

CHAPTER II

THE ANALYSIS OF THE BEAUTIFUL

Introduction

The Critique of Judgement may be broadly viewed as a work in which Kant attempts to reconcile the laws of Nature, as described in his first Critique, with the laws of freedom, as described in the second. Kant holds that the deterministic laws of physics can be brought into harmony with the unconditional commands of morality only if reason has the right to presuppose an underlying and fundamental purposiveness behind Nature.

Part One of the Critique of Judgment attempts to show how purposiveness is presupposed by aesthetic judgment. According to Kant, the beautiful, either in art or in Nature, must be conceived as if it were preadapted to bring about a certain kind of pleasure in persons constituted like ourselves.

Beginning with the assumption that human cognition is composed of three broad realms - understanding, judgment and reason - Kant holds that three faculties respectively correspond to them : the thinking faculty, the feeling of pleasure and

displeasure, and the faculty of desire. Understanding, which works in accordance with its own rules, supplies with a priori of Nature, by which knowledge of the empirical world is made possible. This knowledge, though exclusively based upon the world of appearances, or phenomena, is both objective and public. It is at least logically possible, so Kant argues, that there exists something behind, or other than, the world of appearances. He holds that there must be presupposed something other than appearances, a "supersensible substrate" - in order to bring the cognitive faculties into reciprocal harmony¹.

The faculty of understanding leaves the supersensible undetermined, that is understanding can have no empirical acquaintance with it. When the understanding tries to determine the supersensible or to give a positive description of it, the road is opened to the vanities and sophistries of metaphysics.

The faculty of desire is as intrinsic to human nature as the faculty of understanding. From the phenomenal point of view, human beings are wholly determinant like any other object in Nature. Yet human beings sometimes blame, sometimes praise, each other's conduct, as well as their own. Kant assumes that as an ethical agent acting out of a pure sense of duty, a person must be construed as belonging both to the supersensible and to the phenomenal empirical realm. Moral responsibility and moral

worth cannot be explained, so Kant argues, in a deterministic world. Consequently, just as the supersensible lies behind the world of Nature, so the "supersensible substrate" is at the basis of the moral agent.

Although the understanding cannot give a positive determination to the supersensible, reason must nevertheless give a practical or moral determination to the "supersensible substrate" of humanity. The chief "Idea" of reason, according to Kant, is the freedom of the moral agent, that is, a self-determining agent acting in accordance with the universal principles of morality. The Critique of Practical Reason attempts to explicate the presuppositions of morality, or of freedom.

With the Critique of Judgment, Kant announces that he is bringing his "entire critical undertaking to a close"². In this transcendental explication of judgment and of the faculty of pleasure and displeasure, Kant means to bridge the gulf that divides the supersensible from phenomena. Kant himself finds judgment "a strange faculty"³, especially in its capacity of aesthetic judgment. Acting as the middle term between understanding and reason, and between the faculties of cognition and desire, judgment prescribes an a priori rule to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Judgment is sometimes employed by the cognitive, and sometimes by the desiderative faculties. So if

there is a rule peculiar to judgment which guarantees its autonomy and independence as a faculty, then the rule must not be derived from a priori concepts, for these are exclusively the province of understanding. To show the possibility of aesthetic judgment involves explicating its a priori rule. What makes judgment difficult to explicate is that it must furnish a rule which is "neither cognitive principle for understanding nor a practical principle for the will"⁴, but an a priori rule for the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Such a rule must regulate affectivity without contributing anything to knowledge.

Then a priori laws of the understanding leave the supersensible undetermined. Reason, in its practical use in moral judgment, gives a determination to the supersensible by postulating freedom, etc. The faculty of judgment joins the other two faculties by supplying a general a priori principle of determinability of the supersensible.

Pleasure keeps Kant's three Critiques together. Pleasure is necessarily combined with desire⁵, the attainment of every aim is coupled with a feeling of pleasure⁶, but more importantly, it can also "effect a transition from the faculty of pure knowledge, i.e. from the realm of concepts of nature to that of the concept of freedom"⁷. For Kant, pleasure supplies the key to

aesthetic judgment. In the Second Introduction to the third Critique, Kant observes that pleasure also arises from comprehending how various empirical laws fall under a larger principle. Discovery of a law, says Rabindranath Tagore, is a liberating experience, it liberates us from the tyranny of facts. Moreover, according to Kant, aesthetic judgment is itself pleasurable because it involves the "free play" of the cognitive faculties. When judgment is neither purely conceptual, as in cognitive experience, nor bound to the realization of the good as such, as in moral judgment, the cognitive facilities are not employed in a determinant manner.

Kant links the pleasure of aesthetic judgment to the great underlying theme of the Critique of Judgment : the purposiveness of Nature. Aesthetic judgment "alone contains a principle introduced by judgment completely a priori as the basis of its reflection upon nature. This is the principle of nature's formal finality for our cognitive faculties in its particular (empirical) laws - a principle without which understanding could not feel itself at home in nature"⁸. The pleasure of aesthetic judgment arises from estimating or reflecting upon the forms of objects, either of Nature or of art. Such pleasure can be nothing other than subjective; yet, Kant claims, because aesthetic pleasure arises from free play of the cognitive faculties, it must possess a kind of intersubjective validity.

The purposiveness of aesthetic pleasure supplies Kant with two major themes of his "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment". "The Beautiful" and "The Sublime". For insofar as judgment reflects upon the forms of objects and their purposive adaptability to the cognitive faculties, the result is a "judgment of taste" or a judgment concerning the beautiful. Insofar as judgment reflects upon an object that violates the sensibility because of its immensity or even formlessness, judgment is reminded of its own finality as a free moral agent. The result is a judgment of the sublime.

Though both the beautiful and the sublime are based upon the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, the beautiful is linked to the understanding, while the sublime is linked to reason. The harmony between the faculties in aesthetic contemplation is universally communicable, so the moral feelings engendered by the sublime are also independent of cultural conventions and universally communicable. It is clear that Kant intends his analysis of aesthetic judgment to hold for any culture. He claims that his analysis is of "pure" judgment, that is, of judgment insofar as it is a faculty legislating a priori.

Later in this study it will be necessary to consider Kant's theory of reflective judgment, for now it might be helpful to notice that Kant defines "judgment" as the "faculty of

thinking the particular as contained under the universal"⁹. Judgment is "determinant" if a rule or law is given, under which the particular is subsumed. Judgment is "reflective" if the particular is simply given and a covering rule must be found. Determinant judgment avails itself of the pure concepts of the understanding. Judgment as determinant is guided by the understanding. Judgment as reflective is a higher point of view, a vantage point to consider the immensity of the number of empirical laws of Nature and the variety of the world. Laws appear merely contingent to the human knower. Reflective judgment thus furnishes itself with its own a priori principle that can be simply stated : All empirical laws of Nature must be ultimately construed and unified as if they were designed for human comprehension. Kant calls this principle "the finality of nature". It cannot be empirically proved, for it is presupposed by all experience. To deny the principle would leave man in a fundamental disharmony with himself, not "at home in nature" in Kant's nostalgic phrase.

A note on the term "aesthetics" : The word aesthetik or "aesthetics" does not occur in Kant's first essay on the subject, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime. This essay is far removed from his attempt in Part One of the third Critique to show that judgments of taste legislate a priori. When Kant introduces the word "aesthetics" into his

own philosophical vocabulary, he assigns it a meaning quite different from that given by Baumgarten, who coined the word¹⁰. In a footnote in the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant appears to dismiss aesthetics as criticism of taste. Kant further states that because the so-called rules of taste are empirical, they cannot serve as a priori laws of judgment. Anticipating the essential theme of Part One of the third Critique, Kant says that "our judgment is the proper test of the correctness of the rules" rather than the reverse¹¹. Although Kant never explicitly speaks of Copernican revolution of taste, parallel to his Copernican revolution in knowledge, his philosophical logistics are the same. Just as objects must conform to our categories in order to be possible objects of experience for us, so too the forms of objects must conform to our feelings of pleasure and displeasure to be objects of aesthetic judgment for us. A similar "revolution" is implied in Kant's ethical writings¹².

In the first Critique, Kant uses "aesthetic" as the title for his own treatment of the pure forms or intuitions of sensibility - space and time. These are the pure conditions of sensibility : all external appearances must be subject to the form of space, and both external and internal appearances must be given under the form of time.

Kant introduces the phrase "aesthetic quality" only in the Second Introduction of the Critique of Judgment : "That which

is purely subjective in the representation of an Object, i.e. what constitutes its reference to the Subject, not to the Object, is its aesthetic quality"¹³. But such a quality is different from the pure forms of sensibility. Whatever serves to determine the representation of an object for knowledge has logical validity. Although space is a subjective form of the sensibility, it is still a constituent of the Knowledge of things as phenomena. Kant also holds that qualities like colour and sound belong to objective knowledge. For Kant, "aesthetic quality" designates exclusively the affective side of a representation, insofar as the object is referred to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. The beauty of objects of art and of natural objects have "aesthetic quality"; "But that subjective side of a representation which is incapable of becoming an element of cognition, is the pleasure or displeasure connected with it; for through it I cognize nothing in the object of the representation, although it may easily be the result of the operation of some cognition or other"¹⁴.

If both sensuous pleasure and disinterested pleasure possess aesthetic quality, then two alternatives present themselves. Either the difference between the two sorts of pleasure is a mere matter of degree. So the aesthetic judgment is as private as judgments of personal preference. Or it may be argued that the difference is one of kind. So aesthetic judgment, though based upon the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, it is in

some sense, to use Kant's phrase, possessed of "exemplary validity". Kant claims that there is a difference in kind between the agreeable and the disinterested pleasure, or between judgments of sense and judgments of taste. The former state are mere likes and dislikes, and make no claims upon other persons' sensibility. The latter are based solely upon the form of an object and are universally legislative.

Kant's underlying concern is to determine who has the right to say that a given object is or is not beautiful. Such a question would not arise with the merely agreeable or sensuous. Yet simply because everyone's verdict concerning the beautiful is not taken on the same plane, and because some persons are said to be better judges of the beautiful than others, the question concerning the qualifications of the judge naturally arises. In the final pages of Part One of the third Critique, Kant writes, "In our general estimate of beauty we seek its standard a priori in ourselves, and, that the aesthetic faculty is itself legislative in respect of the judgment whether anything is beautiful or not"¹⁵.

B. Kant's Problem of Taste

Kant's "critique of taste" is concerned with part of the general problem of transcendental philosophy: How are synthetic a priori judgments possible? On Kant's view, the justification

of a judgment of taste requires a deduction of a synthetic a priori judgment. As for the judgment of taste he takes as a paradigm the judgment that a particular object, such as a rose or a painting is beautiful. In calling an object beautiful, we each express our own pleasure in it, yet go beyond the evidence furnished by that feeling to impute it to the rest of mankind, as the potential audience for that object. We presume that our feelings, just like our scientific theories and moral beliefs, can be the subject of publicly valid discourse. There can, of course, be no rule by which anyone should be compelled to acknowledge that something is beautiful, we are nevertheless entitled to respond to a beautiful object with a "Universal voice... and lay claim to the agreement of everyone"¹⁶. But the universal validity of our response to a beautiful object can neither be deduced from any concept of the object nor grounded on any information about actual feelings of others. Kant believes that it can be based only on an a priori assumption of similarity between our own responses and those of others. Thus the presumption of aesthetic judgment can be defined if we can answer the question : "How is a judgment possible which, merely from one's own feeling of pleasure in an object, independent of its concept, estimates a priori, that is, without having to wait upon the agreement of others, that this pleasure is connected with the representation of the object in every other subject?"¹⁷ We use 'beautiful' and many other predicates, we do attempt to ground publicly valid assessments of objects on peculiarly

private feelings and responses. Kant's critique of taste is thus addressed to a question of perennial importance to aesthetics.

We have already observed that Kant's view on aesthetic judgment grew out of long reflection on the work of his British and German predecessors, whose theories Kant himself named "empiricism" and "rationalism" in the "critique of taste"¹⁸. Kant believed that empiricism in aesthetics (as represented by Hutcheson, Hume and others) explained aesthetic response as a purely sensory response to the stimuli presented by particular external objects. Kant believed that empiricism in aesthetics would obliterate the distinction that marks off the object of our delight in beauty from the merely agreeable, or reduce our pleasure in a beautiful object wholly to the gratification which it affords through charm of emotion. In other words, Kant thought empiricism explained aesthetic response as a purely sensuous response to the stimuli presented by particular external objects. It is also possible that empiricism in aesthetics would yield laws of aesthetic response. But Kant supposed that, even though these laws are generalisable upon the assumption that different subjects are, contingently, similarly organized, they could not command how we should judge. Such laws could only tell us how we do judge. The command of such laws could not be unconditioned¹⁹. If empirical laws of taste could not justify such a command, they could not also justify a judgment of taste, for in making such

a judgment one declares that everyone should give an object his approval and, like himself, declare it beautiful. In Kant's opinion, empiricism could establish only a contingent congruence among the pleasures of different persons. This would preclude any explanation of the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste, and justification of the claims they make.

As regards rationalism in aesthetics, Kant held that it denied any uniqueness to aesthetic judgment. Cartesian aesthetics demanded that concepts must be analyzed to render them "clear" and "distinct". "Clarity" attaches to a concept apparent to the attentive mind; "distinctness" attaches to a concept "so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear"²⁰. It follows that feelings may share an attitude of reason, and it would thus appear that the beautiful is not wholly to be cut off from reason. Aesthetic feelings would belong to a realm of sensuous truth, indistinct and confused, but nonetheless "clear". In rationalism there is no real difference in either content or basis between aesthetic and cognitive judgment. On rationalistic theories, Kant held, the judgment of taste was really a disguised cognitive judgment, called aesthetic on account of the confusion that besets our reflection, indistinct conceptualization. And Kant could have further said that the question of intersubjective validity of judgment of taste could not arise within the framework of Cartesian aesthetics.

It will be easier now to see that the objective of Kant's own theory has to accomplish to solve the problem of taste. We take pleasure in beautiful objects and found judgments of taste on it. This has to be distinguished from both the gratification which we take in the agreeable object and the esteem which we feel toward an object which is good. Arguing in that manner Kant suggests that the problem of taste cannot be solved if we confuse aesthetic response with sensory gratification or conceptual evaluation. Aesthetic response cannot be understood in terms of either one of these quite distinct states of mind. If, like the rationalists, we conflate aesthetic response with a conceptual value (the beautiful as a confused perception of the good, a la Leibniz) the problem of intersubjectivity of judgments of taste may not even arise. And, if, like the empiricists, we assimilate our pleasure in the beautiful, analogically, to our gratification in the agreeable, then the problem may be raised but can never be solved. For Kant, the point was both to raise and to solve the problem of taste. To do that he will have to provide an analysis of the judgment of taste which shows its essential connection to feeling, and then, retaining its essential subjectivity, discover an explanation of aesthetic response which allows its intersubjective validity.

R E F E R E N C E S

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4. Ibid., Introduction, pp. 32-33.
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7. Ibid., Introduction, p. 17.
8. Ibid., Introduction, p. 35.
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