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KANT'S AESTHETICS

INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on Kant's *Critique of the Faculty of Aesthetical Judgment*, which is one of the two major sections of his third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*. It will follow a plan similar to my oral presentation in class with sections devoted to the a priori principle, understanding and reason, the faculty of judgment, judgments of taste and deductions of judgments of taste. What is different is an expanded explanation of Kant's revolutionary concept of synthetic a priori knowledge and the key principle of purposiveness, including the role it plays in Kant's aesthetic theory and its relation to the other two major critiques: *Critique of Pure Reason*, a critical examination of scientific knowledge, and *Critique of Practical Reason*, an examination of moral knowledge.

Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory could be described as an attempt to answer one key question. When a person makes the statement "This is beautiful," can that judgment of beauty be universal, applying to all persons? Another way of putting it, can one person's judgment of beauty represent more than that person's individual subjective feeling about a work of art or an object in nature? Kant's attempt to answer that question in the affirmative and to establish a philosophical basis for his response comprises his Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant completed his Third Critique in 1790 at the age of sixty-six and described it in a short Preface as the completion of his entire critical philosophy.

As for the work's individual significance, Donald W. Crawford, in his book *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*, says it is "the first full attempt to deal in a systematic way with the major problems of aesthetics: the nature of aesthetic attitude and experience, the work of art and the

aesthetic object, natural beauty, the creative process, evaluation and criticism, the function of art in society, and the value of aesthetic experience generally.”

THE SEARCH FOR AN A PRIORI PRINCIPLE OF TASTE

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* presents an important doctrine, “that there is an a priori rule or principle of taste, but one that is indeterminate.”¹ Crawford says this represents a switch in Kant's view. Prior to the Third Critique, Kant thought that a critique of taste was not possible because such a critique would require principles underlying our judgment of taste that would not be empirical, in other words not based on our sense experience. The principles would have to be a priori. Only an a priori principle or rule, Kant felt, would allow anyone to make the judgment “This is beautiful” with the implication that others should feel the same way.

One of the unique aspects of Kant's philosophy is that human beings can have synthetic a priori knowledge. The term “synthetic” refers to statements that add knowledge. “A priori” means prior to our experience with the world. Normally in epistemology, a priori knowledge is associated with analytic statements, such as “All bachelors are unmarried males.” (It is also used in connection with some mathematical principles.) This is analytic in that it adds no new information; an unmarried male is already included in the definition of bachelor. It is a priori knowledge because one needs no experience with the world to know that all bachelors are unmarried (by definition). So the startling thing is that Kant is saying that we can have information about the world independent of our experience. How is this possible? Some refer to this as Kant's Copernican Revolution.

This revolution consisted in a completely different view of human knowledge. The Theocentric Model of Knowledge states that knowledge of objects in the world, in order to count as knowledge, must conform to the objects themselves (i.e. knowledge conforms to the world).

Not for Kant. He developed an Anthrocentric Model of Knowledge. He said that objects must conform to our knowledge of them! What that means is our cognition, our ability to experience the world, is structured in advance in a specific way. In order for empirical knowledge of objects to be possible, certain necessary epistemic conditions must be met. All possible empirical knowledge of objects in the world is structured, but that structure comes from us, not the world. This is the way that Kant justifies synthetic a priori knowledge. It is justified transcendently, meaning that it concerns the conditions under which knowledge is possible.

How we experience objects in the world has to do with a structure that is part of our cognitive processes. For Kant, this means that there are limits on knowledge. We can experience the phenomenal world; but never things “as they really are”, which he called the noumenal.

The search for a principle of synthetic a priori judgment is one important connection to the other two critiques in which Kant attempted to demonstrate synthetic a priori judgments of cognition and synthetic a priori moral judgments in *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason* respectively. Kant wanted to show how our knowledge claims, moral judgments and judgments of taste can have more than private validity. Putting it another way, he wanted to show that such judgments are more than just subjectively “true for me”, and have validity for all humans. In order to do this he needs to break down the subjective-objective dichotomy and explain how a judgment based upon feelings of pleasure can also be universally true.² The Third Critique is his systematic attempt to establish such a principle which leads us to purposiveness.

PURPOSIVENESS: UNITY BETWEEN UNDERSTANDING & REASON

According to Crawford, an important part of Kant's system is his attempt to show how the faculty of judgment forms a "mediating link" between the cognitive faculty (understanding) and the faculty of desire (reason).³ The problem concerns whether there can be unity between two realms established in his first two critiques—the phenomenal world of cause and effect, and the noumenal supersensible world of freedom.

Kant believed that he had shown in the first critique that understanding contains constitutive principles of cognition *a priori*, and in the second that reason contains constitutive principles *a priori* with respect to the faculty of desire. The important question for the *Critique of Judgment* is "whether now the judgment, which in the order of our cognitive faculties forms a mediating link between understanding and reason, has also principles *a priori* for itself." (Pref. 3).

Kant believes that in the third critique he establishes that the aesthetic judgment does contain an *a priori* principle, namely the principle of a formal purposiveness of nature. What Kant seems to mean is that we make sense of nature and art by determining its purposiveness. He says an object, state of mind or action is purposive if we can explain or conceive of it by assuming it is grounded in causality according to purposes. Purposive does not, however, assume that there is an actual purpose in nature. This subjective purposiveness also is transcendental "because it is presupposed by our faculty of knowledge (cognition) in its attempt to understand natural phenomena in accordance with empirical laws."⁴

Hopefully it will not seem redundant, but will actually clarify the concept further, by introducing Henry E. Allison's explanation that purposiveness "clearly signifies the contingent agreement of the order of nature with our cognitive needs and capacities...the basic idea is that

we look upon nature as *if* it had been designed with our cognitive interests in mind; though, of course we have no basis for asserting that it was in fact so designed.”⁵

In Allison’s view, the purposiveness of nature is one of the three great ideas around which Kant’s critical philosophy revolves; the other two being the transcendental ideality of space and time, and the freedom of the will.

The next step is to see how this principle of the subjective formal purposiveness of nature relates to the feeling of pleasure. Pleasure, Kant maintains, is what is affirmed in the person when that person makes a judgment of taste that an object is beautiful. “In Kant’s analysis, this pleasure or satisfaction results from the perceived harmony of nature with the abilities and demands of our mental faculties.”⁶ We feel pleasure when we perceive the form of the object of art or nature, and that form leads to a harmony in the operation of our cognitive faculties (imagination and understanding) in reflection upon it.

This brings us back to the question with which I began this section, which is how does this principle of judgment mediate between the understanding and the reason, and, therefore, between cognition and morality? In his first two critiques, Kant maintained that there is a distinction between the realm of theoretical knowledge (natural laws of the empirical world) and the realm of morality. The gap occurs because freedom of the will, which is necessary for morality, is not a feature of the empirical or phenomenal world, which is subject to causal determinism. According to Crawford, “the purposiveness of forms in nature leads us to believe that nature is adapted to our faculties, since the free play of our mental faculties in apprehending this purposiveness is pleasurable to us.” Thus, the freedom of the will in the noumenal world and the world of experience or phenomena are not inextricably separate.

THE FACULTY OF JUDGMENT

Kant identifies the ability to judge with one of the three major faculties of the mind—understanding (*Critique of Pure Reason*). For Kant, judgment is “the faculty of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule.” Rules are what help us to organize the various sense inputs from the environment. Rules help us to communicate with other human beings. Crawford cites the example of walking around one’s house, observing various parts such as the roof, chimney, etc. By means of rules we unify these different perceptions under one representation—a house. Concepts are the way the understanding has of gaining knowledge, through making judgments by means of concepts the mind supplies. In Kant’s system, the imagination works with the understanding to supply knowledge, and then we can make judgments.

Kant further distinguishes two types of judgment: determinant and reflective. A determinant judgment occurs when the universal or concept is already given (e.g., the house in the previous example.) and I search for an object (a part of the house) to subsume under the concept of house. Judgment in the reflective form occurs when the mind has only pieces of the whole, but does not have the concept or name for the whole. Crawford gives the example of coming across a pile of debris that might have been a building or just a pile of carelessly stored building materials. I have to reflect upon the situation before making a judgment—that the building was a shed—and then I have knowledge. Kant says that judging an object for its beauty is exercising reflective judgment. The mind examines the object of art or nature without a definite concept (presumably of beauty) in an attempt to see if the elements and relationships are organized in a purposive manner. “The question in matters of beauty is whether the elements and their relationships relate as if they can be subsumed under a definite concept, as if they were

rule-governed, even though we have no definite concept at our disposal which fits their organization.”⁷

Allison attempts to present a perspective on the evolution of Kant’s thought. This contrast Kant draws between reflection and determination in the operation of judgment was not distinguished explicitly in the first *Critique*. It remains, however, an open question as to whether this contrast marks a major change in his conception of judgment. Allison mentions the view of Beatrice Longuenesse that “what is unique to the third *Critique* is not the affirmation of a distinct reflective activity of judgment, but rather the idea that there are judgments (aesthetic and teleological) that are *merely* reflective.”⁸ Longuenesse feels that reflection and determination are complementary aspects of judgment from the very beginning of Kant’s critical period.

Allison zeroes in on the importance of reflective judgment, stating “that an account of judgment solely in terms of determination is radically incomplete.” Kant makes it clear “that the concepts under which objects are subsumed in judgment are themselves only attained through a complex act of (logical) reflection.”⁹ It is this act of reflective judgment upon which the entire architecture of the third *Critique* is ultimately based.

Further, according to Allison, the reflective capacity of judgment is concerned with far more than judgments of taste, or even aesthetic judgment. “For Kant argues in both Introductions that reflective judgment is deeply involved in the empirical investigation of nature and that in such an investigation it is governed by its own *a priori* principle, namely the purposiveness of nature, which, though merely regulative, is nonetheless necessary.”¹⁰

JUDGMENTS OF TASTE

Thus far, I have attempted to show that Kant established that the faculty of judgment does have a unique a priori principle, namely purposiveness, and that it is constitutive, that is normative for the feeling of pleasure and displeasure.

“Moreover, as normative, or ‘rule-giving’ for this feeling, the principle of judgment is precisely a principle of taste, understood as a capacity to judge or discriminate by means of this feeling. Thus, it is judgment’s legislation to feeling through judgments of taste concerning the beauty of objects of nature and art that makes a critique of judgment both possible and necessary.”¹¹

A critique is made possible because it is only if the cognitive faculty (judgment) claims an a priori principle (purposiveness) that it becomes an appropriate subject for a Kantian critique, which consists in examining the grounds and limits of such a claim. It makes a critique necessary because any such claim requires an examination of its grounds and limits before it can be accepted.

A judgment of taste is simply a judgment that a particular thing is or is not beautiful. Kant includes only singular judgments about single objects. He excludes judgments about classes of objects (Crawford uses the example “all Michelangelo sculptures are beautiful”). The latter is not a judgment of taste in Kant’s system; it is a logical or cognitive judgment, an empirical generalization based on a number of judgments of taste.

Kant also sees the judgment of taste as a reflective judgment in that the object is not judged with respect to any definite concept, but only as to whether it produces in us pleasure or displeasure.

Kant’s definition of taste is that it is the faculty of judging the beautiful. A judgment of taste also is an aesthetic judgment. In judging that something is beautiful, one relates the

representation of an object to a feeling of pleasure in oneself. An aesthetic judgment can be contrasted with a logical or conceptual judgment in which a representation of an object is related to a concept. (Crawford's example: "This is a dog.").

In Kant's system, the judgment of taste is based on disinterested pleasure, independent of charm, emotion and the concept of perfection. So the judgment of taste is reflective, singular, and aesthetic; it involves a feeling of pleasure along with a claim to universal validity—that others also ought to find pleasure in their experience of the object.

Judgments of taste also are pure, meaning they are completely a priori. Crawford challenges Kant's position here as somewhat ambiguous. Crawford says that Kant can't mean a judgment of taste is completely a priori in the sense that it is known independent of experience and of all sense impressions. Crawford believes that what Kant really means by pure "is that it is possible for judgments of taste to have the characteristics we believe them to have only if they are made in accordance with an a priori principle."¹² Rounding out what he believes Kant's position to be, Crawford says that a judgment of taste is pure if it is made not on the basis of sensation alone (the charm or emotional appeal of the object), but rather on the basis of judging, reflecting or contemplating on the work of art. Also, a pure judgment of taste is necessary, meaning that others ought to agree, but in the sense that the necessity is exemplary, conditional and subjective. Finally, a pure judgment of taste is universal insofar as it is based on what we can suppose in all people. This universality is subjective; not dependent upon concepts.

DEDUCTION OF JUDGMENTS OF TASTE

"Kant's claim to have developed the first truly philosophical theory of aesthetics rests on his attempt to explain the differences between judging something to be beautiful and simply judging it to be pleasant."¹³

Both judgments are aesthetic in that they are not conceptual judgments about things in the world, but are reports about the object perceived and the feelings of pleasure in the person doing the judging. The difference, however, lies in the fact that a judgment of beauty goes beyond what I feel and includes the imputing of similar feelings of pleasure to other people. The pleasure is both necessary and universal in that it is implied that my judgment of beauty should be felt by all people.

Judgments of taste need to be deduced because they claim a necessity and universality not met with in experience. This seems to have to do with the a priori principle involved.

This deduction involves the mental activities which lead to the judgment of taste, not merely the sensation of pleasure. This is an activity of reflection and contemplation on the form of the object. For the judgment that something is beautiful to make a legitimate claim for objectivity, or inter-subjectivity, and universal validity, the pleasure must be a consequence of the mental activities of contemplation, consideration and judging the form of the object. If the judgment of taste were made simply on the basis of pleasure in a given sensation, it would lose its claim to universal validity. Sensations of taste, smell, sound and sight are completely subjective and may vary from individual to individual. “By relating the pleasure in the beautiful to the faculty of judgment, however, Kant claims to have shown how it is possible for judgments of taste to make this claim for universal validity.”¹⁴

Kant maintains that the principle underlying the faculty of judgment is a condition for any experience. The judgment of beauty comes from the cognitive faculties wherein the imagination and understanding harmonize, as there is an awareness of purposiveness of form. Since Kant believed that “this harmonious interplay of imagination and understanding is

transcendentally necessary for any experience...it is a condition which can be supposed legitimately in all men.”¹⁵

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NOTES

1. Donald W. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974) p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, 15.
3. *Ibid.*, 17.
4. *Ibid.*, 18.
5. Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,) p. 30.
6. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*, p. 19.
7. *Ibid* p. 23.
8. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, p. 18.
9. *Ibid* p. 20.
10. *Ibid* p. 5.
11. *Ibid* p. 4.
12. Crawford, p. 25.
13. *Ibid* p. 26.
14. *Ibid* p. 28.
15. *Ibid* p. 28.