

# UNIVERSALITY IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUE AND THE BEAUTIFUL: ON PROVING BEAUTY FROM KANT ON

MIRCEA MARICA

**Abstract.** I argue that Kant's attempts to grant universality to aesthetics leave us without a clear-cut distinction between determinative judgements and judgements of taste in what provability is concerned. Both seem to have as their referent an evaluative dimension regarding how understanding stands in a satisfying rapport with the sensible or imagination.

**Key words:** aesthetics, Kant, proof, beauty, evaluation

## 1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that the third Kantian Critique was meant to coherently solve the dilemma concerning which path the subjective thinking has to pursue: appropriating the deterministic laws of nature or obeying the will to absolute freedom; in short, the step from a trained observer to a sovereign ruler.

One of the most important aspects of Kant's approach to aesthetics is the peculiarity of the judgement of taste: namely, the 'I', as the locus of the synthetic activity, can not rely on the pure classical schemata because the subjective conditions of aesthetic judgements lack concepts. Thus, while the attainment of scientific knowledge is explained by Kant in terms of the fittingness between intuition and understanding, knowing the beautiful does not seem to comply with this schema. This is the reason which makes Kant believe that a science of taste is impossible, but he tries to offer a critique of taste as a middle ground between mere subjectivism and scientific universalism.

I intend to argue that, although Kant goes through much trouble to sharply distinguish between determinative and reflective judgements, his attempts to grant universality to aesthetic judgements brings the latter closer to determinative judgements than he intended. Both seem to have as their referent an evaluative dimension regarding how understanding stands in a satisfying rapport with the sensible or imagination.

Also, I will argue, this opens the possibility towards an alternative interpretation regarding the relation between aesthetic judgements and understanding; aesthetic judgements would not be lacking concepts, but quite the opposite: they would offer an overwhelming abundance of concepts, which would account for the difficulty in offering proofs for their truth.

To this aim, I will first offer a brief historical overview, accounting for the contextual determinations of Kant's aesthetics, in order to highlight his hesitations and purpose. Further on, I will advance my above mentioned hypothesis, and provide it with support from two distinct angles: first, from an extended affectivity account, I will stress on the vagueness of the distinction Kant puts forth. Secondly, I will move on to support my thesis from a context-dependent view on proofs in general.

## **2. Contextual Determinations of Kant's Thoughts on Beauty: Between Burke and Baumgarten**

Roughly, the psychology of Kant's time discussed three faculties of the mind: the intellect, the judgement and the reason, corresponding to knowledge, the sentiment of pleasure and the will. Analogously, Kant thought, these three faculties correspond to the three propositions of a syllogism: the intellect provides the major, the judgement – the minor, and reason corresponds to the conclusion. Judgement is, thus, a connective link<sup>1</sup>.

In the first version of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR), Kant doubted aesthetics was even conceivable as a systematic structure. In 1769, he was very much into rejecting A.G. Baumgarten's view, according to which aesthetics must be a somehow technical endeavour, regulated by the analogy with the Leibnizian theory of reason<sup>2</sup>. Kant's refutation of this approach regarding taste was rooted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century British theory. The core idea of the latter can be summarized as follows: the criteria for taste are given by the real consensus of different people, as beauty is always linked with something other than pure understanding, that is, psycho-empirical moments<sup>3</sup>. It would be fair to say that this is a radical reduction, but it is not the aim of this paper to rigorously treat the common thread of the various British accounts of that time, nor to describe the dynamic of the embedded ideas, often in opposition; the sole purpose here is to remind ourselves of the framework in which the Kantian aesthetic theory was conceived. In this respect, it still must be pointed out that, while British philosophers were disputing over how to construct a theory of art and beauty starting from psychical-embodied experience, the Germanic cultural space was characterized by a reluctance to see art and the beauty as an object for scientific or philosophical endeavour. The first main German figure who recognized some cognitive potential in beauty and artistic intuitions, (though still a somehow inferior one) was Baumgarten.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert and Kuhn (1939: ch. XI).

<sup>2</sup> “[...] these lower faculties of cognition, in so far as they represent the connections among things, and in this respect are similar to reason [...] or the sum of all the cognitive faculties that represent the connections among things indistinctly.” (Baumgarten 2005: 146).

<sup>3</sup>As an irony, the history of British aesthetics indicates John Locke, maybe the second great despiser of poets after Plato, as one of the main sources for the theories of Art and Beauty practiced in Great Britain after 1750. Also, Edmund Burke (2001) was one of the most radical anti-rationalist among his fellows, reducing the entire aesthetic process to passions.

In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, younger Kant tried to define aesthetic thought following the English fashion. This work can be considered mainly as a collection of psycho-anthropological observations, in response to Edmund Burke's similar attempts to find a 'scientific' ground for a mature aesthetics<sup>4</sup>. But Burke's discourse is shaped to serve a special social theory; namely, passions as the conditions for beauty are viewed as linked with social self-preservation and overcoming an existential obstacle or terror. All this results in one distinct feature of Burke's aesthetic theory: beauty and sublime are different in origins; while the former rests on pleasure or sensual love, the later rests on a special delight somehow earned in the struggle for improvement.

In Kant's terms, Burke's attempts are only a half-step away from universality. His thought is starting from a sympathetic position towards Burke's, and evolves to a more nuanced one (Gilbert and Kuhn 1939: 321, 325).

If in 1781 (CPR A edition) Baumgarten's efforts were simply "false hopes" in Kant's view, because the "taste is empiric", in 1787, the year of the second edition of the first Critique, "empiric" is only referring to the "sources" of taste judgements, and not to the taste as such (1996: 74). Still, Kant remains sceptical about Baumgarten's conceptions. In the CPR (B edition), Kant considers that the notion of aesthetic has been largely misused: Kant operates a division between transcendental aesthetic as a science of pure intuition and the aesthetics as an object of despised speculative philosophy with a psychological meaning<sup>5</sup>.

However, the debut of the critical period seems to be marked by a tacit sacrifice with respect to the real possibility of a theory of taste; Kant is beginning to realize that aesthetics (other than what he called transcendental aesthetic) is a "new field of knowledge" and it must be explored<sup>6</sup>. Nine years later, he is back on the use of the term *aesthetic* as judgement of taste and his previous recommendations on the matter become outdated. This is the exact moment of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) (CJ). As a general remark, Kantian aesthetic judge-

<sup>4</sup> In the 1991 edition, Burke's name appears in the following notes: "Mountains and plains. As it was nature in its powerful destruction, hence the fables of giants. – It leads to the raving of the imagination, and then the mind falls victim to fear of tension and madness. Burke – Milton – Klopstock. Aeneas's descent into hell. – The night is sublime, the day is beautiful. Deserts, inhabited by spirits. – Ancient abandoned castles". (1991: 523).

<sup>5</sup> "The Germans are the only people who presently (1781) have come to use the word *aesthetic[s]* to designate what others call the critique of taste. [...] Because of this it is advisable to follow either of two alternatives. One of these is to stop using this new name *aesthetic[s]* in this sense of critique of taste, and to reserve the name *aesthetic[s]* for the doctrine of sensibility that is true science. [...] The other alternative would be for the new *aesthetic[s]* to share the name with speculative philosophy. We would then take the name partly in its transcendental meaning, and partly in the psychological meaning." (Kant 1996: 74).

<sup>6</sup> In a letter addressed to Reinhold, dated 1787, Kant recognizes that the general schema of his first Critiques had been confirmed in his mind by the discovery of a new field of knowledge with a priori principles. This new field of knowledge is the field of aesthetics. See Caird (1909: 376–377).

ment is subjective, intimately linked to the internal feeling of pleasure or displeasure. In fact, the term judgement will be used as an attempt to bridge the objectivity presupposed in justification with the necessary subjectivity of reason. The picture we are faced with is showing a nature unknowable in-itself, only knowable in its appearances to the ego thanks to a *status quo* of the ego called synthesis (Bowie 2003: 21–24).

Thus, this extraordinary power of the subject is a fortunate epistemic coincidence arising from being determined by the laws of nature to give laws to the same nature. This performance has as its main methodology the well-known Kantian split operated in the object of reflection: the noumenal and the phenomenal, the will in-itself and the effects of the will, I and the world. The direct consequence with regard to beauty would be that aesthetic knowledge would only be possible inasmuch as we can apply some norms to intuition. Going deeper into this proposed analogy with his previous two Critiques, it is only reasonable to ask about the necessary conditions for the existence of beauty.

### 3. Extending Affectivity

The general condition for a judgement to take place consists in the accordance of the representation by which the object is given in the intuition (as manifoldness) with the understanding (concepts representing the unity which binds manifoldness). The system introduced in *CPR* gives to imagination the central responsibility of synthesizing the manifold given by the senses according to the norms that are prescribed by the understanding. A general norm prescribed by the understanding grants knowledge of the perceptual moments of a given object through a particular concept. One of the most important aspects of Kant's approach is the "peculiarity" of the judgement of taste<sup>7</sup>: namely, the 'I', as the locus of the synthetic activity, can not rely on the pure classical schemata because the subjective conditions of aesthetic judgements lack concepts.

This is the reason which makes Kant to believe that a science of taste is impossible, but he tries to offer a critique of taste as a middle ground between mere subjectivism and scientific universalism. The faculty of judgement unifies the manifoldness in two manners: either thinks a specific moment A starting from a general category (determinant thinking, from general to particular), or tries to find the universal principle starting from the specific moment (reflective thinking). Kant compensates for the lack of concepts with the internal perception of pleasure<sup>8</sup>. At this point, judgements of taste are conceived more as psychological moments in the

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<sup>7</sup> See Kant (2007: ch. 37, 39, pp. 119–121 and ch. 9).

<sup>8</sup> "First of all we have here to note that a universality which does not rest upon concepts of the object (even though these are only empirical) is in no way logical, but aesthetic, i.e. does not involve any objective quantity of the judgement, but only one that is subjective. For this universality I use the expression universal validity, which denotes the validity of the reference of a representation, not to the cognitive faculties, but to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure for every subject." (Kant 2007: 46).

human being, a conception which is not so far removed from Burke's, and we know now that this is not what Kant intended. The replacement is needed to make room for the famous Deduction of taste and for the subjective universality of aesthetic judgements. The beautiful depends on the harmonic relation born in the free play of the imagination and the understanding.

The relation of the imagination with the understanding brings out some ambiguities which have puzzled Kant's scholars since: if such interplay does exist, this means that imagination can also structure data independently or prior to understanding in a spontaneous impulse. Consequently, imagination can be both receptive and productive. Furthermore, concerning sensibility, as a non-discursive type of spontaneity (different from the spontaneity of the understanding), the forms of intuition are generated by what Kant in the CPR – A edition – calls the "synopsis" of the manifold in sensible intuition, which could be the "pure synthesis of apprehension" and also the "pure figurative synthesis of the imagination" (*synthesis speciosa* in the B edition)<sup>9</sup>.

The spontaneous imagination is the primordial capacity to come up with representations that have no external sensible source. They are simply originated from the creative capacity of the human mind. This would lead to some different primordial region, other than the mere immanence of subjectivity, a transcendent element pouring universality in the very transcendental ego; but Kant chooses to ignore this realm. Instead, CJ appeals to modal fictionalism, to which Kant also remains committed in his philosophy of religion, thus avoiding dealing with the whole problematic of the transcendent. His lack of appetite for special metaphysics compelled him to bring to the table a theory of aesthetic communicability in the name of which he claims universalism.

The locus of this free play is *sensus communis*. Here, 'communis' is to be read as harmony in the free play of faculties<sup>10</sup>. Harmony is taken to be the accordance of cognitive faculties, and can only be produced as internal feeling. Introducing this dimension, Kant wants to define taste as being the medium term between aesthetic moments and the determinative thinking specific to natural philosophy, hoping to bridge the gap between reason and will.

On the one hand, taste must be cultivated, but on the other hand, according to what norms? Only after this transcendental definition of taste, Kant offers an analysis of beauty, though with a vague normativity. The difference between logical (as determinative) and aesthetical judgements (as reflective) would consist in what Kant calls *proofs*. Taste can give none. So the defining mark of determinative judgements is the concept, which offers objectivity to our sense data,

<sup>9</sup> This ambiguity is thoroughly thematized in Heidegger's (1929) *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, translated by R. Taft, Bloomington: Indiana University Press [1997].

<sup>10</sup> "The judgement of taste, therefore, depends on our presupposing the existence of a common sense. (But this is not to be taken to mean some external sense, but the effect arising from the free play of our powers of cognition.) Only under the presupposition, I repeat, of such a common sense, are we able to lay down judgement of taste." (Kant 2007: 68).

objectivity constituting the proof. This is a fertile soil for knowledge, which gives a sense of certainty or concreteness in evaluating the scientific laws. Determinacy is something referring to the evaluative function of judgement. In other words, when we perform a determinative judgement, we accept or deny that a general principle is applicable to a specific moment. So an evaluation is taking place, resulting in a satisfactory state of affairs. Satisfaction refers to being able to establish a connection between sensuous imagination and understanding; still, neither the concept nor the object (as sensual) is providing satisfaction. We find acceptable or satisfying only the formal rapport between them.

However, we are faced with a rather weak distinction between determinative and reflective judgements. Thus, although Kant goes through much trouble to sharply distinguish between determinative and reflective judgements; his attempts to grant universality to aesthetic judgements seem to bring the latter closer to determinative judgements than he intended. Both have as their referent this evaluative dimension regarding how understanding stands in a satisfying rapport with the sensible or imagination. But from this we can also infer, given the possibility of having internal pleasure or satisfaction for every act of judgement, that every judgement has an aesthetic dimension and, in this way, can be allo-logical<sup>11</sup>. Even if such a claim may be a too strong conclusion to draw, it is still safe to say that we are at least faced with the hypothesis that determinative judgements are to be definable in terms of what we subjectively ‘feel’ as being universally acceptable. ‘Evaluation’, or ‘satisfaction’, seems very close to an internal perception of pleasure; one may wonder where to draw a line between the two. Thus, we are dealing with under-specification regarding the relation of understanding with imagination, which instantiates a classical slippery slope case. Furthermore, Kant himself recognizes the motivational role of pleasure in the cognitive process<sup>12</sup>.

What Kant wanted to oppose to Burke is universality, exclusively based on the possibility of mere communicability. Despite the apparent inability to provide proofs, judgements of taste are not exclusively defined by the contingency of the sensitivity of human body; still, a purely conceptual necessity would take the matter too far away from the body.

Though the result of the above discussion remains a hypothesis, it seems legitimated to have a small dose of scepticism as regards Kant’s compensation attempt regarding the universality of aesthetic judgements. If we accept: 1) Kant’s ob-

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<sup>11</sup> In the following passage Kant explicitly sees an analogy and a difference between two kinds of judgements: “The judgement of taste is differentiated from logical judgement by the fact that, whereas the latter subsumes a representation under a concept of the object, the judgement of taste does not subsume under a concept at all—for, if it did, necessary and universal approval would be capable of being enforced by proofs. And yet it does bear this resemblance to the logical judgement, that it asserts a universality and necessity, not, however, according to concepts of the object, but a universality and necessity that are, consequently, merely subjective” (2007: 117).

<sup>12</sup> “A judgement upon an object of our delight may be wholly disinterested but nonetheless very interesting, i.e. it relies on no interest, but it produces one” (Kant 2007: 37, footnote).

servations according to which determinative judgements and judgements of taste share something in common with respect to universality and necessity and 2) the above hypothesis, placing determinative judgements closer to the realm of subjective affectivity, it follows that it is possible that the universality of determinative judgements, those which are involved in cognition, depends on an internal sensation very akin to pleasure. Accordingly, all Newtonian laws, the whole sphere of science, empirical cognition in general, could be taken as a peculiar form of art. This would not sound so strange if we take into consideration the fact that, at that time, Kant understood art as *techne*, similarly with the ancient Greek view on the matter, concerning the capacity to produce in a purposive manner (Bowie 2003: 21–24).

#### 4. Contexts, Science and Beauty

There are further issues that I must consider: first, a very important distinction which Kant operates between the feeling of pleasure taken as internal sensation and sensations taken as empirical external experience. The former is in relation with the perceiving (intuiting) subject, while the latter is in relation with the perceived (intuited) object. Still, this distinction does not affect my hypothesis because I did refer to the internal feeling of pleasure. A difference remains, though; namely, it is easier to bring proofs for a determinative judgement, pointing to the specific law or concept under which the object is functioning or is conceived. To give proofs is nothing but to objectify a subjective state of mind.

As I showed above, the only thing that keeps aesthetic judgements outside the sphere of objective cognition is the free play from which they are born; the beautiful can not be proved. The representation of the object only meets some but not sufficient requirements for cognition, making it incapable of being cognized in a determinate way<sup>13</sup>. So, when it comes to judging the beautiful, we are faced with a free-play-sourced representation, which is not yet formatted by understanding. Is this a sufficient condition for isolating the judgements referring to the beautiful from the determinative judgements? If we all have the capacity to recognize beauty at a subjective level, why can't we objectify our evaluation on the matter? Kant's response is exclusively based on the appeal to concepts. Still, his account fails to dismiss the alternative of the apparent impossibility of objectifying our evaluations about beauty being in fact due to an abundance of determinations. Beauty might not be lacking concepts, but its representation might offer an overwhelming complex network of concepts and laws, hard to describe and make available for a scientific endeavour. Based on Kant's First introduction to CJ<sup>14</sup>, and focusing on

<sup>13</sup> In the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant explains that instead of construing a beautiful object as an example of some determinate concept, in contemplating that object, we “refer [its] representation to cognition in general” (2007: 48–49).

<sup>14</sup> “[...] the apprehension, in the imagination, of the object's [sensibly given] manifold agrees with the exhibition [Darstellung] of a concept of the understanding (which concept this is being indeterminate)”. (Erste Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilskraft, Nachlass

the fact that in the free play, a certain representation exhibits a multitude of concepts, not one in particular<sup>15</sup>, it follows that reflective judgements in general are in fact hyper-determinative. In this framework, aesthetic theory seems to find its proper place rather at the core of metaphysics, than among its applications. The conclusion would be that aesthetic judgements, by being reflective, are not lacking concepts, but quite the opposite: they offer an overwhelming abundance of concepts. Thus, the subject's difficulties regarding objectification (showing proofs) relate to his difficulties in choosing the first concept to invoke when it comes to beauty. Considering the productive dimension of imagination, a new approach to our judging about the beautiful is thus opened; during the free play, imagination gives rise to a multitude of forms which "correspond to the general feature of an exhibition of an empirical concept" (Heinrich 1992: 51), but which are not coerced by the faculty of understanding into exhibiting a particular concept, as in determinative judgements. The free play supports the exhibition of many concepts, and, thus, a beautiful thing permits a multitude of series of re-imagining it. In this equation, the understanding just acknowledges and tries to guide the rich free play of the productive imagination, which results on one hand, in our attraction towards such richness, but also, on the other hand, in the insecurity ensued by the lack of strict determining criteria.

The multi-concept interpretation of the free play also has the advantage of offering a suitable account for the aesthetic education. In the educational process, the subject is exposed to a collection of rules which makes him susceptible to see beauty in a more articulated manner, allowing him to evaluate deeper into his representation. In contrast, the scientific determinative approach of reality just narrows judgements to a limited spectrum of certain rules or concepts taken as conditions. In a Newtonian framework, for instance, scientific truth was restricted to an arbitrary acceptance of a certain set of concepts. Science has since evolved, and the Newtonian rules do not satisfy us anymore. The Copernican revolution was a matter of simplified calculus of the orbits, and thus it was evaluated and accepted as a scientific progress due to this simplicity; still, it remains an evaluative convention.

Thus, the laws as such remain hypothetical judgements all the way; the best we ever have is probability. What allows us, at some point, to 'feel' we have come close enough, is nothing but a value judgement. Bringing proofs for a certain scientific judgement seems to have an inherent conventional, contextual dimension. In the light of this, above mentioned hypothesis appears more plausible; it is not so straightforward how to operate a clear cut between reflective and determinative judgements.

If, for instance, I belonged to a 'green criteria' community, I would be able to justify my aesthetic judgements, which would thus be accepted as objective; showing that a thing is beautiful because it contains a relation with 'green' would constitute a determinative proof for beauty. But an adequate aesthetic judgement

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(1987); First Introduction to the Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett: 220–221).

<sup>15</sup> For this argument, see Rush (2001: 58).

has its origin in something which both overwhelms and pleases us. We are only the subjects of a striving for, a striving which makes us grab that something in our understanding. Given the variability of the contexts in which we are compelled to give proofs for our judgements, Kant's claims regarding aesthetic judgements lacking concepts seem revisable. If our proofs are context dependent, then objectivity is just a matter of evaluative affinity.

### 5. Conclusion

Kant purports to find a hint of universal in the judgement of taste. In this endeavour, he searches for a middle ground between mere subjectivism and scientific universalism. Judgements of taste are neither merely sensuous, with no claims to the universal, pointing into the inarticulate variability of the human body, nor conceptual judgements. In Kant, taste somehow partakes of the two. Taking this into consideration, if we deem something to be beautiful, what is it about it that makes a claim to universality? Kant argues that the singular beauty has something more than particularity that is communicated. The occasion of singular beauty becomes open to something further, beyond.

Human imagination is conceived by Kant as a mediating power, related to both the senses and the understanding; without it there is no possibility for a coherent, ordered experience. Representation sets in motion imagination and understanding, in a harmony. In experiencing this harmony, we are experiencing beauty. The universality, for Kant, consists in the possibility of universal agreement, inasmuch as it makes reference to this harmony, which can be anticipated in relation with other human subjects. Thus, what is essential of universality is communicability. An aesthetic communicability has one of its roots in the sensuous and the other in the understanding.

I have argued here that Kant's attempts to grant universality to aesthetic judgements leave us with a rather weak distinction between determinative and reflective judgements. Both seem to have as their referent an evaluative dimension regarding how understanding stands in a satisfying rapport with the sensible or imagination. In what determinative judgements are concerned, an evaluation is taking place, resulting in a satisfying state of affairs. Satisfaction refers to being able to establish a connection between sensuous imagination and understanding; the proper object of this satisfaction is the formal rapport between the sensual and the conceptual. Hence, at the core of our proving our determinative judgements lies a mere feeling, an evaluative judgement: we 'feel' we are close enough to the genuine law. Inasmuch as aesthetic judgements share both their evaluative and their universal feature with determinative judgements, I have argued, the clear distinction Kant is trying to preserve here seems rather forced. Thus, the CPR ambiguities related to the synthetic powers of imagination give rise to even more vulnerabilities for his aesthetic theory.

Also, I have shown how an alternative view, granting judgements of taste not a lack in conceptualization but, on the contrary, an overflow of concepts, better accounts for both the apparent difficulty in proving beauty, and the similarities determinative judgements share with aesthetic judgements.

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