

Kant's Aesthetic Theory: Subjectivity vs. Universal Validity

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Abstract

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant claims that the judgment of taste is based on a subjective principle, but it has universal validity. This subjective principle determines what pleases and what displeases us only through feeling—not through concepts. The *a priori* character of taste reflects the transcendental principle of the general acceptability, and only such a transcendental principle can be a *sensus communis*. His contention is that this principle emerges from the free play of our cognitive faculties, and has to be common sense that everyone has since everyone has the same cognitive capacities. In this paper, I try to demonstrate this nature of the aesthetic judgment, which is subjective but has universal validity.

1. The Necessity of the Aesthetic Judgment

In the exposition of the beautiful that Kant offers at the end of the fourth moment of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, we see an amalgamation of the *a priori* character of the judgment of taste and the necessary character of the pleasure that we take from a beautiful object. Beautiful is “cognized without a concept as the object of a necessary satisfaction” (J, 5:240). However, since the notion of necessity is abstract and conceptual, the idea of an aesthetic judgment that is necessary seems paradoxical because an aesthetic judgment is always subjective and non-conceptual. According to Kant, it is not an arbitrary incidence that some elements in nature produce pleasure in us and some do not. He therefore claims that this necessity, regarding the pleasure that we take from a beautiful object, has to be a characteristic of the aesthetic judgment. One cannot separate

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this notion of necessity from the claim that the beautiful object gives universal pleasure without a concept.

In Kant's view, universality and necessity are the two indications of a claim that has an *a priori* character. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he says:

Experience teaches us, to be sure, that something is constituted thus and so, but not that it could not be otherwise. First, then, if a proposition is thought along with its necessity, it is an *a priori* judgment; if it is, moreover, also not derived from any proposition except one that in turn is valid as a necessary proposition, then it is absolutely *a priori*. Second: Experience never gives its judgments true or strict but only assumed and comparative universality (through induction), so properly it must be said: as far as we have yet perceived, there is no exception to this or that rule. Thus if a judgment is thought in strict universality, i.e., in such a way that no exception at all is allowed to be possible, then it is not derived from experience, but is rather valid absolutely *a priori*. (R, B4)

Since these two categories are inseparable from each other, when we claim that the beautiful object gives universal pleasure—if this claim is not an empirical one—our claim is that it is necessary that the beautiful object gives pleasure.

We need to find a ground for this claim that aesthetic judgment is necessary. We cannot find an epistemic ground for it—there is not *a priori* knowledge that tells us that everyone takes the pleasure that I take from an object that I find to be beautiful. Kant says:

[T]his necessity is of a special kind: not a theoretical objective necessity, where it can be cognized *a priori* that everyone will feel this satisfaction in the object called beautiful by me, nor a practical necessity, where by means of concepts of a pure will. (J, 5:237)

As he points out, we cannot find a moral ground for it either—the aesthetic pleasure is not based on the principles of our will. Therefore, the necessity of an aesthetic judgment is neither a theoretical necessity (as in the case of judgments of knowledge) nor a practical necessity (as in the case of normative judgments). This subjective judgment—the aesthetic judgment—is necessary, but it is not a necessity that is based on our concepts. In other words, this necessity that the aesthetic judgment contains is not based on anything that is outside of aesthetic pleasure. We need to seek the principle of aesthetic pleasure through analyzing the necessary connection between the beautiful and this feeling of pleasure that we take from a beautiful object.

In order to clarify this necessary connection between the beautiful and pleasure, we need to underscore the distinction that Kant draws between the agreeable and the beautiful in the sense of the nature of their relations to pleasure. The agreeable is completely based on our empirical judgments and it completely depends on our subjective tendencies. Therefore, there is only a contingent connection between agreeable objects and pleasure. On the other hand, the beautiful

is characterized by its necessary relation to pleasure. We see that, in aesthetic judgment, the pleasure that one takes from an object becomes a rule that everyone has to approve. This rule seems to reveal only an expectation of a consensus in a community. But, we cannot draw the conclusion that the aesthetic judgment is necessary by moving from the agreement in all judgments in a community since an *a priori* necessity does not follow from an empirical agreement. In addition, we know that the aesthetic judgment does not contain a necessity that is based on concepts.

Kant thinks that the aesthetic judgment, which carries with it a kind of necessity, contains universality as an exemplary. He says:

[A] necessity that is thought in an aesthetic judgment, it can only be called exemplary, i.e., a necessity of the assent of all to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce. (J, 5:237)

We consider the judgment necessary since it is an exemplary of this universal law that we are unable to conceptualize. When we view aesthetic judgment in this way—aesthetic judgment contains universality as an exemplary—both the necessity of the aesthetic judgment and the universal principle that contains this necessity has to be subjective (i.e., based on feelings). Kant says:

If judgments of taste (like cognitive judgments) had a determinate objective principle, then someone who made them in accordance with the latter would lay claim to the unconditioned necessity of this judgment. If they had no principle at all, like those of mere sensory taste, then one would never even have a thought of their necessity. (J, 5:238)

So, we see that the necessity of the judgment of taste, which stays outside of these two cases as Kant points out, is based on a subjective principle. He says, “They must thus have a subjective principle, which determines what pleases or displeases only through feeling and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity” (J, 5:238). Only this principle provides the *a priori* character of taste, which goes beyond an empirical universality.

Kant thinks that the transcendental principle of general acceptability is this principle that provides the *a priori* character of taste. Such a principle, he claims, can be only common sense—*sensus communis*. This is common sense that everyone has to have since everyone has the same cognitive capacities—this common sense emerges from the free play of our cognitive faculties. It is a sense of an internal harmony. By viewing the *sensus communis* in these terms, he does not consider this notion in its traditional meaning—he does not view it as an element of our social and moral being. The Aristotelian notion of *sensus communis*, the primary unifying cognitive faculty, is merely about combining various perceptions in unity and does not contain the Kantian thought that *sensus communis* emerges from the free play of our cognitive faculties. It follows that the Aristotelian notion does not include the disinterestedness and universality features of

the Kantian notion of it. Therefore, the meaning that Kant assigns to the term, the *a priori* character of taste, is different from the Aristotelian meaning of the term, which includes both reason and practical reason. We know that, in his moral theory, Kant excludes the notion of *sensus communis* that is an element of our social and moral being, and the moral feeling that is based on such a notion. Morality is not based on our feelings, but it is based on our reason—it is based on our practical reason.

On the other hand, the two meanings of the notion of *sensus communis*—a capacity that everyone possesses and a sense that is present in a community—seem to exist in Kant's view too. He seems to view the notion of a *sensus communis* as the common root of our external senses and a capacity for judgment that unites these external senses regarding a given object: a capacity for judgment that is based on our feelings belongs only to the cases regarding aesthetics (i.e., the judgment of taste). This principle applies only to aesthetics since the *sensus communis* is based on our feelings. Now, all we need to find out are the elements that ground this notion of common sense.

We know that the only kind of universally necessary feeling is the one that is not based on our subjective desires or tendencies, but the one that is based on our objective mental states. Therefore, Kant appeals to a presupposition of common sense that is based on our objective mental states, in order to elucidate that the aesthetic judgment is a necessary judgment. He believes that such a presupposition of common sense excludes all conscious identifications, and contains the notion of necessity, and the necessity of the judgment of taste becomes possible on the basis of the objectivity of our mental processes in which the aesthetic feeling emerges. He claims that on this basis our knowledge and judgment can be universally communicable, and points out, "...for otherwise they would have no correspondence with the object: they would all be a merely subjective play of the powers of representation, just as skepticism insists" (J, 5:238). In such a case it would be impossible to justify any knowledge.

When we accept that knowledge is universally communicable, we need to accept that the mental state in which our cognitive faculties establish a harmony in order to establish knowledge is universal—it is a common element in everyone—too. Similarly, the processes of our cognitive faculties that accompany an aesthetic judgment are presupposed in the same way in all humans and these processes must be based on the same subjective principles. Therefore, the aesthetic feeling, whose root is the free harmony of our cognitive faculties on a non-cognitive level, must be universally communicable too. Every person, as a consequence of her cognitive faculties, possesses the conditions of free play of the imagination and understanding abilities. In this way, something like common sense is presupposed.

Kant formulates the necessity regarding the judgment of taste as a subjective necessity, and claims that this necessity is objectively represented under the presupposition of a common sense. This subjective necessity is a conditional necessity since it is not defined by the principles of our cognitive faculties. Therefore,

the condition of this necessity, regarding our judgment of taste, is the presupposition of a common sense that surrounds all persons. Here, judgment—different from the principles of knowledge that are based on objective principles—cannot reveal a universal agreement through concepts. One’s judgment of taste only expects or hopes an approval from everyone in the form of “should,” and the approval of this expectation can only be related to a presupposition of common sense as the subjective principle of taste. Therefore, since we have a common ground with all other persons that make judgments—since we rely on a sense that everyone is supposed to have—we expect that everyone agrees with our judgment. Kant says:

In all judgments by which we declare something to be beautiful, we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore make our ground not as a private feeling, but as a common sense. (J, 5:239)

According to him, experience does not establish the basis of this sense because this common sense is employed in order to approve the judgment that includes “should.” He adds, “it does not say that everyone will concur with our judgment but that everyone should agree with it” (J, 5:239). So, the main element in the necessity of the judgment of taste is not the idea that everyone else will agree with our judgment—it is the necessity that everyone has to agree with our judgment.

The necessity of the universal assent of the aesthetic judgment, which happens as an expectation depending on “should,” does not contain an external force that depends on a principle, but contains a unity in freedom (i.e., an internal necessity). In this internal necessity, there is neither a universality notion nor a necessity notion of a deterministic mechanism of an empirical reality. In this internal necessity, we go beyond both the notion of moral necessity, which is determined by reason, and an abstract notion of freedom, which is based on the causality of our mind. Therefore, the person who undergoes the process of an aesthetic judgment, isolates herself, regarding her judgment, from all kinds of subjective elements. This judgment proceeds “without appeal to psychological observations, but rather as the necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition” (J, 5:239). In this kind of isolation from such subjective elements, the person reaches a point—that involves freedom—in which this person makes her judgment as if she has the right to make this judgment for everyone. She relies on only her own feeling, but, when this feeling is the sole element of her judgment, she places herself at a point such that she has a universal point of view when she makes her judgment.

In this case, judgment is presented as an ideal norm, an exemplary of the *sensus communis*. The person who makes an aesthetic judgment does not rely on a concept, but relies on a feeling that connects her to all other persons. Kant notes:

[O]f whose judgment I here offer my judgment of taste as an example and on an account of which I ascribe exemplary validity to it, is a merely ideal

norm, under the presupposition of which one could rightfully make a judgment that agrees with it and the satisfaction in an object that is expressed in it into a rule for everyone. (J, 5:239)

Therefore, every judgment of taste is related to the ideal norm in the course of this transformation of the person that makes a judgment, and it is presented as an exemplary of this ideal norm.

2. The Aesthetic Judgment and the Social Commonality

In the course of reaching to the universal unity of taste, the person who looks at an object transcends to a person that represents a whole. She, by her judgment, is able to communicate her innermost feelings and, in her subjectivity, seeks a way of becoming universal and communicating in authentic human terms. To say that the aesthetic judgment expects a universal agreement is to hope the unity of a community in freedom.

The notion of taste contains an element of social commonality in it, and, with the presupposition of a common sense, this element goes beyond any empirical element. But this commonality is not conceptual. Kant says:

By "*sensus communis*," however, must be understood the idea of a communal sense [...] this happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others, and putting himself into the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our own judging; which is in turn accomplished by leaving out as far as is possible everything in one's representational state that is matter, i.e., sensation, and attending solely to the formal peculiarities of his representation or his representational state. (J, 5:293)

The point that he stresses is not the abstract commonality of mind, but a concrete commonality that represents the community. *Sensus communis*, with such a condition that it possesses, is not fed from actuality but from possibility. Here, the issue in taste is not to approve something as beautiful, but to have a certain kind of taste: the issue is to have an eye that faces toward a whole in which everything beautiful reaches to an agreement through that eye. Only such an eye is capable of overcoming the illusion that is an outcome of our subjective conditions. Otherwise, in such an illusion, one may make a subjective judgment as if it were objective. The person is supposed to avoid such illusions that would create prejudice in her judgment: the notion of common sense becomes actuality as universal taste. By this taste, we can withdraw ourselves from our subjective choices. Therefore, taste, by its structure, is not merely subjective, but also it is a phenomenon that is related to a community.

Although the taste, by the universality that it represents, seems to be in opposition to the subjective tendencies of a person, we can view our subjective tendencies as something communal since our subjective tendencies involve the processes of our cognitive faculties, which are the same in everyone. Our pleasures

and displeasures are universal since these are the outcomes of the processes of our cognitive faculties, which are the same in everyone. Therefore, it is possible to view taste as a critical skill that is based on thinking—a different way of thinking. In this way of thinking, we do not consider the sameness of a person with herself, but we consider the sameness of her with others. This way of thinking requires that we think from the perspective of others, and evaluate the judgments of others. This situation becomes possible in the thinking process of the person regarding her state of feeling. In this process, the person turns toward the formal characteristic of the representation and seeks the judgment that is thought as a universal law.

Kant presents this way of thinking as a maxim of human understanding. These maxims are (1) “to think for oneself,” (2) “to think in the position of everyone else”, and (3) “always to think in accord with oneself.” The first one is the maxim of the “unprejudiced” way of thinking; the second one is the maxim of the “broad-minded” way of thinking; and the third one is the maxim of “consistent” way of thinking (J, 5:294). So, to make a judgment as a common sense is to utilize the maxim of the “broad-minded” way of thinking since it is the maxim of our power of judgment. The “broad-minded” way of thinking is neither an issue of our sufficiency of knowledge nor an issue of our capacity of knowledge. It is an issue of the mental habit regarding our purposive use of our capacity of knowledge. He claims that, through this habit, a person can refine her feelings; and consequently, she can have a universal point of view through placing her own point of view in relation to that of others.

In these terms, the aesthetic judgment has a plural character as a consequence of its internal structure. It requires a presupposed unity of feeling with others. Subjective taste, by being based on a sense that is isolated from special conditions, gains a communal characteristic. According to Kant, being a real communal sense is a possibility only in regard to taste. *Sensus communis*, which is a subjective principle, operates as a universal taste. It is universal since it is a consequence of the free play of our cognitive faculties, and it belongs to a community since it is a sense that is based on the freedom of a person—It is an *a priori* effect that places itself between a universal rationality and the emotional and empirical harmony.

3. The Subjectivity and Universal Validity of the Aesthetic Judgment

Since taste is based on our senses—that is, taste is a *sensus*—there is not any principle that applies to the process of judgment. A ground that is based on concepts does not explain the application of the rules. Taste makes its judgment in such a way that it cannot be separated from the actual situations that it proceeds and cannot be reduced to any rules or concepts. In this judgment, we need to conceive the inner unity between the subjective and the universal, not the application of universality. Here, the object is evaluated without considering any concepts, but it is evaluated, in its sensational subjectivity; and even though we evaluate it based on our subjective feelings our evaluation is a universal one.

In this evaluation, the aesthetic object, in its sensational subjectivity, cannot be exhausted as a particular exemplary of a principle or of a concept. We cannot apply the criterion of a universal principle to the object, which we attempt to conceive and evaluate in its uniqueness. We evaluate the object, together with this universal principle—the universality of sensation and feeling. We cannot prove the value of the beauty through a conceptual universal principle. In addition, there is not an empirical ground that can challenge the judgment of taste. When the other's judgment conflicts with our judgment, this conflict may make us doubtful about our judgment, but this conflict does not easily convince us that our judgment is wrong. In addition, we do not tend to believe that we can conclude the issues regarding taste through logic or a series of proofs. Therefore, we do not seek any conceptual criteria in this area, and even if there are some criteria, we do not think that they are true. In aesthetic judgment, the ultimate factor that makes the decision is our very personal taste. In other words, it is our inner feeling.

In aesthetic evaluation, we do not trust the power of proofs, but we trust our contemplation about our state of feeling by leaving the concepts and principles outside. Therefore, taste is a principle of itself: it does not contain the knowledge of its reasons in the process of the judgment of taste. If our taste shows a negative reaction to an object, we cannot explain the reasons for it. But we tend to be confident about our judgment of taste because taste is not a private capacity. Although taste does not contain a knowledge dimension, it is not merely an issue of a subjective reaction that is based on the pleasure regarding our senses. The way taste decides is not based merely on something subjective, but is based on a norm that goes beyond our empirical decisions. Therefore, our taste always attempts to be a universal taste, and it tends to be confident about its judgment.

Taste requires absolute autonomy. If a person defines her own judgment in terms of other people's judgments, this would be heteronomy. The notion of taste contains the notions of a society and a potential agreement among people, but it is not a decision of a community or a demand from a community. Taste is always evaluated by its own judgment: it contains a specific freedom and a specific superiority. This freedom and superiority is the normative power of our taste, and such a power only belongs to our taste. This power is the knowledge related to the taste of an ideal community.

This taste that judges according to common sense contains both the freedom condition of the judgment and the transcendental principle of the judgment's general acceptability. The possibility of the communicability of a universal sensation and feeling without a concept is actualized by the principles of common sense. This sense is based on the collaboration and relation of our cognitive faculties and free play. Cognition reflects obedience to the rules, and imagination reflects freedom. Therefore, the subjective judgment is based on the possibility of establishing a unity between understanding and the free imagination.

This capacity of subjective judgment emerges from a special use of the general power of the judgment, and this power utilizes a process of classifying. But, in

this process, there is an absolute freedom regarding the faculties since, opposite to the case of knowledge judgment, it is impossible to put the representation under a concept of object. Kant says:

[I]n [the logical power of judgment] one subsumes under concepts, but in the aesthetic power of judgment one subsumes under a relation that is merely a matter of sensation, that of the imagination and the understanding reciprocally attuned to each other represented form of the object, where the subsumption can easily be deceptive. (J, 5:291)

This connection or harmony, regarding our senses, among the faculties is a special kind of connection, a special kind of harmony, and the power of judgment, when it is used in relation to the representation of the object, requires the harmony of the two representation powers.

According to Kant, since the feeling of aesthetic taste is universally communicable, it creates an interest to beauty, which is disinterested. Since every interest contains a relation to our way of existence, there is an existential tendency in humans toward beauty. In other words, our feeling of the aesthetic sense must have a close connection to our way of existence. In the phenomenon of beauty, our mind discovers that nature reflects a kind of purposiveness for us. Our mind sees that its own faculties have an objective reality; and, so it is unconditionally interested in the presence of beauty. In nature, the person that takes pleasure from the form of beauty, which is a product of nature, takes a disinterested pleasure from the presence of this product too.

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