) The second, seemingly quite distinct question, concerns the status of empirical scientific laws. The first *Critique*, Kant says, has established that the categories, as a priori concepts, necessarily have application to objects of experience, because this is a necessary condition of the possibility of experience. The objective validity of empirical concepts, however, does not follow from the possibility of experience; nevertheless, because, as laws, they express a necessary relation between appearances, they must have an a priori basis. (Intro., §IV; V:180) The problem is that both of these questions seem to require us to extend our knowledge beyond the limits of possible experience, whereas it was the chief thesis of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that such an extension is illegitimate. Ideas of reason allow of what Kant calls merely regulative use, as guides for our action in and investigation of the world, in contrast to the constitutive use he grants the categories of the understanding. The essential difference between regulative and constitutive principles is that the objective validity of the latter can be shown to be a condition of the possibility of experience, while no such demonstration can be given for regulative principles.

The principle of the purposiveness of nature is intended to solve both of these problems. It can accomplish this because both are aspects of reason’s overall task of systematizing human cognition. This systematization consists in organizing concepts in ever-broader frameworks, with more specific concepts included under more general ones, with ideas of pure reason, as it were, at the apex of the pyramid. The goal is a sort of “theory of everything,” with an exhaustive inventory of all the sorts of human cognition (the most important examples being natural science and moral reason); a clear understanding of the essential features of each component; a complete application of each sort of cognition to every possible particular; and an account of the mutual relations and limitations of each component. But while the broad outlines of the system can be established a priori, the complete systematization of experience must always remain a goal, for the ideas of pure reason that express this ultimate unity can only be approached as “asymptotes,” never entirely to be reached. This account of reason therefore makes of it a faculty for guiding human conduct rather than one that produces knowledge in its own right.

But while it is the task of the *Critique of Judgment* to provide a transcendental deduction for the PPN, this cannot be construed as overturning the central thesis of Kant’s transcendental idealism, namely that our knowledge is limited to objects of possible experience. Kant’s adherence to this thesis is reflected in a couple of important features of the *Critique of Judgment*. First, the PPN itself is a merely regulative principle, and thus not a condition of the possibility of experience. Second, the PPN is the central focus of the critique of the faculty of *judgment*, not of reason. Indeed, one of the startling changes in doctrine between the first *Critique* and the third is that whereas in the earlier work the task of unifying human cognition is assigned to reason, in the later work it is assigned to (reflective) judgment, indicating the impossibility of demonstrating any direct correspondence between reason’s concepts and the world of our experience. But, these limitations aside, in providing a transcendental deduction for the PPN, the *Critique of Judgment* will be demonstrating the possibility of achieving reason’s ends, and thus of applying reason to the world of our experience.[[1]](#endnote-1)1

The most fundamental objection to identifying the subjective formal purposiveness attributed to the object in judgments of taste with the purposiveness of Kant discusses in the Introduction, and thus to seeing taste as a mode of cognition is that, whatever the relation between taste and genius, given the subjectivity of taste, it seems impossible that judgments of taste could provide cognition in any sense at all. Kant denies strenuously that pure judgments of taste provide cognition of objects, and he maintains that the concept of beauty is a merely indeterminate one. But it is a mistake, I think, to infer from this that judgments of taste are not *about* objects, or that judgments of taste are not cognitive in a broader sense than the one Kant employs. In a judgment of taste, says Kant,

we do not use understanding to refer the presentation [*Vorstellung*] to the object [*Objekt*] so as to give rise to cognition; rather, we use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Hence a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but rather an aesthetic one... [§1; V:203]

But it is not necessary to read Kant’s frequent claim that in the judgment of taste we “refer [*beziehen*] the presentation” to our feeling of pleasure or displeasure to mean that the judgment of taste is in any sense *about* that feeling. There is a point of language to consider here. The German verb ‘sich beziehen’ is generally, and correctly, translated as ‘to refer.’ But I do not think it is necessary to take this to mean *linguistic* reference. He *may* mean this, but I believe that my reading, according to which to say that we “refer” the judgment of taste to our feeling of pleasure or displeasure is to say that this feeling serves as the evidence for the judgment, is also compatible with the text. Far from being in any sense about the judging subject, judgments of taste are judgments about appearances, defined as “the undetermined object [*Gegenstand*] of an empirical intuition.”[A20/B34] In his explanation of the claim that the judgment of taste is aesthetic, in his discussion of the role of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure in grounding such judgments, and in drawing the contrast between determinate and indeterminate concepts, Kant’s concern is primarily epistemological, having to do specifically with the sort of *evidence* that can be given for judgments of taste. Kant’s crucial claim in §1, for example, that the feeling of pleasure or displeasure is the “determining ground” [*Bestimmungsgrund*] of the judgment of taste is most naturally read, I think to suggest that the feeling is the evidence or ground for, not the subject of, the judgment. Similarly, what distinguishes an indeterminate from a determinate concept is that the former “does not allow us to cognize *and prove* anything concerning the object”; by contrast, an “objective principle of taste,” were such a thing possible, “would allow us *to guide, to test, and to prove* [our] judgments.” [V:340-1; emphasis added] By saying that the concept of beauty is indeterm­inate Kant is not claiming that the concept of taste is in any way vague. On the contrary, both in the case of a judgment involving a determi­nate concept and one involving the indeterminate concept of subjective formal purposiveness, appearances are judged to have a particu­lar property (specifically, the property of subjective formal purposiveness, which reveals a “technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it as a system in accordance with laws” [§23; V:246]), but in the former case one asserts that the correctness of the judgment can be demonstrated by appealing to a rule under which the appearances fall, whereas in a judg­ment of taste, employ­ing an indeterminate concept, no such rule is available.[[2]](#endnote-2)2

In the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” I take Kant to be defending what might be called a middle position on the relation of aesthetic judgment to cognition. On the one hand, natural beauty reveals to us something real about the world, namely its fitness for rational systematization. On the other hand, this cognition is different from cognition in the stricter sense, because unlike all other judgments our pure judgments of taste cannot be supported by appeal to determinate rules, but only to the subjective feeling of the harmony of the faculties.

Having considered Kant’s account of the relation between taste and cognition in very gener­al form, I turn now to looking at the embodiment of the cognition of beauty, namely genius. Kant’s account of genius has received rather less attention than it deserves, partly, perhaps, because discussion of genius no longer figures in philosophical aesthetics, and partly because Kant’s attitude toward genius is generally regarded as entirely negative. Two points are insufficiently appreciated: First, in 18th century German discourse, genius was understood not merely as an aesthetic category, but more broadly as a form of nonrational cognition. Second, Kant’s account, while denying genius nonrational access to reality, nevertheless accords it an important role *within* the overall theory according to which, as we have seen, beauty serves as evidence of reason’s grasp on reality.

Somewhat confusingly, Kant offers several competing definitions of genius, but I think it is helpful to start with the claim that genius is a “faculty for the production of beautiful objects.” (§48; V:311) Indeed, Kant goes so far as to say that “beautiful art is art of genius.” (§46; V:307) Works of genius are construed in terms of their relation to rules: They are original, which means that not only are they not produced by following a rule (that is, by imitating the work of an earlier master), but furthermore the individual genius herself cannot state the rule according to which her work is beautiful. But, once created, the work of genius serves as a rule or exemplar for other, less gifted artists, who learn through imitating it. Kant’s explanation of the exemplary status of works of genius reveals their importance for his account of the relation between taste and reason. “Spirit,” he says, is an essential component of genius, and he characterizes spirit as the faculty for the “presentation of aesthetic ideas.” (§49; V:314) An aesthetic idea is, he says, the counterpart [*Gegenstück*] or “pendant” of an idea of reason: Whereas rational ideas are concepts for which no object can be given in intuition, aesthetic ideas are “representations of the imagination,” whose content cannot entirely be captured in a concept, but which “provides much to think about.” More specifically, aesthetic ideas

strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation [*Darstellung*] of concepts of reasons (of intellectual ideas) which gives them the appearance of an objective reality. (§49; V:314)

By saying that the products of genius offer for ideas of reason only the *appearance* of objective reality, Kant stops short of putting the ideas on an equal epistemological footing with the categories of the understanding, whose objective reality was proven in the first *Critique*. But it is clear from Kant’s account that in her creative activity the artistic genius nevertheless has genuine insight into the rational character of reality.

This might seem surprising, for several reasons. First, as Kant emphasizes, genius is a talent for creating objects, not for judging them. Specifically, whereas “a natural beauty is a beautiful thing, an artistic beauty is a beautiful representation of a thing,” (§48; V:311) a passage that incidentally reinforces the impression that Kant takes beauty to be a feature of objects. How then can objects created by humans be taken to reflect the nature of the nonhuman world? Second, the connection Kant draws between aesthetic and rational ideas is a psychological one: Aesthetic ideas “set the faculty of intellectual ideas in motion” so that it can associate more with a given representation than can be captured in concepts. Finally, judgments of taste do not employ a determinate concept, whereas “since art always presupposes an end in the cause (and its causality), a concept must first be the ground of what the thing is supposed to be.” (§48; V:311)

But on a closer examination of the relation between taste and genius, and between natural and artistic beauty, this opposition is no longer so clear. Kant actually takes a somewhat equivocal position on the relation between natural and artistic beauty. As noted, judgments of taste concerning objects in nature do not entail the application of a determinate concept to those objects, whereas artistic creation always requires that the work be preceded by a concept of the intended product. But to judge that something is purposive is to judge that it appears *as if* it were the product of an intelligent being acting toward an end, that is, with a concept that preceded the object, while works of fine art are successful to the extent that they do *not* seem to be intentional in this sense. (§45; V:306-7) Thus “beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature.” (§45; V:306) This does not mean that only representational art is good art, but it does mean that an artwork is beautiful only by virtue of its connection to reality. Nor is it quite right to contrast the creativity of the artistic genius with the givenness of natural beauty. Kant describes genius as a talent: it is innate rather than learned, and even after a work is finished the genius is unable to state the ruled he followed in creating it. This is why Kant summarizes this relationship by saying that through genius “*nature* gives the rule to art.” (§46; V:307) Finally, it is important, in understanding the relation of natural beauty and artistic genius, to remember that while taste is not sufficient for genius --“spirit” is also needed– it is nevertheless necessary: Taste serves as a “discipline” of genius,

clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished; but at the same time it gives genius guidance as to where and how far it should extend itself if it is to remain purposive; and by introducing clarity and order into the abundance of thoughts it makes the ideas tenable, capable of an enduring and universal approval, of enjoying a posterity among others and in an ever progressing culture. (§50; V:319)

The mere ability to produce artworks unlike anything done previously does not constitute genuine genius, Kant is saying. Instead, if the genius’ work is to be truly beautiful, it must please universally, “in the mere judging,” and so it must accord with subjective conditions of all cognition. In short, the artist strives to produce representations that are subjectively formally purposive. It is in this spirit that Kant describes genius as “the natural endowment of a subject for the *free* use of his cognitive faculties.” (§49; V:318)

But while Kant’s doctrine of genius inherits the philosophical significance of the theory of taste, it also shows analogous limits. For while Kant certainly wanted to accord genius some role in the cognition of the purposiveness of nature, he just as certainly did not want to raise this cognition to anything like the level of clarity and certainty granted to scientific and moral cognition. Part of the explanation of this is systematic, in that one of Kant’s chief concerns in the *Critique of Judgment* is to address the question of reason’s hold on reality without giving up the thesis that our knowledge is limited to objects of possible experience. Part of the explanation however is also historical, namely that in Germany at that time genius was the organizing idea for a number of writers challenging the Enlightenment creed to which Kant was committed. The account of genius in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” is intended to show that, properly understood, genius must be understood as a complement of reason rather than as a challenge to it.

In order to show how Kant hopes to achieve this it will be helpful to focus on the notion of genius as it appears in the thought of one of Kant’s contemporaries, Johann Georg Hamann. Although Kant mentions Hamann nowhere in the *Critique of Judgment*, I think the comparison is justified for a couple of reasons. First, Hamann’s writings were highly influential for a number of important thinkers that Kant clearly does have in mind, such as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and (above all) Johann Gottfried Herder. It can be argued, in fact, that Hamann’s chief legacy to these thinkers was precisely the idea of genius as nonrational cognition, and so his thought was, in a sense, the foundation for a long line of anti-Kantian critique. Second, Kant and Hamann knew each other personally, and over a long period. Thus despite the absence of explicit reference to Hamann in Kant’s text, we know that Kant was familiar with Hamann’s work (more familiar, I suspect, than the textual record indicates), and more importantly that Hamann was familiar with Kant’s work, and indeed that much of Hamann’s thought was developed in informed opposition to Kant.

The concept of artistic genius is thus central to Hamann’s critique of the Enlightenment, especially his critique of Kant. Two aspects of Hamann’s idea of genius are important for an understanding of what Kant’s theory must do to offer a response to it. First, on Hamann’s theory (if we may call it that) genius is understood as a nonrational form of cognition. The Book of Nature written by God cannot, for Hamann, be understood using reason, nor can the Holy Bible. The methods of reason– such as rational criticism or scientific experimentation-- are useless for unlocking their secrets, nor can the meaning of Creation be expressed in terms of universal and necessary principles. But while Hamann maintains that the world cannot be understood rationally, this does mean that it cannot be understood at all. Nature and the Bible are God’s speeches to us, intentional communications that must be grasped aesthetically, by which Hamann means both through the senses and through the appreciation (and creation) of art and beauty. By insisting on the reality of God’s communication to humankind, but denying that this communication can be grasped through reason, Hamann hopes to preserve the notion of the Bible as a guide for human life while safeguarding it from rational scrutiny, such as the rationalist literary criticism then being directed at the text of the Bible, and the scientific skepticism undermining faith in miracles. As a vehicle for this understanding, the insights of genius must be seen as genuine, but not rational or conceptual cognition.

Secon­d, Hamann’s rejection of Enlightenment reason is motivated at least in part by a desire to protect the Protestant idea of individual faith as the central element of Christian piety. It thus significant that Hamann discusses our understanding of the world not in terms of abstract pri­nciples but rather in terms of the achievements of concrete individuals. Here too the fact that genius is more akin to sensing than to reasoning plays a role: the ability to sense is shared equally by all human beings, while reason (Hamann thinks) is the province of an enlightened elite. Hamann saw this elite, with its assumption of responsibility for enlightening the benighted masses, as attempting to mediate between God and humanity in much the same way as the Catholic Church. This is the import of the unfavorable contrast Hamann draws in *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeit­en* between Socrates and Kant. It is not for nothing, therefore, that Hamann was invoked, more than half a century later, by Kierkegaard, who shared his opposition to the intrusion of philosophical reason into God’s direct relationship to the individual.

Kant’s account of genius in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” embedded as it is in the overall theory of taste as an awareness of the purposiveness of nature, disarms Hamann’s view on both of these counts. While there are different sorts of rational cognition, Kant argues, all genuine cognition must be rational at least in the extended sense of occupying a philosophically ground­ed and well-defined place in relation to other forms of cognition. This is manifested in the essential role that taste plays in both constituting and limiting genius. Works of genius owe their exemplary status to their approximation to natural beauty. Beauty cannot be the object of determinate judgments, that is, our judgments of taste cannot be proven by appealing to a determinate rule. But because judgments of taste are distinguished from judgments about mere agreeableness by their claim to the agreement of others, they must, Kant argues, have some relation to cognition. Specifically, they must be based on the “subjective conditions of cognition,” which we can take to be the same in all human beings. This is why genius requires taste as a “discipline” or “corrective”: true genius lies not in merely producing original representations, but in finding representations that can meet with “universal approval.” Note that for Kant, the reason that judgments of taste require an a priori (even if indeterminate) basis is strictly that we demand that others agree with our judgments. Since Hamann understands God’s creation as a message intelligible to and also binding upon all human beings, Kant can plausibly be said to be relying here on a premise to which even Hamann must assent.

Kant responds to the second feature of Hamann’s account– the emphasis on nonrational cognition as an individual achievement– by turning on its head the genius’ indifference to rules. As we have seen, Kant defines genius as “the innate predisposition of the mind through which nature gives the rule to art.” (§46; V:307) Genius is a genuine use of the cognitive faculties, but it is one for which even the genius himself can give no explanation. It is therefore in a real sense not something for which the individual genius can be given responsibility. Without intentional, and thus concept-guided activity on the part of the artist, the artist becomes merely a link in a causal chain that originates in nature itself.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Thus we find that in his accounts of taste and of genius Kant tries to show that the appreciation of beauty carries some cognitive value without putting aesthetic cognition on the same plane as scientific cognition– with cognition, that is, in the strictest sense. This balancing act is a reflection of the basic principle of his critical philosophy, that knowledge is limited to objects of possible experience. Keeping this principle in mind can in fact can help to explain one interesting feature of Kant’s account of genius in the third *Critique*, namely the claim that genius is properly limited to art rather than science. In his earlier writings and lectures on aesthetics and logic, Kant had contemplated the possibility of a genius for science or even philosophy. This possibility is no longer open in the *Critique of Judgment*. This change parallels a change in the relative status of taste and metaphysics: In the critical period, after Kant adopted the limitation of our knowledge to possible experience, our cognition of nature’s beauty could no longer be explained and supported in the same way as our cognition of the basic principles of theoretical understanding or practical reason. To do this would have required Kant either to downgrade the constitutive status of the categories of the understanding as principle of natural science, or to elevate the purposiveness of nature to a constitutive principle. In either case, he would be compromising the central claim that knowledge is limited to possible experience. At the same time, our awareness of beauty in nature, and the genius’ creation of works that mimic this beauty, cannot be denied all cognitive value, for without them we would have no basis for believing that we live in a world where reason’s goals can be achieved.

**NOTES**

1. 1. For a fuller presentation of this reading of the Introduction to the third *Critique* see my “The Task of the *Critique of Judgment*: Why Kant Needs a Transcendental Deduction of the Principle of the Purposiveness of Nature,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXXV, No. 2 (Spring 2001), 243 - 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2. I defend this position in much greater depth in “Symbolism and Cognition in General in Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82, No. 3 (2000), 266 - 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Zammito has an excellent discussion of the “ironic” nature of Kant’s account of genius. See Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 136 – 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)