



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

## The Problem of Particularity in Kant's Aesthetic Theory

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**ABSTRACT:** In moving away from the objective, property-based theories of earlier periods to a subject-based aesthetic, Kant did not intend to give up the idea that judgments of beauty are universalizable. Accordingly, the "Deduction of Judgments of Taste" (*KU*, § 38) aims to show how reflective aesthetic judgments can be "imputed" *a priori* to all human subjects. The Deduction is not successful: Kant manages only to justify the imputation of the same *form* of aesthetic experience to everyone; he does not show that this experience will universally occur in response to the same objects. This is what I call Kant's *Problem of Particularity*. After critiquing Anthony Savile's attempt to overcome this Problem by linking Kant's aesthetics to the theory of rational ideas, I elucidate the concept of (the oft-unnoticed) *aesthetic attributes* (§ 49) in a way that allows us to solve the Problem of Particularity.

The central elements of Immanuel Kant's faculty-based aesthetic theory are reasonably familiar: In non-aesthetic cognitions, the faculty of imagination serves to synthesize sense intuitions and reproduce them in a manifold that is then "unified" under concepts by the faculty of understanding. The unification of the sensory manifold is thus a cognitive aim (*Absicht*) with respect to knowledge.<sup>(1)</sup> A crucial claim of the third *Critique* is that in conjunction with reflective experience of certain objects, the imagination presents the sensory manifold already unified, as it were, without the use of a concept. This harmony of the two faculties accomplishes that cognitive aim in a sort of unexpected way, and is the occasion of "a noticeable pleasure."<sup>(2)</sup> It is on the basis of this pleasure and an acknowledgment of its genesis in the contingent harmony or "free play" of the faculties that a judgment of taste is made.

In moving away from the objective property-based or perfectionist theories of the medieval and early modern periods to this sort of subject-based aesthetic, Kant did not intend to give up the idea that judgments of beauty are universalizable. Accordingly, much of the first part of the *Critique* is given to showing how one person's reflective aesthetic judgments can be legitimately "imputed" to or expected from all properly-situated human subjects.<sup>(3)</sup> The famous "Deduction of Judgments of Taste" (§ 38) provides a sketch of this argument. Very briefly, Kant argues that since the faculties under consideration are "required for possible cognition as such," it follows that all who (through communicating with others reveal their

ability to) cognize anything are susceptible to the same experience of faculties in free harmony, and to the concomitant aesthetic pleasure. As long as the subject takes himself to be conscientiously beholding the object under appropriate circumstances (e.g. without interest, prejudice, etc.) he can take his judgment of taste to imply in an "*a priori*" fashion that under similar circumstances other well-functioning human beings likewise will be pleased by it.(4)

Whether or not this Deduction is successful in any regard, it certainly does not achieve all of the aims that Kant sets for it. For, as Paul Guyer argues, the fact that everyone is possessed of faculties which make them capable of "unifying manifolds under empirical concepts" does not "imply that the special case of unifying a manifold without any empirical concept at all must occur in precisely the same circumstance for everyone."(5) Again,

Kant's explanation of our pleasure in beauty in terms of a distinctive employment of the underlying faculties of cognition... may be sufficient to make it reasonable to expect that all cognitive subjects should be capable of aesthetic response under *some circumstances or other*. ... But his argument does not seem sufficient to prove that *particular objects* must always produce the same aesthetic response in all subjects who encounter them under suitable circumstances. (6)

I shall refer to this as Kant's *problem of particularity*.

Kant would not have accepted this conclusion, of course; he seems to think that his Deduction is successful in all respects. It is perhaps worthwhile, however, to consider whether Kant's theory in general has the resources to handle Guyer's latter-day criticisms. In *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, Guyer denies that such resources exist. (7) In his more recent *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, Guyer refers to the work of a number of other theorists who have argued otherwise—in each case by trying to tie the experience of a particular object of beauty to the interests of morality. According to Guyer, all of these attempts but one fail, for reasons which he enumerates in the early pages of the book. There is, says Guyer, only one author who has with some degree of success "confronted the issue of how a connection between aesthetics and morality could ... justify the [expectation] that different persons not just have some aesthetic sensibility in general but agree in finding particular objects beautiful. That author is Anthony Savile, in his book *Aesthetic Reconstructions*." (8)

My initial aim here is to indicate why Guyer's affirmation on Savile's behalf is ill-founded by way of showing that Savile's account achieves its goal only at the cost of undermining important tenets of Kant's overall theory. Savile makes a great advance, however, when he proposes that we look into Kant's discussion of "aesthetic Ideas" (9) for the resources with which to salvage the Deduction. In the latter portion of the paper, I provide an interpretation of the notion and phenomenology of an aesthetic Idea which, while remaining faithful to the spirit of Kant's theory, suggests a solution to the problem of particularity.

## I

The central thesis of the Savilian account is that only art objects that treat of a certain "subject matter or theme" allow an individual's positive aesthetic judgments about them to be legitimately imputed to everyone. (10) That subject matter, says Savile, is some "idea of reason." Now for Kant an idea of reason is a concept which has something to do with "the supersensible" realm outside our phenomenal experience, and thus it outstrips the

conceptual ability of the understanding. Unlike a determinate theoretical concept (such as "a dog" or "a house"), these ideas cannot be adequately exemplified by any single intuition. (11) According to Savile, a successful, spirited artwork will contain an *aesthetic* Idea which is, in turn, "one possible way of thinking about [a rational idea], and may be said to be an expression or presentation of that idea or theme." "On this account then, Ideas are identified as the concrete presentations of particular themes that are offered us by individual works of art. Consequently, whatever interest they have for us attaches to the particular work or object that embodies them." (12)

Savile's reasoning is clear enough. Artworks that display *Geist* present one aspect of a valuable theme, and invite "the spectator or reader to extensively explore the theme in his thought in the mode in which it is presented." (13) Moreover, this thoughtful exploration of such a theme is "of its very nature pleasurable" to the properly-situated beholder. (14) When she reflects upon the pleasing thought or series of thoughts that she had upon confronting the work, she "shall not be able to do so without making reference back to the detailed embodiment that it is given in the work." (15) Thus she can assume that properly-situated beholders generally will be pleased upon being presented with this particular object under the right circumstances, and thereby "impute" her judgment to them.

Whatever this account's intrinsic plausibility, I do not think it does justice to Kant's overall position. This for two reasons: First, it conflicts with Kant's insistence that aesthetic pleasure be *disinterested*; second, it bases this pleasure in the rational concept thematized in the work, rather than in the subjective form of aesthetic experience itself.

(i) Regarding disinterestedness: Savile explicitly states that the reason the appreciation of Ideas in art is pleasurable for us is that we find contemplation of the rational ideas they exhibit "valuable" and "beneficial." Experience of Ideas meets a certain "need" that we have. A Kantian objection immediately comes to mind: But certainly we will have an *interest* in meeting such needs?

Savile tries to circumnavigate this objection by depicting the structure of the experience in such a way that the pleasure does not arise "in recognition of the fact that the Ideas are beneficial or meet a need." Rather, it is "a pleasure in the object as it presents itself to us in meeting the need." This is a fine distinction; too fine, I think, to do the work that Savile wants it to do. For Kant's doctrine is that "if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste... All interest either presupposes a need or gives rise to one, and because interest is the basis that determines approval, it makes the judgment about the object unfree." (16)

This is not to say that there are no intellectual or empirical interests involved in our experience of beauty. Kant thinks that we have an empirical interest in communicating our judgments to others in society, for instance, and an intellectual interest in the moral aspects of any experience. (17) Moreover, these interests arise out of needs we have for sociability and for affirmation of our moral vocation—needs which can be met in the course of making aesthetic judgments. But these needs, the interest they evoke, and the pleasure we experience in having them met are technically *external* to aesthetic judgments and their pleasures considered "of themselves." (18) Savilian judgments of beauty will indeed be universal, but only because they are inappropriately based on universal *practical* interests. (19)

(ii) The second reason for rejecting Savile's proposal is related to the first: by connecting

an artwork's beauty to its subject matter or theme, Savile departs from Kant's dictum that it is the subjective *form* of aesthetic experience alone which prompts aesthetic response. Kant emphasizes this in many places; the following is one:

An aesthetic judgment is unique in kind and provides absolutely no cognition (not even a confused one) of the object; only a logical judgment does that. An aesthetic judgment instead refers the presentation, by which an object is given, solely to the subject; it brings to our notice no characteristic of the object, but only the purposive form in the [way] the presentational powers are determined in their engagement with the object. Indeed, the judgment is called aesthetic precisely because the basis determining it is not a concept but the feeling (of the inner sense) of that accordance in the play of the mental powers insofar as it can only be sensed. (20)

For Kant, the form of the aesthetic experience—the way our faculties interact upon being presented with beautiful objects—is the *sine qua non* of a well-formed judgment of taste. Savile violates the spirit of Kant's theory when he has us attributing beauty to art objects because their *conceptual content* strikes us as expressive of rational ideas, and therefore as morally valuable. In what follows, I want to suggest how we might employ a different understanding of aesthetic Ideas to solve the problem of particularity, and to do so in a way that does not militate against the basic tenets of Kant's account.

## II

Although Kant occasionally speaks of an aesthetic Idea as "a presentation" in the singular, my suggestion is that we construe the mental act of contemplating an Idea as involving a *plurality* of presentations and thoughts linked together. (21) There is textual evidence for this: In one passage, Kant calls an aesthetic Idea a "coherent whole of an unspeakable wealth of thought." (22) And in an earlier discussion of the "aesthetic standard ideas" that exhibit determinate concepts (rather than rational ones), Kant indicates that they are produced by way of the imagination "projecting a large number" of thoughts "onto one another." (23) It is plausible then to read the later notion of an aesthetic Idea that exhibits a rational concept as involving (to use Kant's words) an "inexhaustible" and "unexpoundable" series of thoughts that the imagination produces when confronted with beauties. It is this coherent and yet unspeakable whole which "aspires" to exhibit in imagination the object's rational concept—a concept that cannot, in principle, be given an adequate exhibition.

On this reading, the essential characteristic of an aesthetic Idea will be the *form* of our psychological experience of it. A mind which is contemplating an Idea will experience a "quickenings" of the cognitive faculties by way of the imagination producing a multitude of thoughts containing a "wealth of material ... for which no expression can be found." (24) *Pace* Savile, it is not the content of these thoughts—moral or otherwise—that is of primary importance here, but rather the formal manner in which these thoughts are strung together by the mind into a "coherent whole" that has the phenomenological "feel" of being inexhaustible. (25) I take it that Kant is explicating in another fashion here the mental episode that he earlier called the harmonious free play of the faculties. Aesthetic pleasure is adverbial on the action of the imagination running through a seemingly endless series of non-conceptually unified thoughts. If this is correct, then the important question for us in this essay is how particular objects engender the experience of Ideas in properly-situated subjects.

Immediately after Kant's introduction of the notion of an Idea in § 49, he moves to a discussion of the "aesthetic attributes" which are supposed to constitute or "yield an aesthetic Idea." (26) To my knowledge, no contemporary commentator has made much of

this portion of Kant's theory. My proposal is that a certain understanding of the nature of these attributes may provide a link between the particular object and the Idea which is involved in aesthetic response. Aesthetic attributes by definition pertain *to the object* as it is presented in imagination—they are "attributes of an object, of an object whose concept is a rational idea." Later Kant says that they are "attribute[s] of a presentation of sense." But attributes of what sort? Kant distinguishes aesthetic attributes from "logical attributes," noting that the former "accompany the logical ones" and yet perform a function distinct from them. (27) Logical attributes of an art-object are correlated with determinate concepts: the Creator-god Jupiter presented to us in a painting, for instance, might possess definite logical attributes like "having long, flowing hair" or "sitting atop a large throne."

The imagination does not rest content to present only these logical attributes of the object, however: it also "calls to mind" a series of "supplementary presentations ... expressing the concept's implications and its kinship with other concepts." These are the aesthetic attributes, which the imagination "conjoins" with the object. (28) The example of such an attribute that Kant provides for our Jupiter example is that of the "eagle with lightning in its claws," an image traditionally associated with Jupiter in Roman mythology. In the proper circumstances, a well-functioning imagination would not stop with this attribute, but would continue to conjure up other kindred thoughts which it associates, in some fashion, with the (rational) concept of the "sublimity and majesty of creation." Some of these might include: "the queen of heaven;" "Roman gods;" "Greek gods;" "Zeus;" "divinity in general;" "omnipotence;" "worship-worthiness;" "fearful;" and whatever else the presentation suggests by way of association, metaphor, catachresis, metonymy, etc. Because Jupiter is an "object whose concept is a rational idea"—i.e., the rational idea of a creative Deity—it will possess a certain richness such that the set of aesthetic attributes that "animate it" by way of these mental associations will seem inexhaustible. Of course, it is *possible* in principle for the imagination to call to mind associations of this sort for any presentation of sense; however, Kant seems to think that such an attempt with respect to a non-beautiful presentation will not produce pleasure. The non-beautiful object "leaves nothing behind as an [I]dea and makes the spirit dull, the object gradually disgusting, and the mind dissatisfied with itself and moody because it is conscious that in reason's judgment its attunement is contrapurposive." Only an object that is connected "closely or remotely with moral ideas" will prove rich enough upon contemplation to avoid this "ultimate fate." (29)

So the presentation of a truly beautiful (art) object "prompts the imagination to spread over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words." (30) The latter set of presentations are aesthetic attributes of the object, attributes that the mind produces in its free interaction with the initial presentation of that object. The train of thought brought to mind by the free play of the imagination is never finished and never finalized, but each thought in that train "does pertain to the concept of the object [presented]." (31) This train of thoughts taken together is then supposed to "yield" an aesthetic Idea. The contemporary concept of "free association" is perhaps helpful here in getting at the mental phenomenon that Kant is describing. For while the aesthetic attributes are *of* the object in question in that they are linked to its logical attributes by chains of association, they are also produced freely. As Kant has it: "in this process we feel our freedom from the law of [logical] association (which attaches to the empirical use of the imagination)"—and it is this feeling of freedom that contributes to our aesthetic experience of the object. (32) Again, the imagination's running through the seemingly endless set of aesthetic attributes engenders the peculiar feeling of "mental attunement" or harmony that is aesthetic pleasure. (33)

A possible solution to our problem is becoming clear. Kant suggests that there is a link between the logical attribute(s) of a particular art object and the aesthetic attributes that it calls to mind in a well-functioning beholder. It is not necessary that the set of thoughts that make up the "train" of aesthetic attributes of the object be exactly the same for every person. But every artwork that has *Geist* will necessarily be rich enough to provoke *some* set of associations in every properly-situated subject. This set will yield an aesthetic Idea in their minds, and thus engender pleasure. (34) When the subject reflects upon the source of their pleasure, they will connect it to the experience of that particular object, and then judge with a "universal voice" that *that* object is beautiful. This scenario meets the demands of taste: the aesthetic pleasure arises out of the form of the subjective experience and is not involved with any moral or empirical interests. It so happens that on Kant's view moral ideas are the only things rich enough to evoke aesthetic Ideas of the sort we are discussing. So the moral content or theme of the artwork will be *indirectly* or, as Kant says, "remotely" connected to the judgment of an object's beauty. (35) However, the moral content itself—whatever other interests it may meet or engender—is not directly the basis for our judgment of taste. Rather, the pleasure in having the Idea is. Thus we can say—*a priori*, as it were—that *only those* objects that are linked to aesthetic attributes which in turn yield aesthetic Ideas in us will be called beautiful by everyone who beholds them under the proper circumstances.

The contemporary aesthetician may very well find this scheme implausible. It does not seem to be empirically true that the same art objects throw everyone's mind into the sort of phenomenological activity that for Kant signals the presence of an aesthetic Idea. But of course, the contemporary aesthetician may find the very notion of an aesthetic Idea implausible as well. That skepticism does not count against the coherence, at least, of the Kantian position. Moreover, Kant did not mean this to be an empirical claim; rather, it is an *a priori* thesis about how and why and when aesthetic pleasure can be imputed to everyone. It may well be the case that many people do not for whatever reason experience a particular beautiful object as beautiful—Kant alludes to such possibilities in his text. (36) The point is that in the analysis of aesthetic attributes and Ideas there is adequate ground for Kant's claim that a judgment of taste implicates the claim that (ideally) everyone *will* find that object beautiful *under the appropriate circumstances*.

It remains to be seen how judgments of beauty in nature fit into this scheme. Both kinds of judgment are judgments of taste, and both are based on the form of mental experience that I have been calling the harmonious free play of the imagination and the understanding. Thus we can, with Kant, "in general call beauty (whether *natural or artistic*) the expression of aesthetic Ideas." (37) The locution here is slightly misleading; elsewhere Kant specifies that rational ideas are *expressed* in beautiful objects, while (and when) aesthetic Ideas are involved in our experience of them. (38) Spirit-filled art objects express rational ideas of God, freedom, the moral law, totality, immortality, etc. by provoking the mind to run through a series of aesthetic attributes pertaining to those rational ideas. It seems reasonable to say that our experience of some natural objects can likewise involve such attributes and produce in us aesthetic Ideas. Indeed, if reading Frederick the Great's poem about a sunset can engender an Idea in us, how much more the experience of an actual sunset?

Further argument would be required here to firmly establish the point. It is worth noting, however, that Savile's account will not allow him to draw this parallel at all, since he thinks that the object's expression of moral *content* in itself provides the justification for its being judged beautiful. Thus he has to privilege the beauty of art, where "the concept of a theme

or rational idea that is more or less richly treated" is most at home. Kant, however, consistently privileges natural beauty over artistic beauty—indeed, fine art is only legitimized on Kant's view insofar as "it seems at the same time to be nature."

A man who has taste enough to judge the products of fine art with the greatest correctness and refinement may still be glad to leave a room in which he finds those beauties ... and to turn instead to the beautiful in nature, in order to find there, as it were, a voluptuousness for the mind in a train of thought that he can never fully unravel. (39)

Savile's argument takes him away from Kant's sentiments here in such a way that he is forced to claim, rather implausibly, that spirit-filled art objects are paradigmatic beauties, and that Kant only means to privilege beautiful nature over "art that is not expressive of aesthetic Ideas at all." (40)

It should be reiterated that any attempt to address the problem of particularity in Kant's aesthetics will be a "reconstruction" of sorts. After all, Kant thought his Deduction was not only successful in all respects, but also "easy"! (41) My primary aim in this essay has been to show that, though the job is certainly not easy, we may be able to find resources residing within Kant's theory—especially in the notions of aesthetic Ideas and aesthetic attributes—to resolve the demands of taste with a particular object's claim to intersubjective beauty.

## Notes

(1) Cf. Critique of Judgment (hereafter referred to by this translations pagination, rather than that of the Akademie version). Trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987. P. 92-93.

(2) CJ, 27.

(3) Cf. CJ, 153. It is not always clear what Kant means by words like "fordern," "ansinnen" and "zumuten" (the translator usually renders both as to require). In the second Moment, where Kant first discusses the universalizability of aesthetic judgments, this requiring is really more of an expectation that others will agree (cf. § 8). In a few places, however, it can seem stronger—like a demand or a stipulation of a duty (cf. § 40). In this paper, I will follow Guyer, Savile, and others in using the English word "impute" to carry the former sort of connotations. That is, I will be concerned with the rational expectation that everyone will share one's judgment of taste rather than any sort of demand that they do so.

(4) CJ, 155. The judgment is "a priori" inasmuch as it doesn't require any empirical evidence about the way people really do judge the object.

(5) Guyer, Paul. Kant and the Claims of Taste, Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. p. 263.

(6) Guyer, Paul. Kant and the Experience of Freedom. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. pp. 12 (my emphasis).

(7) Cf. ch. 8-9.

(8) Guyer, Kant and the Experience of Freedom. p. 12-18, see also Chapters 1-3.

(9) I shall follow Savile in capitalizing Idea when referring to Kant's "aesthetic Idea" and

reserving the lower-case usage for "rational idea."

(10) Savile, Anthony. *Aesthetic Reconstructions: The Seminal Writings of Lessing, Kant, and Schiller*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. p.168.

(11) CJ, 215.

(12) Savile, 170.

(13) CJ, 184.

(14) Savile, 176.

(15) Savile, 170-1.

(16) CJ, 46, 52.

(17) CJ, § 41-§ 42 (163-170).

(18) CJ, 46n.

(19) Savile seems to think that having the basis of the pleasure (the intellectual interest) be obscure to the subject at the time the judgment is made will somehow enable his account to evade this charge. But Kant, in the quotation provided, does not seem to allow for this: he simply says that if as a matter of fact an intellectual interest is the basis of the pleasure, then the judgment is not properly one of taste.

(20) CJ, 75.

(21) For the sake of brevity, I am here setting aside some Kantian qualifications regarding epistemological differences between "presentations" and "representations."

(22) CJ, 199.

(23) CJ, 82. Also see CJ, 191.

(24) CJ, 184, 186.

(25) CJ, 199, 183.

(26) CJ, 183f.

(27) CJ, 184.

(28) Ibid.

(29) CJ, 196.

(30) Ibid.

(31) CJ, 183.

(32) CJ, 182.

(33) CJ, 186.

(34) See Kant's definition of genius, or the ability to impart have spirit imparted to one's artworks. A criterion regarding the artwork's ability to provoke aesthetic Ideas is built right into the concept. CJ, 186.

(35) CJ, 196.

(36) CJ, 145-6. Kant discusses the case of a young poet who will not be convinced by others' disapprobation of his poem. And Kant seems to applaud this stubbornness, since it is incumbent on the individual to arrive at his own, autonomous judgment of taste. This implies that there may often be disagreement over such judgments; on our scheme, this would be explained by the fact that if the work is indeed beautiful, then those who think otherwise have allowed other interests or prejudices to impede the production of an Idea in them. It is another question, one I shall not address here, whether this neglect is somehow culpable. See the important footnote to the Deduction, CJ, 155.

(37) CJ, 189, my emphasis.

(38) CJ, 183.

(39) CJ, 166-167.

(40) Savile, 174.

(41) CJ, 156.