Summary of Kant's Aesthetic Theory

A. General Introduction to Kant's Philosophical Goals and Interests

1. Kant claimed that there are three modes of consciousness in human beings: knowledge, desire, and feeling. The nature and limits of human knowledge was the subject of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781); the nature of desire, duty, and moral law was the subject of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787); and the nature of aesthetic and teleological judgments, as well feelings of the beautiful and the sublime were the central issues faced in the third critique — the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

2. Kant set out in the third Critique to prove that our aesthetic experience is independent of both moral duty and knowledge.

3. A related goal was to use the concept of aesthetic experience to reunite Nature (as a realm of deterministic causal order) and Freedom (the human, non-deterministic, moral order) after having separated them in the first two Critiques.

4. Much of Kant's work was a response to British Empiricism (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume) and Inner Sense theories.

   a. Kant agrees with Hume on several points, viz. that judgments of taste have something to do with our feelings of pleasure in the presence of certain objects. Thus, such judgments cannot be taken as objectively valid nor governed *a priori* by rules. At best, judgments of taste can be intersubjectively valid. (More on that below.)

   b. But Kant also thought that prior aesthetic theories tended to conflate various types of judgments, in particular judgments of taste and judgments of the agreeable. In the *Critique of Judgment* he argues that judgments of taste are universally and necessarily valid *a priori*. (See below.)

5. Kant's Philosophy of Mind

   a. Kant attempts to explain human experience in terms of "faculty psychology", i.e. by appeal to distinct faculties of the mind. (See the schematic representation to the right and the more detailed one below.)

   b. An intuition or consciousness (representation) of an object is the result of the workings of either the faculty of Sensibility or the faculty of Imagination. An intuition is singular, direct, and caused by the action of the external world on the sense organs (sensation).

   c. A concept is a representation, produced by the faculty of Understanding, of a possible object of consciousness. It is general, indirect, and (as noted above) produced by the mind.

   d. Intuitions are "synthesized" by means of cognitive judgments. The synthesis of a "manifold of intuitions" is produced by the faculty of Imagination and brought under a concept by the faculty of Understanding.
**SENSIBILITY**
Formal structures through which appearances are **given**
[Space & Time]

**Imagination**
(Synthetic appearance gives rise to the object of experience)

**UNDERSTANDING**
Formal structures through which appearances are **ordered**
[Categories & Concepts]

Concept

"This is a man."

**Synthesis of Apprehension**

**Synthesis of Reproduction**

? ——— Sensations

Manifold of Appearances ——— Intuition

Kant: Schematic of Objective Experience
e. So, for example, if I enter a room and see on the desk in front of me a single red rose in a tall slender vase, the sensation of the rose (the light reflecting off the surface of the object and into my eyes) gives rise to an immediate intuition of the object which I see as a rose. The term "seeing-as" is one way of expressing the judgment, "This is a rose."

f. This constitutes a common and ordinary act of cognition which results from the interaction of Imagination and Understanding.

B. Third Critique: Analysis of the Judgment of Taste (JT), i.e. of the Beautiful.

1. JT is subjective.
   a. In a logical (i.e. conceptual) judgment (e.g. "This is a rose"), a concept (representation) is "applied" to an object. The judgment is, in this sense, objective.

   b. In aesthetic judgment of the form "This is beautiful", said in response to the appearance of the rose, the representation (which in this case is not a concept) is "referred to" a subject in conjunction with a feeling.

   c. Since the JT is aesthetic, it is also subjective, i.e. relative to the particular feelings of the subject.

2. JT is disinterested.
   a. Kant distinguishes three kinds of pleasure:
      ▪ pleasure in the agreeable (interested)
      ▪ pleasure in the good (interested)
      ▪ pleasure in the beautiful (disinterested)

   b. The satisfaction or feeling of the beautiful is disinterested, i.e. it does not produce a desire or interest in possession, i.e. "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.

   c. The aesthetic judgment 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.

   d. Therefore, the JT is purely contemplative.

3. JT is universal. (Universality follows from disinterestedness.)
   a. The universality of the JT 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.

   b. The JT 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.

   c. Given this intersubjective validity, relativism is avoided. How is this possible?
      i. First of all, the JT is not universal in the sense that the statement "All roses have petals" is universal, i.e. not as a logical judgment. [See above.]

      ii. 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"

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1. Note: The apprehension of beauty is not the same as a mere "sensuous enjoyment" of, e.g., a color or a sound.
with "All roses are beautiful". Neither judgment is particular; hence, neither is aesthetic, even though the latter has to do with beauty!

iii. One must be in the presence of the object to form an aesthetic judgment. It makes no sense to judge an object beautiful on the basis of hearsay. There are no a priori rules to which one could appeal in judging an object to be beautiful.

iv. Now, if aesthetic judgment is related to a feature common to all human minds, then the claim of universality would make sense.

v. For Kant, this means it must be related to "knowledge in general", i.e. as a general feature of human cognition.

d. This general feature is the harmony of Imagination and Understanding — a free play of the cognitive faculties. (See below.)

4. **JT is based on "purposiveness without purpose".**

a. What is a purpose? What is it for a thing to have a purpose? A purpose comes about when the concept (essence) precedes the object or event (existence) and brings the object or event into existence in order to satisfy one's desire or interest.

b. When we regard something as if it had a purpose, but we have no particular purpose in mind, then, Kant says, the thing is experienced as having "purposiveness without purpose", an experience which produces a harmony of the cognitive faculties.

c. Note that the thing experienced in this way cannot be regarded as having a purpose because if it did, the experience would be a logical (conceptual) judgment. Also, it would not be disinterested, for obvious reasons.

d. Thus, in an aesthetic judgment, the form of the object is connected with a feeling of harmony—a disinterested pleasure.

e. Finally, according to Kant, this feeling is neither sensuous nor intellectual. It is not due directly to sensation, nor is it a simple cognition, although it is related indirectly to both.

5. **JT is necessary.** Given the proper attention on the part of the observer and the right relation of the object to the cognitive faculties, one inevitably experiences the pleasure of the harmony of imagination and understanding. This implies what Kant calls a "common sense".

### The Sublime

1. Recall that beauty is related to the formal purposiveness of an object and the pleasure produced by the harmony of the cognitive faculties through the mere contemplation of it.

2. In contrast, the sublime is related to that which goes beyond form.

3. The feeling of sublimity is not purposive (as beauty is) but "wild".

4. Kant distinguishes two kinds of sublime experience:
   
a. **The Mathematical Sublime**: This involves the idea of infinity in a central way. For example, a sensation arises in the mind and one searches for an image of the thing — a "totality". In other words, the Imagination tries to call up a concept that the faculty of Judgment can apply to the
sensation. When the Imagination fails to produce it, one senses the transcendent power of Reason which then results in a feeling of sublimity.²

b. **The Dynamical Sublime**: Similar to the above but arises in response to an experience of the overwhelming power of Nature rather than Reason.

5. **Aesthetic Ideas** - The Imagination produces thoughts that can't be captured by specific (determinate) concepts. (This is one of the features of artistic creativity.)

**A Note on the Kantian Scheme: Aesthetic vs. Sensual**

The pleasure of the aesthetic, as opposed to the enjoyment of the senses, is a "refuge". **Sensuality**, on the other hand, is **natural**, immediate [not earned], and tyrannical—in short, "low" or "impure" in quality.

The aesthetic, which relies on a certain **cultivation** and **disinterested contemplation**, can free one from enslavement to the senses. It is a source of liberation from the natural instincts.

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² Note: Kant claims that there is a pain associated with the limitations of the Imagination. But there is a pleasure associated with the vastness of Reason. This opposition produces a kind of affective or felt contradiction. It also takes us beyond appearances (phenomena) to things-in-themselves and, hence, our own greatness as rational and moral beings.