

## COMMUNICABILITY OF PLEASURE AND NORMATIVITY OF TASTE IN KANT'S THIRD CRITIQUE

ISKRA FILEVA

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

### I. INTRODUCTION

Do claims of taste function as validity claims? Our ordinary use of aesthetic notions suggests as much. When I assert that Rodin's *Camille Claudel* is 'beautiful' I mean my claim to be, in a sense, *correct*. I expect others to *concur* and if they do not I think that they are *mistaken*. But am I justified in attributing an error to the judgment of someone who, unlike me, does not find Rodin's *Camille Claudel* beautiful? Not obviously. For it looks, on the other hand, that my assertion "The sculpture of *Camille Claudel* is beautiful" is not an assertion about a *property* of that sculpture, not, that is, about a feature of the world which exists *for others as well as for me*. Quite the opposite, I seem to base my claim on a *subjective* response, on a certain *feeling* of mine. I maintain that the sculpture of *Camille Claudel* is 'beautiful' because it produces a particular effect upon me, namely it *pleases me* aesthetically. But how can the *feeling* of pleasure, being a *subjective* response on my part, serve as a *normative* ground for a claim?

Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* can be read as an attempt to give a reply to this question. There Kant undertakes to demonstrate that judgments of taste can be both based on a *feeling* and *universally valid*. His argument to that effect is briefly this: aesthetic pleasure, albeit a feeling, is not a *private* feeling; it is a *public, sharable* feeling. But a sharable feeling, unlike a private one, *can* serve as a ground for validity: not, indeed, as a ground for *objective* validity, yet as a normative basis nonetheless (i.e. as a ground for validity not in respect of *the object* but for *the community of judging subjects*).

My purpose in the present paper is to re-examine Kant's account of the nature of aesthetic judgments. I believe that Kant is right both in viewing judgments of taste as *validity claims* and in construing the type of validity which such judgments possess as *intersubjective validity*. But he is mistaken, I wish to hold, in supposing that aesthetic pleasure is *a universally sharable feeling*. In what follows I shall argue for this thesis and suggest a way in which the *normative* character of aesthetic judgments can be upheld in the face of the *non-universal* character of aesthetic pleasure.

## II. WHY BEAUTY IS NOT A PROPERTY OF OBJECTS

I mentioned in the beginning that it is a familiar fact of our experience that aesthetic judgments are based on a *subjective* response, on a *feeling* of ours. But the issue is in fact controversial. Upon reflection one may well come to disagree with the claim I made. The reason behind eventual disagreement is likely to be that, on the face of it, judgments of *taste* have the structure of *cognitive* judgments. When I assert that the rose *is beautiful*, I seem to be doing something very similar to what I do when I claim that it *is red*. It would appear that as a matter of grammar (though not in Wittgenstein's sense) 'beautiful' is a predicate just like any other predicate. If so it is reasonable to suppose that pleasure itself is a property just like any other property. This line of reasoning is the route to aesthetic realism and everyone who views that line as plausible is bound to regard Kant's attempt to reconcile the subjectivity of judgments of taste with their validity aspirations as an ill-conceived enterprise: if claims about beauty are claims about *properties of objects* then the normative aspirations of such claims do not stand in need of being accounted for, at least no more than the validity aspirations of empirical judgments do.

I believe Kant to be correct in claiming that 'beautiful' is unlike ordinary predicates but I am not going to argue for that claim myself since Kant gives what I take to be sufficiently powerful arguments in this regard. Below I shall briefly rehearse those arguments. They are as follows:

First, if 'beauty' were a property like 'red' it would be possible for us to form a *concept* of beauty. But we do not, in fact, possess such a concept. This is evidenced by the fact that we refuse to believe any purported 'demonstrations' that claims about beauty are correct. If someone wishes to *convince* us that an object is 'beautiful' either without showing to us that object or else contrary to our own feeling for the object we,

paraphrasing Kant, refuse to listen.<sup>1</sup> We find ourselves extremely unwilling to let ourselves be *convinced* to call something ‘beautiful’. And we do because, as our intuitions rightly tell us, aesthetic judgments are not based on our having *understood* something but on our having *felt* something.

Second and relatedly, there are no reliable methods for creating beautiful things. One cannot *learn* to make beautiful things in the way one can *learn* to make tables and chairs. Beauty does not come as a result of a correct application of some definable rule.<sup>2</sup> It takes a ‘genius’ to create a beautiful work and genius is the capacity to reach the beautiful without possessing a reliable procedure, without knowing in advance how to get to it. Yet if ‘beauty’ is a concept which can be mastered, it is hard to see why there aren’t any teachable techniques for beauty creation and why it should take a genius to bring beauty about.

Third, if ‘beauty’ were a concept and if a claim about ‘beauty’ were no more than a subsumption of an object under that concept, it becomes hard to explain why we ever find it *pleasing* that something is beautiful. For the fact that something is rightly subsumable under its concept is never, on its own, *pleasing* to us. We don’t find it pleasing that a round object is round and not square or that a red object is red and not green so why should we be pleased that beautiful things are beautiful and not ugly?<sup>3</sup>

So aesthetic realism is not a viable option: judgments of taste are based not on *concepts* but on the *feeling* of pleasure.<sup>4</sup> The question is: can aesthetic judgments, despite being deprived of an *objective ground*, justifiably aspire to validity?

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<sup>1</sup> Kant writes in this regard: “we refuse to be swayed by any reasons or principles into calling something 'beautiful' and want to take a look at an aesthetic object with our own eyes” *The Critique of Judgment* trans. by James Meredith (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1928, reprinted 1969), 8:216. All references to Kant are from the same translation and the page numbers follow the pagination of the Akademie edition of the *Third Critique* hereafter referred to as *Ak.*

<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that there is no rule whatsoever (normativity without a rule is impossible on Kant’s reckoning) but only that such a rule cannot be ‘definite’ for if it were, claims about beauty will be like knowledge claims.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ak.* 6:212. The fact that *particular laws* can be subsumed under more *general laws*, on the other hand, can be, on Kant’s view, a ground for pleasure.

<sup>4</sup> In this line of reasoning Kant defines judgments of taste as ‘reflective’, as opposed to ‘determinant’, judgments.

### III.   NORMATIVITY WITHOUT CONCEPTS

Kant's reply is 'yes' because there is one kind of validity for judgments which is not validity in respect of the *object*, namely validity for *all judging subjects*. That precisely is the validity which judgments of taste aspire to: *subjective universality*. When I claim that something is 'beautiful' I mean my claim to be valid not *for the object* but *for everyone else*: I take it that *everyone ought to be pleased* in contemplating that object. Kant writes:

In a judgment of taste the pleasure felt by us is exacted from every one else as necessary, just as if, when we call something beautiful, beauty was to be regarded as a quality of the object forming part of its inherent determination according to concepts; although beauty is for itself, apart from any reference to the feeling of the Subject, nothing. (*Ak.* 9:218)

But what is my justification for this demand that *others* share *my* pleasure?

Kant's answer, as mentioned earlier, is that the 'feeling' which underwrites aesthetic judgments is not a *private* feeling. Aesthetic pleasure is not private because not relative to *personal* characteristics of the judging subject. It is based, rather, on *universal* human characteristics. We possess the capacity to *abstract* from what is purely subjective about our own experience, such as our own interests and inclinations, and that is what, according to Kant, we do (or should do) when passing a judgment about 'beauty'. It is precisely our having thus abstracted from what is merely personal about ourselves and our own experiences which entitles us to the demand that *others* partake in *our* delight.<sup>5</sup> Kant writes:

since the delight is not based on any inclination of the subject (or any other deliberate interest), but the subject feels himself completely free in respect of the liking he accords to the object, he can find as reasons for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. (*Ak.* 6: 212)

When I call an object 'beautiful' I do so because my feeling, at least so far as I can see, is *not* based on the suitability of the object to occasion pleasure in me *personally*,

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that when I call an object 'beautiful' I expect that everyone *will* actually agree with me. I take my judgment to be normative for everyone only in the sense that I *demand* agreement from others and in the face of disagreement on their part I do not find consolation in telling myself that, after all, "everyone has his or her own taste". I persist in my demand for agreement and *deny* them 'taste'.

but in *human subjects generally*.<sup>6</sup> Judgments of taste are arrived at by means of *shared capacities*.<sup>7</sup>

There is certainly more to Kant's account but I cannot give all details here and neither are they, for my present purpose, necessary. We already have the gist of Kant's solution to the problem with the dual nature of judgments of taste. There is no contradiction in conceiving of these judgments as both based on *feeling* and *universally valid*. The validity such judgments aspire to springs from the nature of the very feeling underwriting them: this feeling is *universally communicable*. The question we have to address now is whether this solution to our problem is satisfactory. I shall take this question in what follows.

#### IV. SHARING PLEASURE AND GRANTING VALIDITY TO JUDGMENTS

I shall postpone for now the discussion of the point on which, as mentioned in the beginning, I agree with Kant, namely that judgments of taste *can* rightly aspire to validity. Instead I shall, for the time being, assume that they do and proceed to ask the question, *when* do we take it (and should take it) that an aesthetic judgment is valid? According to Kant, as we saw, we should deem a judgment of the type 'X is beautiful' to be 'valid' when reflection tells us that the object of that judgment is fit to produce delight in *all human beings*, when it is by means of shared human capacities that delight is experienced. That, I wish to maintain now, is not actually the case. We can and do grant validity to judgments based on pleasure which we neither experience *ourselves* nor take it that *everyone* should experience.

In order to see the point consider the following by no means unfamiliar type of case: I do not enjoy Mozart because Mozart's music is too lighthearted for me (except for the Requiem, say). But my friend's favorite composer is Mozart. What do I do in the face of the fact that I do not share her pleasure in a Mozart sonata?

Whatever the answer to this question, it seems clear that there is one thing I *do not* (and *should not*) do: I do not (and should not) *deny her taste*. And I neither do nor should, I wish to suggest now, because despite the fact I do not *share* her aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup> Not every type of aesthetic judgment, however, involves the 'abstraction' by means of which we come to evaluate objects from the viewpoint of human subjects generally. Judgments about what is 'charming', 'tasty' or 'agreeable', for example, do not involve the abstraction in question, and so do not aspire to more than a private validity.

<sup>7</sup> Kant uses the expression 'sensus communis', or 'common sense', in order to designate these capacities.

pleasure I can *recognize* the possibility of Mozart's music being of great appeal to other people, to people whom I would regard as possessing *good* taste. To have Mozart as one's favorite composer, to consider Mozart's music unsurpassed in beauty by anyone else's is, so far as I can see, a response in a *very fine* taste though it is not *my* taste and neither do I think that it should be *everyone else's*.

But there is a sense, I am going to suggest now, though a weaker sense, in which we view as 'valid' even responses we take to be in 'bad taste'. This weaker sense is the sense in which we view responses in 'bad taste' as, in the very least, *normal* human responses. For instance, I consider the enjoyment of the soundtrack of the Matrix as a sign of poor aesthetic taste. Yet I do not, for this reason, deny *any validity* to the judgment "the soundtrack of the Matrix is beautiful music". The reason I do not is that someone else's enjoyment in the soundtrack of the Matrix is at least *intelligible* to me, I view such enjoyment as a *normal* human reaction.<sup>8</sup> In opposition to responses in either 'good' or 'bad' taste are *abnormal* human reactions, likings so 'off' the track that it becomes hard for me view them as 'adequate' human responses even in a minimal sense. Thus suppose someone were to insist not on that the soundtrack of the Matrix but on that the sound of tractors, is more pleasing than either Mozart's music or that of the Matrix soundtrack. I will think that she has an extremely bizarre taste, neither 'good' nor 'bad' but a taste so idiosyncratic and remote from a normal person's liking as to not allow of being qualified as either 'good' or 'bad'. The judgment "the soundtrack of the Matrix is beautiful music", though not indicative of 'good taste', then, possesses more validity than the judgment "The sound of tractors is beautiful".

Now suppose the above considerations are correct. The question arises what features of our aesthetic experience did Kant overlook, such as allow us to grant validity in either minimal or non-minimal sense to responses not underwritten by universally sharable pleasure? I wish to suggest two things. The first has to do with the role of imagination in assessment of aesthetic responses. We are capable of *imagining* conditions under which *others* could experience pleasure in an object that doesn't please *us* and we use this capacity in judging aesthetically. Perhaps what is required for the enjoyment of a given object is a temperament different from ours, more cheerful, say, or more sentimental. Or maybe we have to be younger or older or

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<sup>8</sup> Our ability to *imagine* how someone else might enjoy an object in what we consider 'bad taste' is what enables us to differentiate between a 'bad' and a 'bizarre' taste.

of the opposite gender in order to be able to enjoy an object which doesn't please us. Thus imagination makes it possible for us to grant at least minimum validity to aesthetic responses that differ from ours.

My second point has to do with the role played by reflection. Reflection upon the conditions for pleasure in a given object has a *critical* role *vis-à-vis* our reaction to the object and so *vis-à-vis* the goodness of our own taste: reflection may reveal that the conditions under which an object *we* do not enjoy can be enjoyed, far from implying an absence of 'good taste', to the contrary, *require* such. That precisely was the case with my recognition of the validity of the judgment "Mozart's music is beautiful". Our standards of 'good taste' do not depend on *our* capacity to experience pleasure<sup>9</sup> any more than our standards of 'normal human taste' do.

Of course Kant already acknowledged that our judgments of taste are partly independent of what we *happen* to like. As I myself emphasized, Kant held that in passing a judgment of taste we have to abstract from what is 'private' and 'unsharable' about our own experiences and aim to refer the representation of a given object to those conditions of experience we have *in common* with other human beings. What Kant did not realize is that in order for us to recognize a judgment as 'valid', that judgment does not have to be underwritten by what we take to be 'universally sharable pleasure'. Quite the opposite, it may well be that the judgment is underwritten by what we take to be *non-universal* pleasure, provided we are able to view that pleasure as possible for human beings with at least *normal human* and possibly a *very refined* taste.

This account is admittedly sketchy but I believe to have said enough to provide its general outline. Much further work needs to be done but I leave that for another occasion. Here I shall limit myself to one final point before closing this discussion. Our capacity to render to ourselves intelligible the pleasure of others, to recognize, if I can put it this way, the multiplicity of voices which the 'universal human voice' comprises, is the route to our becoming more tolerant to other people's likes and dislikes: *respectfully* tolerant. In opposition to that, an aesthetic relativist who refuses to make an attempt to render to himself *intelligible* other people's likings is what

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<sup>9</sup> This relative independence of our standards of 'good taste' from our *own* taste helps explain a type of result of second-order assessment of our own responses which would otherwise appear paradoxical: just as we can recognize as 'good taste' a taste which differs from ours so too we can recognize as 'bad' *our own* taste. Our lover of the soundtrack of the Matrix may well *admit* that enjoying that soundtrack is not a sign of 'good taste'.

might be dubbed *disrespectfully tolerant*. For tolerance, to my intuitions at least but also, I believe, to my reader's intuitions, requires not just admission *that* others may enjoy what I do not, but my ability to see *why* they enjoy what I do not. What is the relevant difference between them and me? A difference which doesn't make them inhuman? A difference which might even make them more *refined* humans.