

## Beauty and Other Aesthetic Concepts: A Kantian Proposal

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Panos Paris suggests that beauty has a privileged place among aesthetic concepts and properties. In this paper, I argue that Kant's insights can help us further develop and defend this view. On the proposed Kantian view, a capacity to make judgments of beauty is presupposed by a capacity to make other kinds of aesthetic judgments.

In his perceptive defence of the concepts of beauty and taste, Panos Paris notes that recent debates about the relevance of beauty for philosophical aesthetics are plagued by a failure to distinguish between different senses of beauty—narrow vs. broad, thin vs. thick, shallow vs. deep. He then identifies a sense of beauty that is narrow, thick, and deep and thus equipped to escape the objection that beauty is either superfluous (if taken to simply mean aesthetic excellence) or “easy, shallow, sensuous” (if understood as a narrow notion). But Paris's aim is not only to restore beauty as one among many aesthetic values; he also promises to show that beauty and taste are “*the* central concepts in aesthetics” (p. 2), that “beauty holds a special place among aesthetic concepts and properties” (p. 12). At the end of the paper, however, the reader is left with a sense that this thesis, though attractive, hasn't been given satisfactory articulation and defence.

I suggest that Kant's account of beauty can help further substantiate and defend the claim that beauty is central to aesthetics, having some sort of primacy among aesthetic properties. While Kant does not provide an explicit account of other aesthetic properties beyond beauty and sublimity nor of aesthetic properties *simpliciter*, I argue that his views in the *Critique of Judgment* imply that beauty underlies all other aesthetic properties. More precisely, a *capacity* to discern and make judgments concerning beauty is presupposed by a capacity to discern and make judgments concerning other aesthetic values and qualities. Judgments of beauty are manifestations of the basic capacity for aesthetic sensitivity or discrimination. This capacity can be cultivated and expanded into a capacity to recognize other aesthetic values and qualities.

My primary purpose is not exegetical. It is to propose that basic tenets of Kant's aesthetics can help us formulate a way (surely not the only "Kantian" way) of thinking about the centrality of beauty that is philosophically compelling. On the strength of its plausibility, I hope to convince the reader that Kant's aesthetics has rich resources for thinking about other aesthetic properties beyond beauty or aesthetic judgment in the broadest sense. These resources have yet to be fully appreciated. Although I believe that my proposal is faithful to Kant's thinking (at least in spirit), there is no reason to consider faithfulness a necessary condition for fruitful engagement with a historical figure (several Kant-inspired classics can testify to this). In any case, the view sketched in this short paper will have to get a full textual and philosophical case in a more extensive future work.

### 1. The Form of Aesthetic Judgment

Aesthetic judgments span a wide range of judgments, which may be grouped into three broad classes: (i) purely evaluative judgments (whether something is aesthetically good or bad, superior or inferior to others); (ii) judgments that are both evaluative and descriptive (whether something is, e.g., graceful, lucid, trite); (iii) descriptive judgments that do not entail evaluation immediately or independently of context (whether something is, e.g., realistic, sombre, comical).<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic judgments need not involve a distinctively aesthetic *term* (consider 'I love that movie' or 'The symphony is too long'). What such judgments have in common is that they require an exercise of aesthetic sensitivity or discrimination. I use 'aesthetic values' and 'aesthetic qualities' to refer, respectively, to evaluative and descriptive properties affirmed in an aesthetic judgment.

Kant's aesthetic theory purports to be a *general* theory of aesthetic judgment. But it focuses exclusively on judgments of the form 'x is beautiful'.<sup>2</sup> Unsympathetic readers could take this to be a sign of impoverishment. Judgments of beauty are a tiny fraction of our rich ordinary aesthetic discourse (think of what we say to each other at the museum or after a play) and not obviously the most significant. Kant is not blind to this fact. In different places, he uses other aesthetic concepts without explicit theorization. For example: "A poem can be quite **pretty** and **elegant**, but **without spirit**. A story is **precise** and **orderly** [...]. A ceremonial speech is **thorough** and [...] **flowery** [...]" (5:313, translation modified). He also does not fail to give a reason for privileging beauty: We "have to seek only the deduction of judgments of taste, i.e., of the judgments about the beauty of things in nature, and by

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<sup>1</sup> This taxonomy is modified from Sibley (2001, pp. 33–34).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from a much less extensive treatment of sublimity.

this means accomplish the task for the whole of the aesthetic power of judgment in its entirety” (5:280).<sup>3</sup> The suggestion is that the aesthetic power of judgment “in its entirety” has application beyond judgments of beauty, but establishing the validity of these judgments suffices for establishing the validity of all other aesthetic judgments (which is all the *Critique* needs to achieve).

There are two ways to defend Kant’s aesthetics against charges of impoverishment. One is to argue that, for Kant, ‘beauty’ refers to a *family* of aesthetic values. Here ‘beauty’ is construed in a *relatively* broad sense. It still does not simply mean aesthetic success; there is at least one type of aesthetic success—sublimity (which may itself be another family of aesthetic values)—that does not fall under it. I have little to say against this reading directly (though I offer some reasons for thinking that Kantian beauty is narrow in Section 3). I want to suggest another, more philosophically appealing way of reading Kant: beauty in the *narrow* sense is Kant’s concern, but beauty in the narrow sense has primacy over other aesthetic properties. In this sense, a capacity to make judgments that something is (or is not) beautiful is presupposed by a capacity to make aesthetic judgments of other kinds. Or, equivalently, possession of the concept of beauty is presupposed by possession of other aesthetic concepts.

To take other aesthetic properties to depend on beauty in this way is to view judgments of beauty as manifestations of a capacity that constitutes the *form* of aesthetic judgments in general. If this is correct, beauty occupies a parallel position to *a priori* forms of other representational capacities: space and time are the form of intuition, the categories are the form of empirical thinking about an object, and the moral law is the form of practical judgment. In claiming that space is the form of outer intuition, Kant is saying that a capacity to represent spaces is presupposed by a capacity to represent objects that occupy them. A capacity to represent causal relations is presupposed by a capacity to represent objective temporal successions. In the same vein, I suggest that a capacity to recognize beauty in an object is presupposed by a capacity to recognize other aesthetic qualities and values. In the third *Critique*, beauty is not characterized as the form of any representational capacity. But we find the claim that “beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end” (5:236). As I argue below, this can be read as support for my view, for all

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<sup>3</sup> Citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given by the pagination of the first (A) and the second (B) edition. Citations from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* are given by the volume number and pagination of the Academy Edition. Translations are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

aesthetic judgments rely on a capacity to apprehend an object in such a way as to perceive its purposiveness without a purpose.

Even if Kant understands ‘beauty’ in the narrow sense, it is not at all obvious that he has any interest in other types of aesthetic judgments. Let me briefly respond to this concern before I further elaborate on my view. Kant does not conceive of the *Critique of Judgment* primarily as a work of philosophical aesthetics. The three *Critiques* form a complete systematic study of the rational character of the human mind and its three basic capacities (e.g., 5:177). After investigating the faculty of cognition and the faculty of desire in the first two *Critiques*, the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure remains to be investigated. For Kant, the rationality of a given faculty or capacity has to do with its being governed by internal norms, which he calls ‘*a priori* principles’—*a priori* because the source of these principles is internal to the faculty itself as autonomous or self-legislative.<sup>4</sup> The third *Critique* is conceived as an investigation of the rational or “higher” part of the faculty of feeling—of the way human feelings are governed by internal normative principles, which manifests itself paradigmatically in our aesthetic responses to nature and works of art.<sup>5</sup>

The third *Critique* is at the same time an investigation of the power of judgment. Kant seems to think that the rationality of the human mind is explained by the rationality of its faculty of *cognition*, a point he expresses by saying that the three higher faculties of cognition (understanding, judgment, and reason) act as the higher faculties of the mind’s three basic faculties (5:198; 20:245-46). The faculty of feeling has the *power of judgment* as its higher part. Kant distinguishes the aesthetic from the teleological power of judgment. But he also says that the *aesthetic* power of judgment is fundamental to the power of judgment in its entirety, since “this alone contains a principle that the power of judgment lays at the basis of its reflection on nature entirely *a priori*”, a principle common to both aesthetic and teleological judgment (5:193).<sup>6</sup> For this and related reasons, some interpreters have argued that the subject matter of Kant’s aesthetic theory is, in fact, the capacity for judgment *simpliciter*.<sup>7</sup> This is not the place to evaluate this thesis. I only wish to note that if judgments of beauty are fundamental to the capacity for judgment *simpliciter*, it would *a fortiori* be fundamental to the capacity for *aesthetic* judgments, which span beyond judgments of beauty.

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<sup>4</sup> See Land (2021) and Schafer (2021).

<sup>5</sup> See Cohen (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Kant also says that “the principle of taste is the subjective principle of the power of judgment in general” (5:286).

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Arendt (1989), Fleischhacker (1999), Ginsborg (2015), Makkai (2021).

## 2. The Significance of Taste

My proposal is that, in Kant's view, beauty in the narrow sense has primacy over other aesthetic properties in the following sense: a capacity to discern and make judgments concerning other aesthetic values and qualities presupposes a capacity to discern and make judgments concerning beauty. This view does not entail that all other aesthetic values are reducible to beauty or that they are just varieties of beauty. Nor does it entail that beauty is constitutive of all positive aesthetic values, such that to be graceful or delicate is necessarily to be beautiful. After all, there are aesthetic qualities that are not immediately evaluative. These, too, I believe, depend on the subject's capacity for recognizing beauty.

For Kant, judgment of beauty requires the exercise of a capacity, the aesthetic power of judgment, that calls for cultivation.<sup>8</sup> He identifies this with 'taste' [*Geschmack*] in the ordinary (eighteenth-century) sense. Cultivation of taste is necessary in order to distinguish genuine from false beauty ('charm' [*Reiz*]). But I don't think this is all there is to Kant's claim. I disagree with those who hold that there is a single, objective, eternal standard of beauty and the faculty for detecting it (taste).<sup>9</sup> On my view, taste admits of a determinate form or shape which is subject to normative standards determined partly *a priori*, partly by culture and history. One reason to think this is that Kant accords the role of a rule-giver to the artist (i.e., genius). Through their original creation, the artist gives a rule to art, which has normative force upon subsequent works. The work of genius serves "as a standard or a rule for judging" other works (5:308). Crucially, such a rule is "original" and "new" and not derived from previous rules or examples (5:317). This implies that Kant allows the standard of taste (for art) to vary depending on art-historical situation.<sup>10</sup>

My suggestion is that part of what it is for taste to be given a determinate shape according to the current artistic practice is for it to be molded into capacities for discerning other aesthetic properties. For what differentiates one historical standard of artistic taste from another if not the set of aesthetic properties one finds (or ought to find) appealing or unappealing? To appreciate and judge the aesthetic merit of a work according to a given standard of taste, one must be in a position to discern the relevant aesthetic properties. Capacities to discern other aesthetic properties arise from the basic malleable or

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<sup>8</sup> 5:225, 5:283. For discussion, see Matherne (2019).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Ameriks (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Kant thinks that this marks a difference between natural beauty and artistic beauty. "The judging of [the beauty of nature] requires only taste". But "the possibility of [the beauty of art] (which must also be taken account of in the judging of such an object) requires genius" (5:311).

expandable capacity Kant calls ‘taste’. They are particular empirical determinations or modulations of taste, which could be characterized as the basic capacity for aesthetic sensitivity. Our sensitivity for diverse aesthetic values and qualities does not consist in a bundle of unrelated capacities; these are systematically related insofar as they are determinations of one and the same basic determinable capacity.

What this basic capacity enables, for Kant, is awareness of the object’s formal purposiveness or purposiveness without a purpose. This means that we apprehend the beautiful object as a distinctive kind of unity. This unity is not spatiotemporal but broadly functional (without determinate functions), analogous to organic unity. In judging an organism to be unity, we consider each of its parts as performing a specific function in reciprocal relation to one another and to the whole. Analogously, when we (seek to) judge an object to be beautiful, we consider its sensible properties in the light of their interrelation and in the context of the whole—how they interact, complement, and contrast with one another to generate experience of a unified whole.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, our capacity to recognize an object’s beauty involves the ability to engage in a distinctive mode or manner of apprehending it. Kant calls this ‘mere reflection’. The object may fail to exhibit (a sufficient degree of) purposive unity and thus fail to be beautiful, but we still exercise a capacity to “reflect” upon it as long as we seek to evaluate the object in terms of its beauty. This is analogous (in some respects) to trying to solve a puzzle (say, Sudoku) which has no solution. We exercise a capacity to solve that type of puzzle as long as we continue to search for a solution.

The same ‘merely reflective’ mode of apprehension, I suggest, is involved the exercise of aesthetic capacities in general. As Frank Sibley observes, “the particular aesthetic character of something may be said to result from the *totality* of its relevant non-aesthetic characteristics”.<sup>12</sup> Take a painting that we find balanced or a poem that we find moving. We can easily imagine that a slight change—adding a stroke here or darkening the color there, reordering this pair of words or changing that one—may result in a different totality that is no longer balanced or moving. It is balanced or moving “because everything about the work is exactly as it is”. When we make a judgment concerning the aesthetic character of an object, we attend to the totality of its sensible properties. We engage, that is, in the

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<sup>11</sup> I’m indebted to Zuckert (2006) for the interpretation presented in this paragraph.

<sup>12</sup> Sibley (2001, p. 35).

same cognitive activity that we do when we evaluate an object in terms of beauty: relating its sensible properties to one another and considering how they hold together as a whole. This is what we do when we attend to an object as an *aesthetic* object.

But why does it follow that a capacity to judge something to be balanced or moving presupposes a capacity to judge it to be beautiful? My view is that there is just one capacity that can be characterized in two ways: as a capacity for mere reflection *or* as a capacity for recognizing beauty. It is a capacity for apprehension whose *aim* is to discern the object's purposive unity. To exercise such a capacity is to relate the object's parts to one another in a distinctive way. But, in what way? In such a way as to make the object's purposive unity (if it has such) discernible or salient. This is the sense in which the capacity to recognize an object's formal purposiveness is akin to a perceptual capacity. As Kant puts it, taste is a "kind of" sense (5:293). But it is, strictly speaking, not a perceptual capacity. What it "detects" is irreducible to objective, non-aesthetic properties (though it depends on them). This type of unity cannot be characterized except by reference to one's *feeling* or affective response to individual objects. An object is experienced as beautiful when it elicits pleasure that signals the presence of this type of unity. To discern beauty *is* to feel "pleasure in mere reflection on the form of an object" (5:191); it is to judge "through feeling" (5:238). Taste is "the faculty for judging formal purposiveness [...] through the feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (5:194). The awareness of formal purposiveness is a kind of *felt* awareness.

My point is that although other aesthetic properties do not presuppose beauty or purposive unity (beauty is not a condition on possessing other aesthetic properties), to *discern* them requires the subject to engage in a mode of apprehension whose aim or end is to recognize such unity. One cannot see the grace of a Canova, hear the sweetness in a Chopin nocturne, or notice the gaudiness of a dress's colour unless one apprehends it *as if* to grasp its beauty (whether one judges it to be beautiful is beside the point). All aesthetic judgments share a common mode of apprehension. However, it cannot be characterized or defined except in terms of the affective response to an object it characteristically enables, namely, pleasure in the beautiful. All other aesthetic capacities thus presuppose a capacity to recognize beauty. This view may be seen as one way of fleshing out Paris's claim that beauty "tracks a distinctively human mode of valuing that is experiential—felt" (p. 13).

### 3. Beyond Kantian Beauty

I have suggested how an account of the primacy of beauty could be developed on the basis of Kant's view in the *Critique of Judgment*. But is Kantian beauty *narrow*, *thick*, and *deep*? Does it correspond to the concept of beauty Paris advocates? My answer is yes.

Kant analyzes beauty in terms of formal features (disinterestedness, universality, etc.) that seem applicable to a wide range of aesthetic judgments. We might be tempted to take Kant to be concerned with aesthetic success in general, thus with beauty in the *broad* sense. But as I pointed out, Kantian beauty must *at least* be so narrow as to exclude sublimity, defined in terms of formlessness and "its resistance to the interest of the senses" (5:267).<sup>13</sup> Kantian beauty is also distinguished from other species of aesthetic success by its association with form (cf. Paris, pp. 4, 7) and a qualitatively distinctive kind of pleasure.

Like Paris's preferred concept of beauty, Kantian beauty is thick. And, similarly, it acquires its thickness or descriptive dimension through its connection with (purposive) form. Kant's concept of form, however, is more flexible and capacious than the more familiar concept of form favoured by twentieth-century formalists like Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Clement Greenberg. As Rachel Zuckert argues, by conceiving form in terms of unity or relation, rather than spatiotemporal properties, Kant can accommodate the unity of tangible form and representational content in a work of art. This is because purposive relations can obtain between aspects of content or between these and sensible properties.<sup>14</sup> It is thus no surprise that, despite his alleged formalism, Kant holds that beauty (both artistic and natural) is "the expression of aesthetic ideas" (5:320).<sup>15</sup> An aesthetic idea, what great works of art and magnificent vistas present us with, is a sensible representation so rich in *content* that it outstrips our concepts—"a coherent whole of an unutterable fullness of thought" (5:329).

The unification of form and content leads us, finally, to the sense in which Kantian beauty is deep, profound, and meaningful. Aesthetic ideation through purposive forms allows beautiful objects to instantiate a distinctive mode of presentation of content—'symbolization' of abstract ideas that

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<sup>13</sup> The capacity to experience the sublime might also allow for similar expansion or modulation. For instance, aesthetic values associated with tragedy, horror, and the grotesque could plausibly be aligned with the sublime. For an influential application of Kant's theory of the sublime to tragedy, see Schiller (1993).

<sup>14</sup> Zuckert (2006, p. 163).

<sup>15</sup> For recent discussion, see Chignell (2007) and Matherne (2013).



embody our deepest values. Following a venerable tradition, Paris locates the ‘depth’ of beauty in its affinity to non-aesthetic values, especially the good life, moral goodness, and justice. Kant, no doubt, belongs to this tradition when he claims, famously, that beauty is the symbol of morality (5:351). In experiencing beauty, we at the same time feel “a certain ennoblement and elevation” of the mind. This feeling is “analogical to the consciousness of a mental state produced by moral judgments” (5:354). Beauty thus presents us with a sensible analogue of the morally good, which, for Kant, is tied to freedom and the supersensible. Kant would agree with Paris that beauty “is a matter of pleasure in form as revelatory of deeper value” (p. 2).

Kant has always been at the centre of the philosophical discussion of beauty. But I have argued that his thinking is also relevant for the current interest in the question of beauty’s place in aesthetics and its relationship to other aesthetic concepts and properties. If judgments of beauty are fundamental to other kinds of aesthetic judgments in the way I have suggested, it would follow that the philosophical analysis of judgments of beauty can reveal something essential about aesthetic judgments in general—that the analysis of beauty is the foundation of what Mary Mothersill called “the semantics of critical language”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mothersill (1984).

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