

Chapter-III

'Aesthetic Judgement and Aesthetic Experience'

Kant Again

It may fairly well be maintained that no aesthetic judgement would be possible if there were no such experience called 'aesthetic'. Often aesthetic judgements are summary reports of aesthetic experience of persons who have encountered works of art. But what is an aesthetic experience ?

Traditionally it is maintained that there is an appropriate way of experiencing works of art, and that may be described as aesthetic experience. But the difficulties of justifying and substantiating that responses are many. Descriptions of aesthetic experience is many, and they make diverse claims. So it is pretty difficult, if not impossible, to find any clear defining characteristic of it or any single feature that is shared by all its descriptions. We may note a few of them : Aesthetic experience has been described as an experience that imparts knowledge, as one that does not impart knowledge, as will-less, as disinterested, as active, as passive, as cathartic, as contemplative. It has been declared to be, on the one hand, no essentially unlike other sorts of experiences, and on the other, to be a type of experience that is uniquely different from others.

In this chapter we propose to investigate some of the philosophical issues arising from diverging accounts of aesthetic experience, with special reference to Kant. We shall take into account a range of descriptions of aesthetic experience, the concept of aesthetic attitude. We shall maintain, in the end, that there is a tenable concept of aesthetic experience, that is importantly connected with, although not exclusive to, experience of the arts and that it is a valuable element in human life. We may note, in passing, that art, beauty and the aesthetic may be taken to overlap to some extent or to be importantly connected, though not co-extensive. It is on this account possible to delineate two separable but overlapping areas of enquiry : the philosophy of art, the main focus of which is on the nature of art and its creation, and aesthetics, the main focus of which is on the perception of aesthetic qualities. The notion of beauty seems to provide an overlap between the two.

Let us try to understand the expression 'aesthetic experience'.

One point of agreement concerning aesthetic experience is that it is an experience to be prized very highly. What kind of values are placed on it? Findlay, for example, says that aesthetic experience is a type of experience which is uniquely marked out, extraordinary in its delight, not always nor readily to be had, and that it involves concentration and undistractedness. The general import is that aesthetic experience at its highest and best is arresting, intense and utterly engrossing, and when fully achieved, it seizes one's whole mind or imagination and conveys whatever it does convey so vividly that the result is delight and knowledge.

Although aesthetic experience varies widely, there have been many attempts to identify a characteristic common to all its manifestations. Probably the most widely-affirmed of these attempts are those that maintain that aesthetic experience is essentially contemplative. One strand of contemplation theory can be traced back to Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* (1230b), where he remarks about the contemplative character of the proper perception of dramatic tragedy and of beauty in general. The stillness, or *stasis* of aesthetic pleasure is not the object of moral disapproval in the way the movement to procure what one desires might be.

What exactly is the nature of the contemplation that is characterised by stillness or *stasis*? There is the concept of *Catharsis in Poetics* (1449 b), which evoke pity and fear. Pity and fear are engendered in us as spectators of the tragedy but when those emotions are contained by the structure of the well wrought tragedy, instead of provoking us to movement and action as they normally do in daily life, they are able to be experienced contemplatively; for the sake of knowing what they are like rather than as spurs to action. We are purged of them, it seems, in being able to experience and know them fully. They yield their proper pleasure: the pleasure, according to Aristotle, of an untrammelled knowledge of their natures. The Aristotelian thread of contemplation theory became incorporated into Western Culture and Christian doctrine through Thomas Aquinas. When he came to write about the

experience of art and beauty he developed the kind of distinction Aristotle had made between the *stasis* induced by beauty perceived as beauty and the desiring movement towards the possession of something. The kind of logical distinction between responding to good or desirable things by movement towards them and to beauty by an entranced contemplation has prevailed in much aesthetic theory. It is expressed in a most lively and interesting way in some of the work of James Joyce. I have his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in mind. To quote what Stephen Dedalus says in the novel : "The tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ The aesthetic emotion is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing". (P.213). Towards the end of Jean - Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (P.248) the main character Roquentin suddenly recognizes listening to his favourite Jazz record that the tune has a life of its own that is inviolable, that the tune *itself* is not something that could be destroyed by smashing records as tearing up music. The tune is not an exciting *thing*, an object at all. It has *being* rather than mere physical existence : "Through layers and layers of experience, it unveils *itself*, slim and firm, and when you try to seize it you meet nothing but existents, you run up against existence devoid of meaning" (Ibid).

We may look more closely at the notion of contemplation. The Aristotelian *stasis* described by Stephen Dedalus is a sustained focusing of attention rather than an inert reception. But some writers have suggested that the first demand any work of art makes on us is surrender. But contemplation maintains a dialogue with what is perceived. It includes that will-less receiving in which a person is entranced, as if experiencing a revelation, as well as a searching attentiveness. It includes thinking *about* something by imagining it as well as apprehending it directly. Schopenhauer writes : "Everyone who reads the poem or contemplates the work of art must of course contribute from his own resources..... [everyone] has to stand before a picture as before a prince, waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say to him. What we grasp of the work depends on what capacity and culture allow" (Vol.II. p.407).

A feature of aesthetic contemplation seems to require both an involvement with and a detachment from the perceived object. Schopenhauer's view includes not only a detachment but also an involvement that is a near - mystical union with what is known. The kind of impersonal detachment characteristic of aesthetic contemplation is generally known as "disinterestedness". It has probably been the single most important concept in the last three centuries of aesthetic theory. To be disinterested concerning something is not the same as being uninterested in it. 'Disinterestedness, can describe the absence of the kind of interest that relates to one's own advantage or disadvantage, or it can describe an impartial and unbiassed attitude in which one has no personal axe to grind in a matter . It requires us to consider something on its own merits and not in relation to what might accrue from it for ourselves : to be concerned with the object itself rather than with how it relates to oneself. Or it can refer to a concern solely with the look or appearance of something and an absence of any interest in the actual existence of what appears.

The notion of disinterest as an important characteristic of aesthetic consciousness is given explicit and detailed exposition by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*.

In his philosophy as a whole Kant systematically investigates three modes of human consciousness : Knowledge, desire and feeling. For each of these topics he wrote a critique. His *Critique of Pure Reason* examines knowledge, and his *Critique of Practical Reason* morality. The third Critique, the *Critique of Judgement* examines our consciousness of beauty, approaching the matter by means of what Kant calls 'The Judgement of Taste', that the kind of judgement we make when we feel and pronounce that something is beautiful. 'Beautiful', for Kant, is the paradigm predicate of aesthetic judgements.

Kant starts from the fact that we do make judgements such as "This is beautiful" and he investigates their character, logical status and presuppositions. His fundamental question is ! 'How are judgements of taste *possible* ?' In asking this

what he wants to find out is whether such judgements are well grounded : that is, whether we are justified in affirming the kind of things we do affirm in them. If they do turn out to be justified then Kant regards them as "possible" in the sense that the justification *entitles* us to make such judgements.

Kant presents four moments, or aspects of the judgement of taste. He first points out that the judgement that something beautiful arises from "being conscious of this representation with an accompanying sensation of delight" (*Critique of Judgement*, P.43). Simply one feels delight in the apprehension of a perceived appearance and thereby judges it to be beautiful, as for example, when one delights in a view or landscape and exclaims at its beauty. The judgement, according to Kant, is not cognitive, that is, it does not involve knowledge of what is judged. It is based entirely on feeling, which he describes as "a quite separate faculty of discriminating and estimating". Moreover this feeling of delight is a response to the *representation* or perceived appearance, not to some feature that depends on the actual existence of what is represented. If it did depend on the object's existence then our feeling of pleasure, Kant maintains, would not be disinterested. He says: "Everything turns on the meaning which I can give to this representation, and not on any factor which makes me dependent on the real existence of the object. Everyone must allow that a judgement on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. One must not be in the least prepossessed in favour of the real existence of the thing, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect in order to play the part of judge in matter of taste" (*Ibid*).

To refine and emphasize the point that the judgement that something is beautiful arises from a disinterested pleasure. Kant carefully distinguishes it from two other kinds of delight : delight in what is agreeable and delight in what is good. He claims that both delight in what is agreeable and delight in what is good involve a

desire of some sort towards an object and therefore an interest in it. What is agreeable, he maintains, makes a direct appeal to the senses and so arouses an inclination to possess the agreeable object or to possess something like it. Our pleasure is therefore related in some way to its real existence and so is not disinterested pleasure. We have a comparable interest in the real existence of the good in that we desire the good thing or action to exist. In contrast "The judgement of taste is simply contemplative, i.e. it is a judgement which is indifferent to the existence of an object, and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure" (Ibid, p.48). Kant does not mean by this that someone who judges that, for instance, a particular oriental carpet is beautiful is wholly indifferent to the real existence of the carpet but simply *that in judging its beauty* one's attention is directed to its visual qualities or appearances rather than to the existence of what makes such perceptions possible. The judgement of taste may well be succeeded by an interest in the real existence of the rug and by a desire to possess it but that interest and that desire are not elements in the judgement of taste, the pleasure of which accrues in the contemplation of beauty and is unaffected by the reality or unreality of what it contemplates. All the time, in these carefully made distinctions, Kant is working to provide a precise characterization of the kind of experience that results in a judgement of taste. He regards both the judgement of agreeableness and that of beauty as aesthetic judgements, for both are based on feeling, but maintains that only the judgement of beauty is a judgement of *taste*. Taste is a persons' capacity to judge things by means of a contemplative delight in their beauty; it is the capacity for disinterested aesthetic experience.

In the second moment Kant identifies another distinguishing characteristic of the judgement of taste. One that arises from the fact that the feeling of delight from which the judgement of taste springs is subjective while the form of the judgement, "This is beautiful" is objective. It is objective in that it seems to impute beauty to the object : we do not express the judgement subjectively by saying 'I like it' : instead, Kant says, we "speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a quality of the object" (Ibid, p.51). He points out that in the case of a judgement that something

is agreeable we can allow that there can be a difference of opinion. But Kant has to explain why the judgement of beauty is not like that; why it is grounded in feeling yet it is at the same time is stated in terms that imply some sort of objectivity and that invites the agreement of others.

Kant's justification of these characteristics of aesthetic judgement is a complex one. What he wants to show is that it is possible for aesthetic judgement to be subjective in that it is grounded in feeling, but also objective in that it may legitimately demand the agreement of others. The justification involves reference to a view Kant has already expounded in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. There he argues that we have to assume that human kind in general possesses faculties of imagination and understanding, since it is these faculties that make knowledge and communication possible. Imagination and understanding, he maintains, interact: Imagination unites the sense perceptions that are the raw material of experience and understanding supplies concepts and higher level classification for the resulting syntheses, thereby rendering them objective and shareable, and so able to count as objects of knowledge.

What is important for our context in Kant's thesis that Imagination and Understanding interact. Whereas in the production of knowledge our mental activity is ruled by *definite concepts* and commonly possessed mental structures that furnish conditions for objectivity, in the pure judgements of taste, Kant holds, the Imagination and Understanding engage in an *indefinite*, although harmonious, interaction that is not dependent on a concept. Thus we do not judge that, for example, a rose is beautiful by reference to a definite concept of beauty, but by reference to our feelings concerning it. Accordingly, Kant describes the judgement of taste as a free one; it is free not only from the constraints of desires and novelty but also from constraints that would be imposed on it by a definite concept of beauty. In this kind of free activity the Imagination, he writes, "induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, that is, a concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible" (p.176).

Although the imagination's activity in the judgement of taste can not be bounded by a concept, the Understanding does exert an influence on it by requiring that its explorations, although free, are not chaotic or incoherent. The interaction of the two faculties must have a formal structure of the sort it has in the generation of knowledge. Thus Imagination enlivens understanding by stimulating it to a wealth of indefinite thought, while Understanding regulates the Imagination's activity. But although there is this similarity to the kind of interaction that generates knowledge, the result is not knowledge because the judgement of taste depends on feeling rather than concepts. Its free delight is the feeling and percipience of beauty. At the same time, Kant has argued that all rational beings possess formally similar faculties and mental structures and may therefore be supposed capable of such feeling and percipience. From this he is able to conclude that we are justified in claiming the possibility of a shared delight and universal agreement in the judgement of taste. He has a neat way of encapsulating all this. He says, "The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally." (Ibid.p 60)

Now having shown the nature of aesthetic judgement as being indifferent to both existence and concepts, Kant sets out to point to its limit. Why does he regard the judgement of taste as a cognitive one? It is because it does not conform to the standards he has laid down for knowledge in the first *Critique*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But his account does allow for the judgement's having what might be described as the *feeling* of knowledge: that vivid sense of a profound understanding or awareness that is characteristic of much aesthetic experiences. In the third moment Kant turns to considering the beauty that is judged in the judgement of taste. He describes the beautiful object as representation as possessing "the form of finality" or in a phrase that has become well-known, as having "purposiveness without purpose" (Ibid, pp 62-3). By this he means that we apprehend the beautiful object *as if* it were something designed for a purpose. It is not that we think of it as actually having a particular purpose that it might be possible to discover, but that it has the *form* of purposiveness. The points Kant is making here is perhaps

best understood by reference to beauties of nature. The forms and patterns of flowers and crystals and of certain natural formations of stones and rocks seem to have the purposiveness he describes, appearing to possess meaning and significance in virtue of their shapes and patterns and the arrangement of their elements, and yet to have no definite or particular meanings.

It is precisely this unfettered form of purposiveness or finality in a representation that quickens the interaction of Imagination and Understanding in a free and pleasurable way. The activity of these two faculties corresponds to the unfettered purposiveness in the perceived form, for they interact in a way that is both law-like and free, just as the representation that quickens their activity is at once both free (in that it fulfils no particular end or purpose) and law-like (in that it has the *appearance* of having been designed for a specific purpose). In the free but law-like interaction of Imagination and Understanding evoked by the representation one experiences the delight that is the judgement of taste.

The fourth moment of Kant's analysis of the judgement of taste takes up and develops something he raised in the second Moment, namely, the claim that the judgement "This is beautiful" implies that "everyone *ought* to give the object in question his approval" (Ibid p.82) and also describes it as beautiful. This may be said to set the scope of aesthetic judgement. What he is pointing out, once again, is that the judgement seems to imply that it is *possible* for us to agree in such judgements and that, ideally, we *ought* to agree in them. But the only basis or justification for assuming all that is by presupposing a "common sense" an ability in everyone to experience pleasure "from the free play of our powers of cognition" (Ibid. p.83), that is, of Imagination and Understanding. Of course, very often and for a variety of reasons we are unable to exercise this ability to the full and so we disagree in our judgements of taste; but the *possibility* of agreement is given a foundation if we presuppose such an ability. It is an "ideal form" which, if or when realized, is an example of how judgements of taste would concur under ideal conditions.

We may now summarize the main points of Kant's account of aesthetic experience which make aesthetic judgements only possible but also sets limits to its scope. Kant approaches the matter by analyzing the kind of judgement we make when we experience beauty and that his chief claim is that it is by a feeling of delight that we come to judge that something is beautiful. This delight has to be distinguished from the delight that is merely a sensory agreeableness, such as a liking for mangoes, and from a delight in something that is recognized as morally good. But these latter kinds of delight are "interested" in that the person who finds mangoes agreeable there to be actual mangoes to eat, and the person who is rational can't, according to Kant, do other than desire the real existence of anything that is morally good. Delight in beauty is free delight not only because it is disinterested but also because one's activity of mind in respect of it is not circumscribed by a definite concept that imposes limits on one's reflections. This does not mean that apprehension of the beautiful is chaotic; for Imagination and Understanding interact in a way that is *formally* similar to the way in which they interact when they work by means of concepts to produce knowledge. They interact as harmoniously as if they are still concept-governed, albeit with a much better scope to these activities than when they are determined by particular concepts.

Accordingly to Kant, beauty in a representation is its formal properties, its appearance of being designed, but no specific purpose. This purposiveness without purpose generates and corresponds to the harmonious, Law-like but unconfined interaction of the cognitive faculties. When we experience beauty we are recognizing and responding to formal qualities.

One great value of Kant's account of the judgement of taste is that it sharpens and organizes our intuitive understanding of what aesthetic experience is like, identifying and analyzing its elements with great precision. Another major value of his account is its placing of the judgement of taste within a larger conception of human capacities and activities. By delineating the wider relationships in which aesthetic sensibility stands to cognition and desire, to reason, sense,

imagination and Understanding, it provides us with an account that is at once exact and comprehensive. We are able to recognize both the particular character of what he calls the faculty of taste and its connection with other faculties. Thus the judgement of taste or aesthetic judgement, is identified as arising from feeling. It is a feeling of pleasure that is distinguishable from pleasurable feelings concerning the agreeable or the good in that it is disinterested; it is disinterested in that it is concerned with the appearance or representation rather than with real existence of what is perceived. The pleasure that arises from the natural quickening of rational and imaginative faculties is subjective and the judgement arising from it is not made by reference to any definite concept of beauty, but at the same time invites the agreement of others.

Kant also encompasses in his account two other features of aesthetic experience. These are, first, the sense of the illimitability of the aesthetic experience, and, second, our intimations of some sort of connection between the beautiful and the morally good. The illimitability, the unfounded proliferation of harmoniously related images and thoughts, has its source and justification for Kant in the imagination's freedom from the restraint of definite concepts. The sense of a connection between the beautiful and the morally good is a more complex matter. We can only no more than indicate the connection Kant expounds. He maintains that full reflection on something that is beautiful can not fail to lead to reflection also on the morally good. This is because, in his view, a beautiful representation, natural or made, is a rendering of moral ideas in terms of sense: The beautiful is the symbol of the morally good. Kant is not wanting to suggest here that experience of beauty are to be sought in order to come to what is morally good, but that if we do attend appropriately to beauty we shall have, at the very least, some intimations of its necessary connections with the morally good. Nor, in speaking of beauty as the symbol of the morally good, is he saying that, for example, a painting of a morally good person such as Socrates symbolizes moral good by depicting a virtuous person. His meaning is more profound than that. It is the *formal* properties of the work, of any beautiful work, be it a depiction of a saint or of a carcass in a slaughter house, that for him

symbolize the morally good ; and there is a formal resemblance, too, between the way in which we judge beauty and the way in which we ascertain what is morally good, for both involve a freedom that is nevertheless law-like, and both have in Kant's view, an ultimate grounding in the faculty of reason.

Kant's account of the disinterestedness of aesthetic pleasure has been criticized for ambiguity. His formulations, it has been said, are not clear enough and Unequivocal and the explications provided by him do not coincide (Mitias, M.H.(ed) *Possibility of the Aesthetic Experience*, Nijhoff publishers, 1986, P.142). This line of criticism has been developed by pointing out that the Kantian notion of disinterested pleasure seems to have at least three basic meanings : first, it can refer to a satisfaction that is independent of whether the object exists or not; second, to a satisfaction that is independent of any desire to possess the object; and third, to a satisfaction that is devoid of personal interest. But it is difficult to see why these three features of aesthetic disinterest should be seen as constituting ambiguity. Why should they not be understood as three different aspects of aesthetic disinterestedness ? One's pleasure in the look or sound of some thing is distinguishable from any interest one may or may not take in its actual existence, from any desire to possess it and form any personal involvement with it. It is surely distinctions such as these that Kant sought to make in order to sharpen understanding of the nature of aesthetic sensibility. His analysis certainly is not immune to criticism, but it does seem to be a mistake to regard its complexity as ambiguity.

It is often remarked that Kant's account works largely within the trilogy of concepts art, beauty and the aesthetic. These are usually loosely defined or understood in terms of each other. For Kant, the judgement of taste is a judgement arising from the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful, and because of the close connections between art and beauty, it is then very easy to assume that the account of what it is to experience beauty is also the account of what it is to experience a work of art. But this identity should not be assumed, and we need to think about the

worth of Kant's account of aesthetic experience separately from the question of its worth as an account of the experience of art, just as we may think of the aesthetic as dealing with concepts other than beauty. Another limitation of Kant's account is that he does not discuss what is involved in judging some thing *not* to be beautiful. We have to infer that an appropriately disinterested contemplation of something lacking the form of purposiveness yields no pleasure and that the object is thereby judged *not* to be beautiful.

In Kant's analysis the main emphasis has been placed on the notion of disinterest, not only because of its importance in his account of aesthetic experience but because of the influence it has exerted on so many subsequent developments in aesthetic and the philosophy of art. From the complexity of Kant's analysis of the judgement of taste has developed the view that to experience something aesthetically is to experience the perceived properties of the object and to do so for the sake of that perception rather than for the sake of any other relation in which one may stand to the object.

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