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Rereading Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: 1790–1990

INTRODUCTION

Guenter Zoeller

THE OCCASION for the symposium on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* held at The University of Iowa, April 1990, was the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the third *Critique*, in 1790, with the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* having been published in 1781 and 1788, respectively.

From May 1989 through April 1990 a group of Iowa faculty members from various disciplines met in a discussion group analyzing and critiquing the *Critique of Judgment*, starting with its first part, the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," and eventually turning to the second part, the "Critique of Teleological Judgment." Each of the original members of the discussion group then prepared a short, fifteen-minute essay for presentation at the symposium. The presenters approached Kant's text and its problems from their respective research interests and home disciplines. The point was to combine individual disciplinary work with its presentation and discussion in a multi-disciplinary setting.

It could be argued that the symposium's broad perspective is a continuation of the multiform reception that the third *Critique* has been accorded over the past two hundred years. The *Critique of Judgment* was received enthusiastically by Schiller and Goethe, the former taking it as the basis for his own aesthetic theorizing, the latter admiring in particular the novel treatment of the teleological consideration of nature. Kant's aesthetic theory, with its insistence on the disinterestedness of the aesthetic attitude and with its balanced consideration of aesthetic production in the theory of genius and aesthetic criticism in the analysis of the standard of taste, became the starting point for romantic and post-romantic artistic practice as well as for reflection on matters of art and beauty. Even the opposition to Kant's aesthetics in the works of Schelling and Hegel is a reaction to

Kant rather than an entirely autonomous intellectual development. More recently, much aesthetic debate has been conducted in thoroughly Kantian terms. This holds equally for Anglo-American analytic aesthetics with its neo-Kantian emphasis on the logic and grammar of aesthetic discourse and for Continental developments such as the revisionary work on Kant's theory of the sublime undertaken by Jacques Derrida and François Lyotard.

It might be helpful to recapitulate the principal parts and doctrines of the third *Critique*, with an emphasis on those topics that are addressed in more detail in the symposium papers. The *Critique of Judgment* consists of two parts, the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" and the "Critique of Teleological Judgment," preceded by a substantial Introduction that provides the rationale for treating aesthetics and teleology in one single philosophical treatise. The unity of the third *Critique* consists in its comprehensive objective of determining the possibilities and limitations of a cognitive faculty left hitherto unexamined in Kant's critical *oeuvre*. The capacity in question is that of *reflective judgment* (*reflektierende Urteilskraft*), understood, by Kant, as the mind's capacity to search for the rule covering a given particular case or a number of relevantly similar cases. Kant argues that our reflective judgment's search for empirical laws is guided by our presupposition of a thoroughly systematic constitution of nature, such that each empirical fact can, in principle, be integrated into a hierarchical structure of laws of nature. Kant's point is not that nature is systematic as a matter of fact. Rather, the systematic constitution of nature is an a priori presupposition on the side of the human intellect, reflecting our need to think of nature as, in principle, amenable to the requirements of human knowledge and its characteristic limitations. Any actual compliance of nature with the human conditions of knowing remains a *contingent* or *accidental* matter.

The system of nature thus conceived by reflective judgment has a purposive structure, exhibiting an order identical to that which it might have could it be known to be the result of an intelligent agent's production. There is no claim, though, on Kant's part, that the system of nature is actually a product of divine design. On the contrary, the purposiveness attributed to nature from the standpoint of reflective judgment is merely a subjectively informed way of reflecting upon nature guided by universal human cognitive interests. Kant specifically qualifies nature's purposive-

ness by calling it *subjective*, that is dependent upon and limited to a certain anthropologically determined perspective. The claims that are advanced in the aesthetic and teleology parts of the *Critique of Judgment* are not knowledge claims regarding nature's objective constitution. They are claims concerning the necessity of reflecting upon nature in certain ways—claims originating in human needs and interests rather than in the way things are.

The “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” analyzes the purposiveness we find in nature with reference to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Kant holds that the discovery of instances of purposiveness between nature and human reason is the source of a pleasure that originates in the cognitive faculty as such and that is not mediated by the faculty of desire. Moreover, Kant argues that the awareness of such pleasure-inducing purposiveness need not depend on instances of actual cognition, as in the case of knowing that this rose is red. There are instances, according to Kant, in which the mere reflection on the general suitability of objects to our human cognitive capabilities produces pleasure in the reflecting subject. In such cases the object of reflection is not considered regarding any *specific* purpose but merely regarding its *generic* simulation of actual purposiveness. The forms so considered are the spatio-temporal features of objects, and the objects, insofar as pleasure is taken in them, are termed “beautiful.”

Kant's detailed analysis of the concept of the beautiful takes the form of an exposition of the principal logical features of judgments that predicate beauty, the so-called judgments of taste. Kant argues that judgments of taste are, first, singular in that they concern a particular object (this rose); second, that they are disinterested in that they disregard the matter of factual existence of the object in question (personal possession of this rose is not an issue); third, that they have as their ground the formal purposiveness of objects (the rose's peculiar spatial form); and, fourth, that their mode of validity is universal and yet in a decisive sense subjective (the rose's beauty is intimated to everyone else considering it).

Much of the discussion in the remainder of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” attempts to account for the paradoxical combination of subjectivity and universality in judgments concerning the beautiful. Kant first invokes the cognitive constitution of our common human nature as the basis for the demanded agreement in matters of taste, postulating the operations of an aesthetically relevant “common sense.” He then proceeds to draw on a decidedly metaphysical doctrine basing human beings, and

empirical reality in general, on an unknowable absolute reality, what Kant calls the “supersensible *substratum*.” The speculative reference to the supersensible *substratum* of humanity is adduced in Kant’s solution of the so-called “antinomy of taste.” The antinomy obtains between aesthetic empiricism (which maintains that there is no disputing in matters of taste) and aesthetic rationalism (which maintains that judgments of taste are based on rational standards warranting contention). Kant’s solution consists in conceding the unavailability of rational standards while defending the idea of an objective, though inaccessible ground functioning as the enabling condition for possible aesthetic agreement — thus interpreting the principal possibility of universal aesthetic agreement as an ideal norm for concrete aesthetic debate. By extension, then, the antinomy of taste becomes the everyday concern of museum and gallery directors, critics, and editors, as of this magazine.

In addition to an exposition, deduction and dialectic concerning the beautiful, the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” also contains a novel treatment of the aesthetic category of the sublime. Kant analyzes the sublime as a property not of the object giving rise to the experience in question but as a feature of the aesthetically experiencing subject — sublime is the human mind in its intellectual and moral superiority over an object that otherwise threatens the subject through sheer size (mathematically sublime) or physical force (dynamically sublime).

While the primary concern of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” is with the aesthetic status of objects of nature, there is also considerable attention devoted to applying the analyses of aesthetic judgments concerning nature to products of human making (art), especially to the “fine arts.” Kant considers art as striving for aesthetic conditions similar to those of nature, an assimilationist view of the relation between art and nature that finds its most elementary expression in the doctrine of genius as nature’s way of giving rules to art.

The second part of the *Critique of Judgment*, the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” extends the reflection on the finality of nature to the phenomenon of organic life. In keeping with the limitations of reflective judgment, Kant’s theoretical biology and ensuing considerations on the moral vocation of human beings are not presented as dogmatic statements about the way things are but in the reflective mode of expressing human needs for cognitive as well as moral orientation.

The five essays that follow take up a number of central issues in the *Critique of Judgment* from perspectives originating in philosophy, philology and literary criticism. Richard Fumerton approaches Kant's aesthetics with the conceptual tools provided by Kant's Scottish contemporary, David Hume. David Stern sketches a pluralist alternative to Kant's own treatment of disagreements in matters of taste. Guenter Zoeller explores the structural parallelism between Kant's theory of aesthetic experience and Kant's theory of knowledge. Marlena Corcoran engages in an etymological and terminological study of key concepts employed by Kant. Donald Marshall links Kant's theory of art to the contemplation of nature in English romanticism. Beyond their disciplinary differences, the essays show a common interest in the problematic status of aesthetic experience with its precarious balance of feeling and perceiving, of subjectivity and objectivity, of particular case and universal rule.

Note on translation used:

In the papers all references to the *Critique of Judgment* are to the translation by W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).