

Rethinking the Aesthetic Experience: Kant's Subjective Universality

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Unlike the classical understanding of Representation, it is safe to assume that there is not one, uniform account of an artwork's beauty, emotional effect and meaning. The idea that there are comparatively stable meanings that inhere in a work of art – or at least in some works of art – is the overriding assumption that governs the modernist claim that interpretations can be true and can be known to be true. On the level of the judgment of taste, some may find an artwork beautiful or ugly. On the level of emotions, others may feel offended or inspired. And on the level of understanding, some may perceive it as either full or devoid of any meaningful interpretation. Once an art is shared to the public, interpretations invariably multiply, which sometimes leave the original idea of the artist cached and obscured. Even when all the possible varied implications of a piece of art (e.g. legal, religious, and political) are put aside in order to focus only at its aesthetic value, it seems that a unanimous judgment of beauty remains elusive. A stark difference is manifest between a professional artist and an ordinary person. The former may find beauty in the strokes, combination of colors and balance in a painting, which the latter might not be able to see. This does not imply, however, that the untrained eye is not capable of making a valid judgment of beauty.

Nevertheless, is it always true that “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”? If such were the case, the aesthetic value of Fine Arts would then be reduced to a mere subjective evaluation which, in any case, cannot be properly subjected under any formal philosophical discipline. On the other hand, is the other extreme possible? Are there objective standards which all works of art must follow in order to fit into an “aesthetic norm” and thus be rendered beautiful? In other words, is there a canon of aesthetic rules and guidelines that any artist or art critic must necessarily refer to in making any aesthetic judgment? These questions are the points of departure of this essay. Using Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, this paper aims to elucidate Kant's notion of the “subjective universality” present in the aesthetic dimension between the *subject* (i.e. perceiver of the art) and the *object* (i.e. the art itself).

“Aesthetics”, etymologically means: “having to do with the senses”. As a branch of Philosophy, its main concerns revolve around the themes of beauty, taste, nature of arts and judgments of aesthetic values. In the contemporary sense, Aesthetics generally refers to a field of study and research which deals with anything that relates with beauty and taste. In passing, it may be important to note that the existence of “works of art” have long existed prior to the formulation of theories regarding art. We need not to go back to the Paleolithic age just to restate the fact that arts, as well as music and literature, is as old as the human race.

The term *Aesthetics* was originally coined by Alexander Baumgarten in 1750 in his book *Aesthetica*. Wessell notes that prior to the eighteenth century, there was no general theory regarding beauty and arts. Philosophers who preceded Baumgarten and Kant considered the study of arts merely as part and parcel of the general philosophical enterprise. It was not until 1750 that Baumgarten separated the topics of beauty and arts from the general study of philosophy, thus making it an autonomous field of inquiry. However, it may be well to note that while Baumgarten played a major role in making Aesthetics an independent body of knowledge, his general notions about it were not easily accepted by Kant, who wrote his critique forty years after the publication of *Aesthetica*.

Baumgarten basically holds that aesthetic judgment is cognitive. Judgments of taste already express some kind of cognition; they are some kind of not yet fully developed judgments of cognition (Wenzel 4). Baumgarten contends that when we judge the beauty of a certain piece of art, we are actually using our rational faculties, which is very much similar to the act of making concrete judgments about the nature of things. In other words, aesthetic judgments are processed cognitively (though not yet fully developed). Since cognition is directly related to beauty, this position inevitably implies that it is possible to come up with certain rules that can account for beauty and taste. Thus, Aesthetics is defined, and guaranteed to be a finite enterprise, by virtue of the immanent aim of its internal object (Fenves, 339). Simply put, beauty is objective.

On the other hand, for Kant, the judgment of beauty is utterly different from any act of cognition. Judgments of taste (or beauty) are judgments in their own right (Wenzel 4). This means to say that judgments of cognition and judgments of taste are equal yet distinct. In his Third Critique, Kant begins with the statement: *The judgment of taste is aesthetic*. He does not ascribe beauty on the object, contrary to what Baumgarten holds. For him, it is our *judgment* that is aesthetic and not the objects. Aesthetics, therefore, is proper to our judgment of taste (which, for Kant, is not cognitive) and not to the objects of beauty. He writes,

In order to decide whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the Understanding to the Object for cognition but, by the Imagination to the subject, and its feeling of pleasure or pain. The judgement of taste is therefore not a judgement of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical (Kant 27).

This completely dislodges what Baumgarten intends to establish: a *science* of Aesthetics. Kant totally disapproves of the idea that Aesthetics can be subjected to the rigorous categories of a positive science. It can only be called such - in which case there would be rules for taste and beauty - if and only if aesthetics were something cognitive. But, for Kant, aesthetic judgment does not consist of cognitive judgment. Had Kant failed to contradict Baumgarten's views, aesthetics would have taken a different route which might not be as open and dynamic as we study it today.

For Kant, three qualities would immediately stand out in determining whether or not a thing can be properly called an art, namely, "deliberate", "practical", and "free". First, Kant distinguishes art from nature. By right we ought only to describe as Art, production through freedom, i.e. through a will that places reason at the basis of its actions (Kant 109). Art, unlike nature, is a result of a person's deliberate act to produce a representation of something that already exists. Hence, a thing is rightly called an art insofar as it was a product of a free and intentional act of the will. Sometimes, we may find beauty in nature such as, a spider web or a beaver dam, but these basically form part of their nature which lacks the element of volition. Therefore, nature's wonders, no matter how beautiful, cannot be considered works of art. Second, Kant distinguishes art from sciences. While the latter basically constitute bodies of knowledge (*scientia*), the former requires both knowledge (and theory) and most importantly skill. Only that

which a man, even if he knows it completely, may not therefore have the skill to accomplish, belongs to Art (Kant 109). An *idea*, therefore, of a finished product is rather useless without the required skill or technique to turn it into a reality. Art, as a human skill, then must always be engaged in actual practice, hence practical. Third, Kant distinguishes art from handicraft. When using the term “handicraft” Kant was basically referring to “industrial art” which is a means to earn. Such is disagreeable on its own account and is only attractive by means of what it results. Kant contends that a piece of work can rightly be called art when its production is not tainted with the sole desire to profit. Thus, on the side of the artist, an artwork must be done “free” from any monetary motivation.

Instead of giving an account of the nature and quality of certain kinds of objects (the objects that we find beautiful), Kant analyzes a certain kind of judgment, namely the judgment of taste (Wenzel 2). Our *judgments* of taste (and of beauty), therefore, is the main target of the analysis of Aesthetics, and not the *object* of beauty. If Kant argues that it is our *judgment of taste* which is rightly called *aesthetic*, then what is the nature of such judgment? Here, Kant would insist that the “judgment of taste” does not refer to an act of cognition. This kind of judgment should not be seen as forming a preliminary stage in a process of cognition, nor should they be understood as inferior to judgments of cognition. Rather, they should take a position of equal rank with judgments of cognition (Wenzel 4). It should be recalled that this is the point where Baumgarten's and Kant's views diverged. On the third section of the first book of his Third Critique, Kant writes,

[...] we shall call that which must always remain purely subjective, and is absolutely incapable of forming a representation of an object, by the familiar name of feeling. The green color of the meadows belongs to objective sensation, as the perception of an object of sense; but its agreeableness to subjective sensation, by which no object is represented; i.e., to feeling, through which the object is regarded as an object of delight (which involves no cognition of the object). (Kant 29-30)

In this passage, it is quite clear that when Kant speaks about the judgment of taste, he was primarily focused on the *feelings* that the representation of an *object* generates, rather than on the *perception* one gains from the *object*. Nevertheless, it must not be immediately construed that Kant advocates pure *subjectivism*, as he seems to give more emphasis on the feelings of pleasure or displeasure of the *subject*. However, this *subjective* feeling of beauty (which usually results either to a feeling of pleasure or displeasure) has *a priori* bases which makes it *universal*.

At first glance, the very term “subjective universality” appears to be self-contradictory. How can a judgment of taste be both subjective and universal at the same time? Is it possible to make a subjective judgment of taste which is “universally acceptable?” If one argues that Van Gogh's *Starry Night* is not a beautiful piece of art, can it be expected that everyone would agree with it? Isn't it a common experience whereby people, who may have different artistic backgrounds, disagree as to whether a certain work of art or performance is beautiful or not?

When Kant speaks of the universality of our judgment of taste, what he seems to drive at is that everyone must be amenable to whatever we feel in the aesthetic experience. In other words, my judgment of taste regarding a piece of art must be a universally accepted evaluation, and not only generally (in which case, not *everyone* agrees). It must be recalled that Kant does not believe in the objectivity of beauty. Beauty or ugliness is not to be found in the object. Hence, there can never be objective rules for taste. Concepts do not play a role in the judgment of taste. Otherwise, it would then be reduced to a form of judgment through cognition.

Kant explains, that the judgment of taste “must involve a claim to validity for all men, and must do so apart from universality attached to objects, i.e., there must be coupled with it a claim to subjective universality” (Kant 34). Wenzel notes that, the “subjective universality” is *subjective* in two senses of the word “subjective.” A judgment of taste is subjective (a) because it *refers to* all judging *subjects*. If I make a judgment of taste, I claim that everyone should agree. A judgment of taste is subjective (b) because it is *based on* subjective *grounds* (feeling, taste, something you have to try yourself, something that you have to make happen yourself (Wenzel 34). However, the question still remains unanswered as to how *subjectivity* (and *inter-subjectivity* insofar as all *subjects* must have the same judgment) becomes *universal*. Kant introduces the notion of “free play of the faculties”.

Kant’s notion of the “free play of faculties” is the key to reconcile subjectivity and universality. According to him, the subject must engage in a “free play of the imagination and understanding” in order to come up with a pure judgment of taste. When he speaks of the “free play”, he refers to a process of employing our imagination and understanding in such a way that it does not follow any rules. It is “free” literally. No guidelines or standards must intervene when our faculties of imagination and understanding work to make a judgment of taste. Consequently, when we engage in such a play, subjective elements such as the feeling of pleasure or displeasure may occur.

But how did Kant use this notion of the “free play of faculties” in order to ground his *subjective universality*? Kant believes that such capacity to engage in a “free play of the imagination and understanding” is a *universal* capacity. In other words, everyone is capable of doing it. This “free play”, Wenzel describes, between imagination and understanding is not just a personal one, because it engages capacities that we all share (imagination and understanding) and it happens with respect to cognition in general (Wenzel 50). Further, Kant notes that,

This state of free play of the cognitive faculties attending a representation by which an object is given must admit of universal communication: because cognition, as a definition of the object with which given representations (in any subject whatever) are to accord, is the one and only representation which is valid for everyone (Kant 38).

Therefore, when Kant advances his notion of the *subjective universality*, he was actually thinking of a capacity which everyone has, that is: imagination and understanding. Though it is difficult to escape from a subjective judgment of beauty, Kant nevertheless, succeeded in laying out a theory which neither advocates pure objectivity nor pure subjectivity in the judgment of taste. Such is the *a priori* principle on which Kant based his idea. Our universal capacity to engage in such “free play of faculties” is already hardwired, so to speak, in our system that even before we pass a judgment of taste, such universality already operates.

Understanding Kant’s notion of the *subjective universality* does not provide an explanation as to why there are still differences in the judgments of taste. I argue, however, that a universal agreement as regards the aesthetic value of any object of art, be it a performance or a visual art, can only be achieved when the *subject(s)* has arrived at a “free”, hence “pure” contemplation of the beautiful. This means that we need to “penetrate” through all the concepts and personal desires that may interfere in the aesthetic experience. Kant explains,

Now the delight in the manifold of a thing, in reference to the internal end that determines its possibility, is a delight based on a concept, whereas delight in the beautiful is such as does not presuppose any concept, but is immediately coupled with the representation through which the object is given (not through which it is thought). If, now, the judgment of taste in respect of the

latter delight is made dependent upon the end involved in the former delight as a judgment of reason, and is thus placed under a restriction, then it is no longer a free and pure judgment of taste (Kant 49).

Simply put, any concepts, motivations or purposes that are present in the subject must be “bracketed”, so to speak, in order to engage in a “free play of faculties” and hence arrive at a “pure contemplation.” Beauty then must be appreciated for its own sake and not for any other purpose. A free beauty is not beautiful in itself, due to some objective property (Wenzel 70). It is clear at this point that for an art to be rightly called art, it must be distinguished from *handicraft*. Handicraft (though may appear to be creative and artistic) is a means to profit, while Art (though it can be a means to profit) is an occupation which is agreeable in itself. An artist must not allow the desire to profit to come in between his creative impulse and his art. In the same token, the perceiver of an art must contemplate its beauty disinterestedly.

Beauty is neither found in the object nor in the subject. There are no objective rules of beauty that can be perceived in any works of art. Also, it is a mistake (in Kant's view at least) to say that beauty is relative. Aesthetics is proper to the judgments of taste and not to the object or the subject. Such judgments of taste, which by nature is not cognitive, are arrived at via *subjective universality*. However, its universality is not fully achieved without the *free play of faculties* which leads to a pure contemplation of the beauty of the object.

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