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# *The Objectivity of Taste: Hume and Kant\**

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In two points at least, Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* can be read as an answer to Hume's essay *Of the Standard of Taste*.<sup>1</sup> First, can there be a standard of taste—as Hume affirms and Kant denies? Second, do judgments of taste ascribe to their object objective value, as Kant contends, or subjective value, as Hume seems to hold? I shall deal with these questions in turn. And I shall finish with a third part that tries to sketch Kant's theory of objective aesthetic value.

## I

Both Hume and Kant take it for granted that we often disagree with respect to our judgments of taste. Hume is very explicit: "The great variety of taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one's observation" (ST 226).<sup>2</sup> This variety of taste, says Hume, is really still greater than it first appears. People often agree only verbally in their aesthetic judgments since it is part of the meanings of the terms that "elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing" are to be praised while "fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy" are to be blamed (ST 227). When it comes to particulars, however, this seeming unanimity vanishes. It then becomes evident that the various critics had various things in mind when they seemed to agree in their praises and blames.

Both Hume and Kant furthermore agree that, as Kant puts it, the "determining ground of [an aesthetic judgment] *cannot be other than subjective*", namely one's feelings of pleasure and displeasure (CJ 203). Now, if judgments of taste simply were meant to be expressions of someone's likings or dislikings, the "great variety of taste" would be perfectly understandable. But there seems to be

evidence that this is not how things are. Kant observes that, as a matter of fact, we speak of beauty and deformity (and, one may add, of other aesthetic qualities) as if they were qualities of the object, and we in fact claim to be objectively right in our aesthetic judgments (cf. CJ § 6). It would be wrong to say: 'This object is beautiful', if we only wanted to express the fact that we are pleased in beholding it. Kant furthermore holds that we are quite right in expressing our aesthetic judgments in an objective mode of speech. It would follow then that our judgments of taste are meant to designate some objective matter of fact. Beauty and deformity would seem to be qualities of the objects which we judge aesthetically. And as we shall see, Kant in fact provides an explanation of the objectivity of beauty and deformity. Hume, on his part, even in the face of the "great variety of taste", declares it "natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (ST 229). It is the very aim of his essay to reveal the nature of such a standard of taste, and to show how it works, thereby assuring the objectivity of aesthetic judgments.

But there is also disagreement between Hume and Kant. The intriguing fact is that Kant in a way concedes aesthetic qualities to be objective while he nevertheless expressly denies what Hume affirms, namely the possibility of a standard of taste: "There can be no objective rule of taste which by concepts decided whether an object was beautiful" (CJ 231). To see the reason for Kant's denial, it will help to clarify Hume's conception of a standard of taste.

Any attempt to establish a standard of taste is bound to fail if there is a fundamental difference between judgments and sentiments such that, as the slogan goes, "all sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself", while "among a thousand different opinions, which different men may entertain of the same object, there is one, and but one, that is just and true", due to the fact that judgments and opinions *qua* "determinations of the understanding . . . have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact" (ST 230). And since beauty belongs to sentiment and "no sentiment represents what is really in the object", it would follow that "beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the

real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter" (ST 230). And if so, things would be as the old saying goes, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, as much in aesthetic matters as in food and drink.

However, Hume observes at the outset of his essay that we in fact don't behave like that. Not only that we do quarrel about judgments of aesthetic taste, we also quarrel about bodily taste as well as about perceptual opinions. Thus, in fact, we do not accept that "all sentiment is right". We suppose that it does make good sense to attribute sensible qualities to perceptual objects, and to claim to know what the perceived objects are like. Sentiments then, though they are feelings, match judgments in referring to something beyond themselves. Sentiments must be understood as non-reflective, perception-based, spontaneous judgments which are right or wrong, depending on what the "real matters of fact" are (ST 230). The only difficulty with sentiments, then, seems to be the same as with judgments and opinions in general, namely "to fix and ascertain" their truth and falsity (ST 230).

This task, however, leads into trouble. Sentiments, though judgments, are feelings nonetheless. They are something occurring to us, not something we arrive at through operations of our understanding. But then, how are we to decide the truthfulness of sentiments? How are we to spell out a rule by which to confirm one sentiment, and to condemn another?

Hume goes so far as to declare it "certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment" (ST 235). What nevertheless provides reasonable hope for the establishment of a standard of taste is the fact that "it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings" (ST 235). So, aesthetic predicates appear to show a certain ambiguity: Sometimes they are used to designate states of the mind, the peculiar delight in beauty or the peculiar uneasiness that attends deformity (cf. T 298). Sometimes they designate "real matters of fact", namely certain qualities in objects which cause (under suitable circumstances) specific feelings in us.

In order now to establish a standard of taste, Hume tries to press the analogy between bodily and mental taste as far as possible. The key to his aesthetics lies in a little anecdote he takes from *Don Quixote*. There Sancho Pansa pretends to have good judgment about wine since this faculty is hereditary in his family. To prove his claim, he tells a story of two of his kinsmen who were well known for their fine tongue and who

were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of good vintage. One of them tastes it; considers it; and after a mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine, but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it. (ST 234 f)

“The great resemblance between bodily and mental taste”, Hume continues, “will easily teach us to apply this story.” The application is as follows. We may expect a certain sensitivity for aesthetic qualities to belong to our normal mental equipment. Partial or total lack of such sensitivity would explain, accordingly, aesthetic blindness or deafness. What is more important: experience and education affect the degree of delicacy of mental taste. Different individuals show various individual profiles of aesthetic sensitivity, so that not anyone is as good at recognizing aesthetic qualities as anyone else. Given moreover that our bodily senses work reliably only under suitable circumstances, it is no surprise that Hume, by analogy, is dealing at some length with the various subtle factors influencing, and perhaps invalidating, the judgments of mental taste. On these lines, it seems, the “great variety of taste” could be explained in a way compatible with the idea that aesthetic qualities, in a certain sense, are “qualities in the things themselves”. The judgment of a well trained and well functioning taste would indicate then, under suitable circumstances, “what is really in the object” (ST 230). It would be the one and only one right judgment; and hence it would be objectively valid. To be sure, we usually do not know, and do not need to know, what beauty and deformity objectively consist in, just as we don’t know what makes sugar look white and taste sweet. We come to know aesthetic qualities through peculiar feelings, since “beauty of all kinds gives us a peculiar delight and satisfaction; as deformity produces pain” (T 298). Yet thanks to the order of nature, our feelings may serve as reliable indicators of objective matters of fact, since

beauty is such an order and construction of parts, as either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. This is the distinguishing character of beauty, and forms all the difference betwixt it and deformity, whose natural tendency is to produce uneasiness. (T 299)

So for Hume aesthetics becomes an empirical investigation,

primarily of works of art, which tries to find out the ingredients, as it were, or the “certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings” of delight inherent to beauty, or of uneasiness attendant to deformity (ST 235). Such knowledge of the objective basis of aesthetic qualities would, by the same token, provide the “rules of composition” (ST 231) which an artist has to observe in his creations:

To produce these general rules or avowed patterns of composition is like finding the key with the leathern thong, which justified the verdict of Sancho’s kinsmen, and confounded these pretended judges who condemned them. (ST 235)

Obviously, such rules of composition would constitute an objective standard of taste. And aesthetic criticism would become an empirical science, as Hume had projected it in the introduction to his *Treatise* (cf. T xv f). As long as we don’t have a scientific aesthetics, however, artists must discover the rules of composition “either by genius or by observation” (ST 231). And with respect to the standard of taste, we have to rely on the joint judgment of the community of good critics:

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty. (ST 241)

The verdict of the community of critics is valid, not because standards of taste, just as standards of fashion, are changeable social conventions, but because good critics are the best epistemic instruments we have for aesthetic qualities. They are just precisely attuned detectors.

I want to turn to Kant now. It is easy to see in what respects Kant agrees with Hume’s theory. When “in order to discern whether or not something is beautiful”, we relate the representation of the object “to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (CJ 203), our judgment is immediate, not based on any criteria, but on specific emotional reactions towards the object perceived. Nevertheless, there can be one, and only one, right answer to the question whether or not the object is beautiful. Thus we are right to claim objective validity for our judgments of taste, even though we are not able to produce such evidence as would prove our case against everybody disputing it.

Furthermore, Kant also thinks, though this is easily overlooked, that beauty is a quality in the object itself. His well known doctrine that the basis of beauty is “a mere formal purposiveness, that is

to say, a purposiveness without purpose'' (CJ 226) corresponds to Hume's statement that beauty is a certain order or construction of parts (cf. T 299). What Kant has in mind when he speaks of formal purposiveness, is the mere formal structure of integrated wholes. An integrated whole is nothing but a manifold of parts, all of which fit together such that nothing could be added, nor left out, nor changed in its position without destroying the structure that makes it a whole.

This concept of beauty is hardly new. It is deeply rooted in the classical tradition. Kant, however, rightly stressed the fact that in beholding a beautiful object we cannot avoid the idea that the object is due to an intentional design, though we don't know of any real functioning, be it of parts, be it of the object as a whole. At least, this is true of "free beauties", the paradigm cases of which are natural beauties, like blossoms:

Hardly anyone but the botanist knows what sort of a thing a blossom is meant to be. The botanist recognizes in it the reproductive organ of the flower; but even he disregards this purpose of nature when he judges it by taste. This judgment is therefore based on no perfection of any kind, on no internal purposiveness as point of reference for the synthesis of the manifold . . . No concept is here presupposed of any purpose for which the manifold should serve the given object [and no concept of] what the given object therefore is meant to be. (CJ 229 f)

Not all beauty, however, is free beauty. Artifacts, designed to serve practical needs, can be beautiful objects only if their form or structure is compatible with their purpose. Thus, to have a concept of this purpose is indispensable for judging such conditioned beauty. This does not imply that conditioned beauty can be defined in terms of purposiveness while free beauty cannot. The conditions imposed by the purpose are only necessary conditions of beauty. But of course something that perfectly fits its purpose may or may not be beautiful. So in these cases too, beauty is to be understood as the formal property of being an integrated whole.

For Kant as for Hume, then, whether or not something is beautiful depends on qualities in the object itself, namely its composition or design. It is the formal property of integration of parts, or its lack, that beauty, or deformity, objectively consist in. *Mutatis mutandis*, the objectivity thesis holds for other aesthetic qualities, too. The *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* offers similar explanations for various types of sublimity. And Kant could have added more if he had been interested in the matter. In the same way, Hume might have been expected to give a more detailed account of at least some

of the rules of composition. Many we know perfectly well already. Occasionally Hume mentions Palladio and Perrault (cf. EPM 292) or “the rules of architecture” (T 299). The rules of classicism, then, surely form part of the canon of the rules which Hume expects scientific aesthetics to provide.

So far there is agreement between Hume and Kant. However, there is fundamental disagreement too. Although we may be assured that Kant was hardly less a classicist than Hume, he definitely denies that there can be a standard of taste by which we could regulate the verdicts about beauty and deformity. In Kant’s eyes, rules of composition obviously do not, and cannot, provide such a standard. The question is, why not?

Hume clearly assumes that there are natural laws specifying regular connections between certain qualities in the object and certain emotional reactions the specific character of which is determined by human nature, custom or even a capricious state of mind. In other words, Hume supposes that aesthetic predicates distinguish natural kinds of things which are specific causal antecedents of specific types of feelings. In Kant’s view, however, we will never be able to single out, on the basis of “general observations” (ST 231), kinds of things whose members by their very nature (and “from the original structure of the internal fabric” of the soul—ST 233) have been (as Hume says) “universally found to please in all countries and all ages” (ST 231), since there are no such kinds of things.

But does not Kant’s own definition of beauty as “purposiveness without purpose” provide a concept of the kind of beautiful things, too? In fact, it doesn’t; or rather, it does so only superficially. We may, of course, divide the world in arbitrary ways by any set of predicates. And any such division will give us kinds of things, in a formal sense. Thus, in this trivial sense, aesthetic predicates represent concepts of kinds of things. But things are different if we take ‘concepts of objects’ in the restricted sense where objects are meant to be objects of empirical knowledge. In this respect, not any set of predicates is as good as any other. In Kant’s theory of empirical knowledge, the categories are general concepts that specify what it is for a thing to be an object of empirical knowledge. It must be a substance for instance, and must be causally, i.e. lawfully connected to other things. The concepts we use in empirical inquiries are not categories, but empirical concepts, derived from empirical generalisations. Such empirical concepts, however, must conform to the categories insofar as they must divide the world, with respect to substance and causal powers for instance, so as to serve induction and projection. In order to do that, empirical concepts obviously



must provide criteria which we can use effectively in establishing, or denying, the kind-membership of anything given in perception. This is exactly what aesthetic predicates fail to provide. So they do not represent concepts of objects, in the restricted sense of the term. Therefore, even though aesthetic qualities are objective properties, we cannot discern by the use of concepts whether or not something is beautiful.

To put the point differently: Ask somebody to pick out the beautiful things in the world. Tell him that beauty consists in something's being an integrated whole. Even so, he would not be able to fulfill his task. He would not really know what to look for. Beautiful things are a mixed bag comprising flowers, animals, landscapes, artifacts serving practical needs, artworks of various kinds, and many other things. There is no reason to expect that all of these will have properties in common to which projectible predicates could be taken to be referring. "Purposiveness without purpose" means a thousand different things in a thousand different cases. Aesthetic predicates therefore do not guide induction. Aesthetic qualities are strictly structural qualities of objects which we may come to know by perceiving them. Thus, aesthetic predicates cut across our established systems of empirical concepts of objects.

This explains also what Kant calls the singularity of aesthetic judgments. 'This F is G' is the proper logical form of a judgment of taste (where 'G' is a variable for aesthetic predicates), since from the fact that something is an F, nothing follows for its being or not being G.

Thus it is impossible that inductive generalisations from instances of aesthetic experience will give us a rule of taste. Of course, the singularity of aesthetic judgments does not preclude generalisations based on them:

For instance, the rose at which I am looking I declare in my judgment of taste to be beautiful. But 'roses in general are beautiful' is a judgment which arises from a comparison of many single roses and is now asserted, not as a mere aesthetic judgment, but as a logical judgment founded on one that is aesthetic. (CJ 215)

Such generalisations may have some cognitive value. However, they are of no use "in order to discern whether or not something [a certain rose, for instance] is beautiful" (CJ 203), since aesthetic generalisations are just this: generalisations—generally, but not universally true. They are not lawlike. From the fact that this single rose or many other ones (be it even all roses we ever saw) are beautiful, we are not entitled to conclude that all roses are beautiful; nor are we entitled to conclude from the fact that roses in general

are beautiful that any single one will be so too. This is what Kant means by saying that we cannot judge by concepts about beauty and deformity. And this is why he rejects Hume's idea of a standard of taste.<sup>3</sup>

## II

So far I have neglected the fact that judgments of taste not only express discriminations of qualities, but also express praise or blame. Judgments of taste are value judgments, and aesthetic predicates are value predicates. In Hume's view, the connection between the discrimination and the evaluation inherent in aesthetic judgments is this. To call something beautiful, is, on the one hand to refer, at least implicitly, to certain objective qualities which, under suitable circumstances, are apt to cause a specific delight, and it is on the other hand to refer to occurrences of such a feeling. Hume seems to presuppose that pleasure (at least *prima facie*) is inherently good, while pain is inherently bad. Therefore he takes it to be part of the meaning of aesthetic predicates that they are expressions of praise or blame.

At first glance, Kant appears to hold a very similar position. We discriminate between beauty and non-beauty through our feeling of pleasure or displeasure, he says. That in his eyes judgments of taste are value judgments too is plain from the fact that in his *Analysis of Beauty*, Kant contrasts the beautiful with the agreeable and the good. Kant furthermore seems to be even more explicit than Hume about the difference between the two aspects of discrimination and evaluation, two things we do not usually distinguish when talking of taste and sentiment. In his book on philosophical anthropology, Kant points out the ambiguity attached to such terms as 'taste': "As we use this term, it is to be understood either to mean mere 'discriminative taste', or, together with this, to mean 'agreeable taste' too." (Anthropology 239) And while it makes good sense, as Kant further notes, to claim objective validity for our judgments of discriminative taste, it does not make any sense at all to claim that something must taste good to anybody else because of the fact that it tastes good to me. In matters of agreeable or disagreeable taste, everybody judges for himself. What counts as agreeable or not to somebody depends solely on him. Accordingly, we may speak of subjective value and of subjective value judgments in all cases where the nature of the individual, his or her idiosyncratic profile of preferences, determines what counts as positive or negative value for him or her. Bodily taste is the paradigm case. This gives Kant his technical term 'the agreeable', as a common

noun for all the varieties of subjective value. Kant restricts the realm of the agreeable to the realm of sensual experience. However, I think there is no good reason for this restriction. It does not weaken Kant's point if we include mental experiences as well. To read a book may or may not be agreeable to me, and to contemplate a beautiful object sometimes is and sometimes is not agreeable to me. Intellectual experiences may have subjective value just as sensual ones do.

This then is the point where a further fundamental disagreement between Hume and Kant emerges. In Kant's view, aesthetic<sup>4</sup> value is objective value, while he takes it that, in terms of a theory like Hume's, aesthetic predicates can designate no other than subjective value. With respect to Augustine's famous question: whether something is beautiful because of the fact that it pleases, or whether something pleases because of the fact that it is beautiful, Kant would affirm the latter, while in his eyes Hume is committed to the first alternative.

With Hume and many others from antiquity on, Kant agrees that something beautiful is valuable. He furthermore agrees that a beautiful thing is pleasurable. Therefore, Kant would not, and could not, I think, object to the reasoning that, since pleasure (at least *prima facie*) is a good thing for us humans, the beautiful thing carries value for us, just because of the fact that it is pleasurable. However, the question is whether this is aesthetic value or not. If, in calling an object beautiful, a person is to be understood as attributing value to it *because* of the fact that he experienced the object to please him, then this verdict would be a subjective value judgment, and thus aesthetic value would be subjective value. But the question is precisely whether or not in this respect aesthetic taste is similar to bodily taste.

Kant has two points here. He insists that statements like 'Roses in general are beautiful' are of quite another type than judgments attributing beauty to some single object, because only the latter is a genuine value judgment, while the former is a descriptive statement about roses and their aesthetic value in general. Hence, "general observations concerning what has been found to please in all countries and in all ages" (ST 231), as Hume projects them, will never provide a rule whereby to judge somebody's sentiments. *Qua* attributions of subjective value, indeed "all sentiment is right", and all hope for a standard of taste is vain.

One might argue that such an objection against Hume is misguided, since Hume himself was aware of the point.

Truth is disputable; not taste: what exists in the nature of things

is the standard of our judgment; what each man feels within himself is the standard of sentiment . . . the harmony of verse, the tenderness of passion, the brilliancy of wit, must give immediate pleasure. No man reasons concerning another's beauty. (EPM 171) [Or] if we reason concerning it, and endeavour to fix its standard, we regard a new fact, to wit, the general taste of mankind, or some such fact which may be object of reasoning and enquiry. (EHU 165)

In other words: Although it would be nonsense to judge anyone's likings or dislikings as right or wrong, sentiments can be reshaped and taste can be adjusted to that of mankind, for instance. "In many orders of beauty," Hume observes, "particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment." (EPM 173) That our subjective evaluations depend only on us is not to say that our profiles of preference are immune to influence and change. And general observations concerning the general taste of mankind could be understood as standards of aesthetic evaluations in the sense that they might serve as guidelines of aesthetic education.

Here then Kant's second point comes into play: the logical form of our judgments of taste does not coincide with our declarations of likings and dislikings. To call something agreeable or disagreeable is always, explicitly or by implication, to say *to whom* the object in question proved to be agreeable or disagreeable. Not so with our aesthetic judgments. Kant is very explicit on this point, and rightly so:

As to the *agreeable*, everyone concedes that his judgment, which he bases on a private feeling and in which he says of an object that he likes it, is restricted solely to his own person. Thus if a man says that Canary wine is pleasurable, he will be quite willing to accept a correction to his expression, reminding him that he should say: it is pleasurable *to me* . . . The case is quite different with the beautiful. It would, on the contrary, be ridiculous if somebody who prided himself on his taste thought of justifying himself by saying: this thing . . . is beautiful *for me*. (CJ 212)

The question however is what we are to make of this observation which so far only states a linguistic fact. That we speak differently of our likings and dislikings and of beauty and deformity might turn out, after all, as one of the oddities of our language that couldn't disprove the thesis that all aesthetic value is subjective value. "Beauty and deformity" says Hume "belong entirely to the sentiment" (ST 235), mine or yours, so that if I praise or blame something for its beauty or deformity, I do so exactly for its pleasing or displeasing *me*.

Or we may take the linguistic difference between statements about the agreeable or the disagreeable and statements about beauty

or deformity as a strong hint that we are saying quite different things in both cases, namely that we attribute objective value where we are calling something beautiful, and subjective value only where we call something agreeable. This is what Kant thinks. It is absolutely clear to him that this is a crucial point in his argument. He knows that all further speculations about the nature of beauty's objective value depend on the concession of what he calls the universality of judgments of taste:

One must be convinced of the following points. In the judgment of taste (about the beautiful) the pleasure taken in an object is imputed to *everyone* without, however, any conceptual foundation . . . This claim to universal validity so essentially belongs to any judgment in which we assert something to be *beautiful* that without implying the universal validity nobody would think of using the term 'beautiful'. Without this universal validity everything that pleases without concepts would be counted as agreeable; as to the agreeable, everyone is allowed to have his own mind and no one requests others to agree with his judgment . . . But this is precisely what always happens in the judgment of taste about beauty. (CJ 213 f)

Because of this difference Kant introduces a terminological distinction between "sensuous taste" (i.e. bodily taste) and "reflective taste" (which is no other than mental or aesthetic taste). And it is this distinction which could be read as Kant's tacit refusal of Hume's fundamental assumption of "the great resemblance between mental and bodily taste" (ST 235).

Now if the beautiful object is not valuable because it pleases somebody, but must please everybody because it carries objective value, it is natural to ask what sort of value this might be. And it is this question which Kant tries to answer in the famous § 9 of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*: "Examination of the question whether in the judgment of taste the feeling of pleasure is prior or posterior to judging the object" (CJ 216). An outline of this answer will form the last part of this paper.

### III

From what has been said so far it is clear that one of the two possibilities, mentioned in the title-question of § 9, is ruled out. Were it the case that we base our aesthetic verdicts on a previous feeling of pleasure or displeasure, caused by the object, then aesthetic value could be nothing but subjective value. So it would seem to be in the line of his argument, if Kant were to say that what precedes our taking delight in the object is the judging whether or not the object in question is beautiful. Kant actually doesn't say this, for

the simple reason, I think, that he would seem to contradict himself, since he started his analysis by the statement that it is by a feeling of pleasure or displeasure that we discern between beauty and non-beauty. Kant tries to avoid this threat of contradiction by drawing on the double nature of judgments of taste, namely to be discriminative and evaluative. “*In the judgment of taste*” about beauty (CJ 216—italics added), there are two things to be distinguished, namely the statement that the object pleases, and what Kant calls a “judging of the object”. This cognitive process of judging the object, however, which Kant describes in the body of § 9, and which is said to precede the feeling of pleasure, is nothing other than a judging of an object for beauty or deformity as far as these are objective features. What takes place when we are becoming aware of something beautiful is a process of reflection about the object. To call this cognitive process reflection is quite appropriate, given the kind of qualities in question. Purposiveness without purpose or being an integrated whole are, as we saw, merely formal properties that could be realised in a thousand different ways. To perceive beauty thus means to see that and how a given manifold of parts fit together into an integrated whole.

There are several highly problematic steps in Kant’s argument of § 9. The first one concerns the theoretical description of the just mentioned cognitive process of reflection. In terms of Kant’s psychology of cognition, such a process of reflection is said to involve the activity of two faculties of the mind: on the one hand imagination, which is the mental organ of apprehending manifold as such; on the other hand understanding, reducing to conceptual unity the non-conceptualized manifold of sense impressions which imagination collects, recollects, and presents to the understanding. However, reflection upon the mere formal structure of a given object, upon its design or pattern, is said to be significantly different from the usual functioning of imagination and understanding, when both work together in order to form, and to apply, empirical concepts of objects. Reflection upon aesthetic qualities is not guided by concepts nor is it aiming at concepts of objects. This is why Kant speaks of a “free play” (CJ 217) of imagination and understanding. Suppose now that the object upon which we reflect shows that it is an integrated whole. In Kant’s reading, this means that there is “harmony” (CJ 218) between imagination and understanding. It is as if the understanding gets what it wants, the reduction of unstructured manifold to understandable unity; while imagination too gets what it wants, the collection of a given manifold where nothing has to be left out because of failure to partake in conceptual unity. And if one gets what one wants to, one is pleased and

satisfied. In this way, the cognitive process of reflection is supposed to bring about a state of mental pleasure.

In the next step of his argument, Kant brings in a highly abstract notion of empirical cognition in general. Empirical cognition of whatever content, he says, always consists in a congruency of imagination and understanding. Usually, however, such congruency is not free play, but compelled by the understanding and its empirical concepts of objects. Kant now argues that the congruency of imagination and understanding in beholding beauty instantiates this abstract notion of empirical knowledge in general. And he argues further that the reflection about the object in question, though not led by empirical concepts, is nevertheless focussed in a certain way, namely by the notion of empirical knowledge in general, so that the formal structure of beauty becomes the intuitional counterpart of the abstract notion of cognition in general.

The only plausible reading of this Kantian idea, it seems to me, is to think of a twofold reflection taking place “in a judgment of taste”. On the first level, there is a reflective interplay in beholding a given object’s design. At a second level, we are supposed to “relate the representation of the object to cognition in general” (CJ 217), thereby becoming aware of the alleged fact that the mental state of perceiving beauty is of the same type as the mental state of empirical cognition. Hence the beautiful object comes to serve us as a representation, as a symbol or as a model, of the idea of empirical cognition in general.

Of course, this whole speculation sounds queer and rather far-fetched. Before criticising Kant, however, one further attempt to make a little more sense out of his speculations will be in place here. For this purpose we have to take into account the wider context of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. He explicates this context in the two Introductions to the third *Critique*, relating it back in particular to the theory of empirical knowledge exposed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. If for the sake of the present argument we concede Kant the results of the first *Critique*, he has demonstrated that the empirical world must yield to our cognitive attempts insofar as there are certain concepts, i.e. the categories, which define what it is to be an object of empirical cognition, and which necessarily apply to everything given to us in intuition. Thus the categories assure us that empirical knowledge of the world is principally possible. The categories, however, don’t specify how empirical cognition is to be done in particular. Many different conceptual divisions of the world into kinds of things are conceivable and are compatible with the set of categories. Hence the transcendental deduction of the categories

does not assure us that we in fact will be able to find out in detail the true system of the world. The *Critique of Judgment*, as an epistemological treatise, deals with the question of what type of reflection about nature may help us to decide here and may further our cognitive ambitions, especially with regard to the realm of living creatures. Generally speaking, we are asked to follow the principle that nature works according to teleological concepts. Such concepts serve our epistemic interests in the biological sciences for instance. What guides our reflection upon nature in order to find out her real division into genera and species are the ideas of function and purpose. The application of such concepts, however, does not imply any supposition of an intelligent being that really arranged things by will according to his plan and design. This is why Kant thought it requisite, in order to finish his critical inquiry, to write a *Critique of Teleological Judgment* which includes a critique of natural theology and of the argument from design. And this is also why Kant thought it fit to attach to it a *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, namely because the idea of purposiveness is the leading idea in judging about an object's beauty. This, then, is the framework for Kant's speculation about the meaning of judgments of reflective taste. Add to this framework the anthropological truism that human beings must be generally interested in acquiring empirical knowledge of the world we are bound to live in and to cope with. It is clear then that cognition is generally valuable for us human beings. Take further into account that Kant's paradigm cases of beauty are natural beauties. And remember that in a judgment of taste we are supposed to take the beautiful object as a representation of cognition in general,—all this together gives an idea of why beauty pleases and why it must be pleasurable for every human being. For natural beauty promises us, as it were, that cognition is achievable. It thus promises us a fulfillment of fundamental human needs. Nature, the producer of the beautiful thing, thereby shows itself to be intelligible in the manifold of her concrete phenomena. This is why natural beauty is valuable, not only for someone or other, but for every human being. Thus it is the metaphysical framework of Kant's theory of human cognition and of the empirical world which provides the key to his theory of objective aesthetic value.

Some final critical remarks, I think, are in order. Kant's theory of the meaning of a judgment of taste about beauty is at best a speculative proposal. No sound argument from well established premises leads to his conclusion. And even if we granted Kant every step in his reasoning, the result would be a very limited one. Only for beauty, indeed only for natural beauty, Kant sketched an answer



to the question of what objective aesthetic value consists in. But in fact, very likely none ever, reflecting on his aesthetic judgments, found the slightest hint for a connection between beauty and the idea of empirical cognition in general. And for the crucial step in his argument, viz. that we "relate a given representation of the object to cognition in general" (CJ 217), Kant relies on the shaky argument that, as a prerequisite for universally valid judgments, we need something communicable to everybody, and that nothing could be "universally communicated and shared except cognition and representation, so far as it belongs to cognition" (CJ 217).

Another serious defect comes to light when we consider the question of how we are supposed to become aware of the alleged fact that, beholding one single beautiful object, the state of our mind matches the state of mind involved in any empirical cognition? Since Kant sticks to the idea that it is by a feeling of pleasure or displeasure that we discern whether or not something is beautiful, he is forced to hold that a feeling of pleasure is itself the required awareness (cf. CJ § 12). This move, however, immediately invites the further question of how we are to distinguish between what pleases me because it fits my idiosyncratic preferences, and what pleases me, not for idiosyncratic reasons, but because it has objective value, for me as well as for everyone else. As is well known, Kant tries to draw a line between interested and disinterested pleasure. Interested pleasure, he says, relates to the existence of the pleasurable object and thereby also relates to our "appetitive faculty" (CJ 204), that is to say, it provides a motive for actions. Disinterested pleasure, on the other hand, is supposed to be free from any concern for the existence of the pleasurable object and thus does not move us towards action. Kant illustrates what he has in mind by the difference between the delights of contemplation through merely listening to, or looking at, something, and the pleasures gained through taking in of food and drink. This distinction, however, between interested and disinterested pleasure is not valid. Kant himself seems to have mistrusted it, since he concedes that we can never be quite sure whether an occurrence of pleasure is or is not an instance of "wholly disinterested pleasure" (CJ 204). There are no reliable criteria for the distinction between interested and disinterested pleasure. Indeed there cannot be such, since there is no such thing, really, as disinterested pleasure. To be sure, there are differences between modes of awareness. Contemplation in a way is less egocentric than the attentive take in of food and drink. To relish the qualities of food and drink seems to presuppose a certain self-awareness, while the man who really listens to a piece of music, for instance, seems

to be totally forgotten to himself. Nevertheless, the one mode of awareness is as interested as is the other. He who likes the state of aesthetic contemplation is as interested in the existence of some object, and is as motivated to repeat his visit to the museums or the concert halls from time to time as he who likes to drink a bottle of wine.

The distinction, then, between interested and disinterested pleasure turns out to be spurious. This shows the limits of the idea of taste as a paradigm for aesthetic judgments *qua* value judgments. The lesson which this conversation between Hume and Kant teaches us seems to be this. Both are right insofar as they take aesthetic properties to be properties in the objects themselves. But aesthetic predicates, as Kant showed, don't represent concepts of objects with clear cut criteria for their application. So it makes sense to use taste as a model for aesthetic discrimination. With respect to aesthetic value, Kant stresses the fact that to judge an object for the pleasure it conveys, is to judge it from an idiosyncratic point of view, so that the value which such a judgment attributes must be subjective value. That aesthetic value is subjective value seems to be compatible with Hume's idea of a standard of taste. Kant, however, objects that judgments of taste claim to attribute objective value. But he did not succeed in producing a convincing idea of what this value is, let alone in reconciling the alleged objectivity for aesthetic value with the idea of pleasure as the sole evidence for our aesthetic judgments. From this failure we should draw the conclusion that as far as pleasure or displeasure are the grounds of our judgments, the value they attribute will ever be subjective value, while on the other hand judgments about objective aesthetic value, if there is such a thing, cannot at all be judgments of taste.

#### NOTES

\*I am indebted to Rüdiger Bittner for considerable help in preparing an English version of this paper which was originally written in German.

<sup>1</sup>As far as we know, Kant had in his library the german translation of Hume's essay. To read the one text in the light of the other seems plausible therefore, not only for reasons of interest in solving fundamental problems in aesthetics, but also for uncovering links in the history of ideas.

<sup>2</sup>Quotations are indicated by abbreviations that explain themselves. Hume's essay *Of the Standard of Taste* is quoted from the edition of his *Essays* by Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis (LibertyClassics) 1987. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and his *Enquiries* are quoted from the Selby-Bigge edition, revised by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford (Clarendon Press) 1978 and 1973 respectively. With respect to quotations from Kant, page numbers refer to the standard edition of his works: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1902 ff (*Critique of Judgment* cf. vol v, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Viewpoint* cf. vol vii). For the translation of Kant's text I relied on Walter Cerf's edition of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Indianapolis—New York (Bobbs-Merrill) 1963, though I didn't follow him *verbatim*. Additions in [] brackets are mine.

<sup>3</sup>This is not the place to deal with Kant's theory of criticism. It is clear from what has been said, however, that he must reject the joint verdict of the critics as a standard of taste *faute de mieux* as well, although he could well concede that the critic's verdict may be of considerable help for coming to perceive beauty or deformity.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout this paper I took the term 'aesthetic' in the narrow sense of today's usage, and I neglected the fact that in Kant judgments of both bodily and mental taste are called aesthetic judgments.

## crítica

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