Kant: Notes on the *Critique of Judgment*

First Moment: The Judgement of Taste is Disinterested.

The Aesthetic Aspect

Kant begins the first "moment" of the "Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment" with the claim that the JT is *aesthetic*. He expands on the basic observation and assumption. When we judge whether an object is beautiful or not we do not relate our representation of the object to a *concept*, as we would in a logical, determinate judgment of *understanding*. Rather, we attend to the way the object appears to us in *imagination* and we relate or "refer" that representation to a *feeling* of pleasure or displeasure of a particular kind. It is in this sense that the JT is aesthetic and, thus, *subjective*—determined by something in me, not something objective, i.e. in the object.

The contrast here is, roughly, between *knowing* and *liking*. When, coming around the corner, I’m immediately confronted by a tall steel object in the plaza in front of the office building, it appears to me as a sculpture. In seeing it as a sculpture, I must have applied, perhaps without even being aware of it, the concept *sculpture* to the object. That’s an example of a very simple, spontaneous, logical judgment—an example of knowledge, or knowing what the thing is, which entails an implicit understanding of the way things of this type function, the role such objects play in our culture, the terms we use in thinking and talking about them, etc. In this very simple and natural way, my behavior exhibits *understanding* by applying the appropriate concept to the object as it appears to me. And if I like it and find the appearance and presence of the object pleasing, I do so based on a *feeling* that occurs in me. This is what Kant calls an *aesthetic* response to the object. Judgments of this kind, based on a feeling, are essential features of the JT.

Disinterestedness

"*Interest* is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object’s *existence*. Hence such a liking always refers at once to our power of *desire*, either as the basis that determines it, or at any rate as necessarily connected with that determining basis." [CJ §2 (45), emphases added.]

In this brief passage, Kant suggests ways in which our liking a thing might be linked with desire and interest, and thus not lead to a pure JT. “Everyone has to admit that if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is a very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing’s existence but must be wholly indifferent about it.” [CJ §2 (46) emphasis added.]

He argues that
- liking a thing as *agreeable* includes a desire for the *existence* of the thing—we like it and want it, or
- a desire for it entails a *purpose* or liking in a *moral* and rational sense—we *desire* what is morally good in human behavior and *like* it when it occurs (exists).

Kant also distinguishes three kinds of pleasure:
1. Pleasure in the *agreeable*, i.e. “what the senses like in sensation”. This includes an interest in sustaining the feeling.
2. Pleasure in the *good*, which “is what, by means of reason, we like through its mere concept”. This pleasure is related to an interest in bringing about the object or act.
3. Pleasure in the *beautiful* related to disinterested contemplation.

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1 Christian Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant’s Aesthetics*, 10, points out that Kant’s use of “moment” (German *Momente*) is intended not as a temporal distinction but, consistent with the sense it has in physics, to signify that which moves things along. In Kant it acts as a guide in the analysis.
Kant appeals to both sets of distinctions in identifying judgments of taste.

The satisfaction or feeling of the beautiful is disinterested—you experience the object as beautiful without a desire, aim, or purpose associated with the object. And your experience is free of any moral or intellectual concerns associated with the object. Kant goes so far as to claim that you don’t even have “the liking we connect with the presentation of the existence of an object” (CJ §2). This distinguishes it from "simple" pleasure taken in the agreeable or satisfaction in the good.

The “merely agreeable” experience of an object, for example “the green color of meadows...belongs to subjective sensation, to feeling, through which no object [of cognition] is presented, but through which the object is regarded as an object of our liking (which is not a cognition of it).” [CJ §3 (48)] Kant distinguishes here between the feeling—the subjective sensation—and the property or attribute of the object of perception in the landscape, i.e. the objective world of nature distinct from the subjective sensation that arises in response to the perceptual object. “Now, that a judgment by which I declare an object to be agreeable expresses an interest in that object is already obvious from the fact that, by means of sensation, the judgment arouses a desire for objects of that kind, so that the liking presupposes something other than my mere judgment of the object...” [CJ §3 (48), emphasis added.] Thus, my experience of the agreeable is not disinterested and not the same as the JT.

The JT is not like a moral judgment either, since the latter implies a purpose or goal. That which is good must be good relative to some purpose, i.e. it must be good-for-something or good as an example of a kind of thing for which a purpose or end exists. (Note that Kant also distinguishes between that which is good as a means to an end, and that which is good in itself. Both entail a concept, purpose, or aim.) In the case of the morally good, once reason leads you to grasp that which is good, your will is determined to bring it about, i.e. to bring it into existence. Thus, my experience of the good is not disinterested and not the same as the JT.

On the other hand, when the above criteria for satisfaction in the beautiful are met, the judgment of taste is “free” and “pure”—independent of interest and engaging one’s own inner faculties and “powers”.

“Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage: these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like them.” [CJ §4 (49)]

Note that disinterestedness is not “objective” or publicly observable—it’s a subjective phenomenon.

At this stage we have only negative criteria. The judgment of taste involves no interest and is not pleasure in the agreeable or the good.
Second Moment: The Judgment of Taste is Universal.

Kant offers two independent arguments for the universality of judgments of taste.

In the first argument (§6), he makes his case on phenomenological grounds—based on self-reflection—that universality follows from disinterestedness.²

If someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone. He must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which only he might be dependent, so that he must regard it as based on what he can presuppose in everyone else as well. [§6 (53f)]

Does Kant’s reasoning here rely on a false dichotomy in assuming that the only options are particularity or universality? For example, could the pleasure apply for some but not all? Does Kant overlook this possibility?

Note that Kant’s argument is part of a transcendental, not an empirical, analysis. He’s searching for that which is a priori. Hence, appeal to the empirical observation that some people share certain experiences would take us beyond transcendental philosophy and into anthropology. This is a move that’s not allowed in the framework of Kant’s critical philosophy.

The basic problem facing Kant is how to establish the universality of a judgment of taste—a judgment which is not objective. If it were the sort of judgment that appeals to an objective fact, e.g. that some roses are red, the two opposing judgments could be resolved by appeal to an empirical fact of the matter—here’s a rose that’s red. But disagreements in judgments of taste, which are subjective and based on feeling, do not lend themselves to such empirical and objective resolutions involving observations and concepts.

So how do you prove that when you experience something as beautiful, you justifiably assume that anyone in your situation should have the same experience? Kant’s strategy is to appeal to something that all humans share. This is an extremely important move on Kant’s part. If he can show that our experience of the beautiful is determined by something common to all human beings, he will have established the grounds for the subjective universality of aesthetic judgments of taste. [§6 (54)]

Note that Kant’s characterization of the normative dimension of subjective universality—that in making a JT we demand the agreement of others, even though we cannot count on it—makes its first appearance in §7. Here he contrasts the agreeable, governed by the principle that “Everyone has his own taste” (a version of Hume’s “de gustibus non est disputandum”) with the beautiful, which is unqualified. If you proclaim something to be beautiful, you judge not for yourself, but “for everyone”. That’s why one says “[t]he thing is beautiful, and does not count on other people to agree [but]...demands that they agree”. [[§7 (56), emphasis added.]] This normative claim will come up again and again and may seem both odd and extreme.

In §8 Kant reiterates the normative claim and introduces the distinction between taste of sense and taste of reflection.

Insofar as judgments about the agreeable are merely private, whereas judgments about the beautiful are put forward as having general validity (as being public), taste regarding the agreeable can be called taste of sense, and taste regarding the beautiful can be called taste of

² Wenzel suggests that Kant may have recognized the limits of this phenomenological argument from self-reflection and saw it as a preliminary step towards the more compelling and complex argument in §9. See Wenzel, op. cit., 28ff.
reflection, though the judgments of both are aesthetic (rather than practical) judgments about an object, [i.e.,] judgments merely about the relation that the presentation of the object has to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. [CJ §8 (57f)]

While we don’t demand agreement with regard to our taste of sense, since it relates to that which is merely agreeable, we do require agreement from others with respect to judgments arising from our taste of reflection. “What the people who make these judgments dispute about is not whether such a claim is possible; they are merely unable to agree, in particular cases, on the correct way to apply this ability.” [CJ §8 (58)]

Kant also points out the “universality” in question here is not logical but aesthetic. He uses the term “general validity” for this aesthetic universality. The logical “universality” will come later in the guise of necessity. This is, perhaps, a subtle distinction, but one that may help us understand the difference between the subjective universality and the “objective” necessity of judgments of taste.

With respect to their “logical quantity”, Kant says, “all judgments of taste are singular judgments” rather than generalizations, that is to say they apply to particular intuitions of an object. When, contemplating a particular flower, I say “this rose is beautiful” I make a singular aesthetic judgment. If I claim “all roses are beautiful”, my judgment is about roses in general, not particular, and it is not an aesthetic judgment, because it goes beyond the immediate intuition of particular objects. [CJ §8 (59), emphasis added.]

The immediate intuition here is crucial. Kant claims it is not possible to make judgments of taste by means of concepts, principles, or rules. “There can be no rule by which someone could be compelled to acknowledge that something is beautiful. No one can use reasons or principles to talk us into a judgment on whether some garment, house, or flower is beautiful. We want to submit the object to our own eyes, just as if our liking of it depended on that sensation.” [CJ §8 (59)] And yet we “require” everyone’s agreement. How does this work? Why should we accept Kant’s claims about the universal validity of the JT?

In §§8-9, Kant offers his second argument, on logical rather than introspective grounds, that universality follows from the free play of the cognitive faculties of Imagination and Understanding. The argument is roughly as follows:

1. The universality of the judgment of taste is not objective, as in logical judgments, but subjective. Cf. “This is a rose”—an objective judgment—with “This is beautiful”—a subjective judgment. The former attributes a concept to an object. The latter attributes (implicitly) a feeling of pleasure to a subject.
2. The judgment of taste has intersubjective validity, i.e. since it's based on a feeling and not a concept applied to an object, everyone is expected to agree with such a judgment.
3. Given this intersubjective validity, relativism is avoided. How is this possible?
   a. First of all, the judgment of taste is not universal in the sense that the statement "All roses have petals" is universal, i.e. not as a logical judgment. It does not depend on relations between the subject as concept or on the predicate as concept. The predicate is a feeling and the subject could be anything—"This is beautiful."
   b. An aesthetic judgment is particular, not general; i.e. it is not the result of a generalization given by rules or a principle of reason. (To emphasize this point, compare "All roses have petals" with "All roses are beautiful". Neither judgment is particular. Hence, neither is aesthetic, even though the latter has to do with beauty!)
   c. One must be in the presence of the object to form an aesthetic judgment. (This adds another component of particularity. It makes no sense to judge an object beautiful on the basis of hearsay because there are no a priori rules to which one could appeal in judging an object to be beautiful.
   d. Now, if aesthetic judgment is related to a feature common to all human minds, then the claim of universality would make sense.
   e. Kant’s decisive move is to claim that any judgment of taste must be related to "knowledge in general"—it must be a general feature of human cognition.
4. This general feature is the harmony of imagination and understanding—a free play of the cognitive faculties.

[T]he way of presenting [which occurs] in a judgment of taste is to have subjective universal communicability without presupposing a determinate concept; hence this subjective universal communicability can be nothing but [that of] the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play (insofar as they harmonize with each other as required for cognition in general). [CJ §9 (62)]

Finally, Kant raises the question of how we know or detect the harmony of imagination and understanding. It must be based on feeling, not cognition.

This sensation, whose universal communicability a judgment of taste postulates, is the quickening of the two powers (imagination and understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate but, as a result of the prompting of the given presentation, nonetheless accordant: the activity required for cognition in general. An objective relation can only be thought. Still, insofar as it has objective conditions, it can nevertheless be sensed in the effect it has on the mind; and if the relation is not based on a concept....then the only way we can become conscious of it is through a sensation of this relation's effect: the...play of the two mental powers (imagination and understanding) quickened by the reciprocal harmony. [CJ §9 (63), emphases added.]

Kant further nuances this “harmony” as a “proportioned attunement” necessary for any cognitive judgment at all and thus a fundamental (necessary) feature of the mind shared by all human beings. That's what gives the JT subjective universality.

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