

Kant: *Critique of Judgment* — Fine Art & Genius

An artist **produces** work and **evaluates** it, stage by stage. Through what **process** and according to what **criteria** is the work judged? Many **interests** undoubtedly inform the process. Does it follow that the artist does not make judgments of taste in the creation of a work? Is it possible or necessary to create a work of art without reference to concepts, interests, or purposes?

What are the implications for the observer? Do we—**must** we—abstract from, bracket, disregard, or banish the artist's intentions and purposes? Are we missing something essential if we do?

How is the pleasure we take in **art** the same as or different from the pleasure we take in **nature**? How is a **photograph** of a pink rhododendron different from the direct **perception** of one? How does the song of a nightingale compare with a melody by Mahler? Is our appreciation of a **landscape** in the English countryside different in principle from our aesthetic appreciation of a landscape **painting** by Constable?

Art and Non-Art

Kant begins his discussion of art by distinguishing it from nature. His initial remark, "Art is distinguished from *nature* as doing is from acting or operating in general...", may not seem terribly helpful or illuminating. [§43 (170)] How is "doing" different from "acting"? It appears, from the rest of §43, that he's building on Aristotle's distinction between the **natural** and the **artificial**. According to Aristotle, a natural object arises and changes spontaneously—it has a principle of growth and development "within it". An artificial object, i.e. one made by a human being, comes to be what it is due to an intention or idea of what the thing is to be and do, which is imposed on it from the outside. In the Kantian scheme, that imposition is the result of rational choices made by the artist. Kant says, "By right we should not call anything art except a production through freedom, i.e., through a power of choice that bases its acts on reason." [§43 (170)] So, while a bee creates a beautiful honeycomb, it does so spontaneously and by nature. The artist who creates a beautiful sculpture does so in a way that is self-directed and self-conscious, and according to Kant, **rational**, and **free**.

Art is also distinguished from **science** and **craft**. The goal of science is knowledge—its method is theoretical and its outcomes determined by **concepts** and **rules** that can be learned. "Only if something [is such that] even the most thorough acquaintance with it does not immediately provide us with the skill to make it, then to that extent it belongs to art." [§43 (171)] Kant's characterization of craft is less clear, but it seems the main point is that the craft object is determined almost exclusively by the function the object is to serve. Hence Kant characterizes craft as "mercenary" as opposed to art, which is "free" of particular outcomes or purposes and embodies a kind of animation or "spirit".

The General Problems Raised by Fine Art — Art and Fine Art

"There is no science of the beautiful, but only critique; and there is no fine science, but only fine art." [§44 (172)]

Having defined the genus, the most general category, of "art", Kant moves on to define the species known as "fine art". Fine art is **aesthetic**, not mechanical. It arouses the feeling of pleasure. And the pleasure it produces is not that of mere sensation, but is accompanied by "ways of cognizing". We know what that means—it is caught up in the free play and harmony of imagination and understanding, which is universally communicable. Thus, Kant uses his theory to draw a line between fine art and entertainment.

Fine Art and Nature — Rules and Freedom

"In [dealing with] a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art **rather than nature**, and yet the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules **as if it were a product of mere nature**." [§45 (173), emphases added.]

In distinguishing our experience of the beautiful in art and in nature, Kant has to resolve the tension between **rules**, which govern the creation of artworks, and the **freedom** of the artist to create that which goes beyond sensation (which is “merely subjective”), imitation, and functionality.

But, at the same time, he insists there is something essential that art and nature share.

“Nature, we say, is beautiful if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.” [§45 (174)]

One of the shared elements is **purposiveness**. But given that works of fine art are shaped by artists’ interests and intentions, as well as artistic conventions, how can it be that a work escapes being determined by particular purposes? According to Kant’s theory, if it enables a judgment of taste and the experience of the beautiful, it must have **purposiveness without purpose**.

“Therefore, even though the purposiveness in a product of fine art **is** intentional, it must still not **seem** intentional; i.e., fine art must have the *look* of nature even though we are conscious of it as art. And a product of art appears like nature if, though we find it to agree quite *punctiliously* with the rules that have to be followed for the product to become what it is intended to be, it does not do so *painstakingly*. In other words, the academic form must not show; there must be no hint that the rule was hovering before the artist’s eyes and putting fetters on his mental powers.” [§45 (174), emphases added.]

Now this makes it sound as if the work of art **can**, and in some sense **must** have a purpose and be subject to rules, but that these must not be **apparent**. That seems to suggest that art is a kind of grand deception. It must mislead us to evoke the same sense of the beautiful that we experience in nature. Is this Kant’s view, albeit stated in more dramatic terms?

The answer to that question, I think, depends on how we understand Kant’s notion of creative **genius** —“the innate mental predisposition *through which* nature gives the rule to art”. [§46 (174)]

Art and Genius — “Giving the Rule to Art”

In section §46 (175), Kant offers the following argument for the origin of rules in art.

Every art presupposes rules underlying the existence and form of the object. But fine art cannot allow judgments of taste derived from rules determining the nature and form of the object. Thus, fine art cannot provide the **rule** for the creation of the object. Therefore, since an object can be a work of art **only if** it is “preceded by a rule”, the rule must come through the inner nature of the artist creating the work.

According to Kant, the capacity to manifest such rules is properly referred to as “**genius**”.

This argument raises a number of questions. What does Kant mean by a “rule”? Are rules a **necessary** feature of works of art? Where do these rules come from? What is the mechanism that accounts for their effect in the production and reception of art? How is genius related to rules and where does genius originate and reside?

Kant addresses the question of the nature of the rule that nature gives to art in §47 (177). There he says it cannot be expressed in a formula, as a mathematical function, since that entails that judgments about the beautiful could be determined by concepts, which has already been ruled out. “Rather”, Kant says, “the rule must be abstracted from what the artist has done, i.e., from the product...”, which then serves as a model—an “**exemplar**”— for other artists.

This tells us that genius (somehow) “gives the rule”, which then must be “abstracted” from the work of art (“what the artist has done”). Thus, there are two crucial processes:

- **giving rules**, which involves artistic agency and genius in the production of works of art, and
- **abstracting rules**, which involves the proper reception and appreciation of the work of art.

I use the term “artistic agency” to hedge a bit on the precise relation between the artist and genius. One has to be careful in identifying the artist with “the genius” given Kant’s own qualification in §46 (174), where he describes genius as an “innate mental predisposition *through which* nature gives the rule to art”. The emphasis here (in Pluhar’s translation) is Kant’s. It suggests that the artist may be a kind of (passive?) vehicle for nature’s rule-giving function. As we see later, **producing** works of fine art involves both

- the manifestation of **aesthetic ideas**, and
- the proper employment of **rules** for producing beautiful objects.

The artist is clearly involved in, if not the sole agent for, both aspects of artistic production.

Note, also, that Kant is committed to the notion that rules and purposes are a **necessary** feature of works of art. He indicates this in several places. [See, for example, CJ §47 (178).] But, here also, distinctions may be needed. Kant talks about **art**, in the generic sense, and **fine art**, which involves taste and the beautiful. For the proper experience of fine art, there must be, in some sense, **no concept or purpose** of what the thing is to be, and **no interest in the existence of the object**.

Spirit and Aesthetic Ideas

In §49, Kant tries to give a fuller accounting of genius by relating it to “**spirit**” (*Geist*). “Spirit in an aesthetic sense is the animating principle in the mind.” [§49 (181f)] It imparts a “purposive momentum” and self-sustaining play. [§49 (182)] Kant identifies this principle with the ability to produce **aesthetic ideas**.

“[B]y an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate.... It is easy to see that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart [pendant] of a *rational idea*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no *intuition* (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate.” [§49 (182)]

Here the free, creative power of imagination is called on once again, as the faculty which presents **ideas** that strive for what is “beyond the bounds of experience” and **intuitions** that exceed the capacity of our concepts. [§49 (182)] Art’s task is to give sensible expression to these aesthetic ideas.

The nature of these ideas and precisely how they work may not be entirely clear.

“In a word, an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it.” [§49 (185)]



Aesthetic ideas are expressed somewhat like metaphors. Kant uses the example of “Jupiter’s eagle with the lightning in its claws” as expressing an attribute of “the mighty king of heaven”. He claims that its

“...forms do not constitute the exhibition of a given concept itself, but are only supplementary presentations of the imagination, expressing the concept’s implications and its kinship with other concepts.... These attributes...do not present the content of our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but present something different, something that prompts the imagination to spread over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words.” [§49 (183)]

“Hence it is a presentation that makes us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, but the feeling of which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letters, with spirit.” [§49 (185)]

By means of aesthetic ideas, Kant links our experience of fine art to rational ideas and the **supersensible**. This appears to complement the role of fine art as that which stimulates the experience of the beautiful.

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