1 Immanuel Kant

The later philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the philosophy which brings about the ‘Copernican revolution’ in thought, is a critical system, in a particular sense of the word. His use of the term is allied to his assertion of human finitude. ‘Critique’, for Kant, refers to an examination of the scope and limits of our cognitive powers; in particular, a demonstration of both the possibility of knowledge within experience and the impossibility of knowledge beyond the limits of experience. As such, it is a reply to the scepticism characteristic of empiricist philosophy and to the dogmatic metaphysics of rationalism. Philosophy, as Kant finds it, is polarized between the rationalism of Descartes, Leibniz, and Baumgarten on the continent and the empiricism of Locke and Hume in Britain. The presuppositions of both systems, Kant observes, ultimately works to undermine them and prevent them from offering coherent theories of knowledge and action. For example, Descartes fails in the Meditations (1641) to guarantee clear and distinct ideas and Hume realizes in the Treatise (1740) that an empiricist model of knowledge cannot account for abstract, structural concepts such as causality, number, and the self. Critical philosophy seeks to avoid these problems. Human finitude means that our concepts necessarily open onto the world as it is received by us through sensibility (what Kant calls die Anschauung or ‘intuition’): ‘concepts without intuition are empty, intuition without concepts are blind’.¹ This necessary interrelationship disarms Hume’s doubt regarding the justification of our concepts and demonstrates to the rationalist that our categories are not abstractions which can be detached from experience and used to construct dogmatic metaphysical schemes.

Kant’s main task is to argue for this interrelationship between mind and reality and, in particular, to explain how objectivity is possible given that the subject has been made
the basis of experience. This project occupies all three of the books which make up Kant’s critical system. The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, revised 1787) lays the foundations and considers the application of our cognitive powers (or ‘reason’ (*die Vernunft*) in Kant’s broad sense of the term) to experience. The consequences of finitude for morality are considered in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Here, Kant faces the question of how a universal moral imperative supplied by reason in advance of experience can serve as a principle for showing us how we ought to act in particular situations.

The *Critique of Judgment* (1790) completes the critical trilogy not just because it is the third and final volume but, more importantly, because it bridges the gap created by the previous two. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant surrenders the operation of the mind which brings pure concepts into relation with empirical intuition as ‘an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover’. The gulf which has to be crossed is between the sensible and the supersensible. The supersensible in this context refers to human reason and, in particular, its capacity for going beyond what is given in immediate (sensible) experience. While Kant maintains the philosophical tradition (following Aristotle, Aquinas, and Descartes) of defining reason as the ability to think creatively and act according to principles which are independent of nature, he nevertheless departs from tradition with his claim that the objectivity or validity of these supersensible principles lies not in themselves, in their own terms, but in their application to sensible reality. This is the relationship which has to be explained. As a result, Kant faces the question of the interaction between the sensible and the supersensible on two accounts, since reason goes beyond the given in both *theoretical* (or cognitive) and *practical* ways, as argued in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* respectively. The questions which arise are: theoretically, how do (supersensible) pure, transcendental concepts projected in advance of experience accommodate (sensible) empirical intuitions; and practically, how can a (supersensible) universal moral imperative supplied by reason in advance of experience serve as a principle for showing us how we ought to act in (sensible) particular situations?
In completing the critical project, the *Critique of Judgment* explores those aspects of experience which allow the fullest exposition of the interrelationship between subject and object: art, beauty, and the appearance of design in nature. Aesthetics is not treated in isolation but made central to Kant’s entire project, and shown to be directly relevant to moral and epistemological issues. The main question which Kant asks in the third *Critique* is how a subjective, aesthetic judgment, a judgment of taste, can claim universal assent. Aesthetic judgments are those utterances where we describe something as beautiful or has having special significance, e.g. ‘This is a beautiful landscape’, ‘This is a powerful work of art’. The problem he finds with these judgments is that, although in one sense they are a description of a personal feeling, they nevertheless appear to make a claim about the object concerned, a claim (about its beauty or aesthetic strength) which arguably should hold for everyone. Kant refers to this as the antinomy of taste. How can the contradictory aspects of subjectivity and objectivity be reconciled?

In order to overcome the antinomy, Kant distinguishes between determinative and reflective judgment. This distinction is vital. ‘Judgment in general’, he writes, ‘is the ability to think the particular under the universal’ (*CJ* 179). Determinative judgments, on the one hand, subsume a particular under a universal or, in a more Kantian idiom, an intuition under a concept, and determine an object to be a certain kind of thing, for example, ‘This is a tomato’. Reflective judgments, on the other, do not identify or assign properties to an object. Judgments of taste are reflective: to describe a landscape as ‘beautiful’ or a piece of music as ‘sad’ is not to ascribe empirically determinate qualities to the objects. No determination is made by these judgments, Kant maintains, for the simple reason that no definite concept is available to them. (Resistance to conceptualization, we can recall, is the traditional charge made against aesthetic experience by philosophy.) Instead, he argues, our cognitive powers have to look for a concept.

Reflective judgment then needs a concept for, in Kantian terms, all experience requires concepts and intuitions, but not a determinate concept. To meet this need, judgment presupposes the *indeterminate* concept of nature’s subjective purposiveness.
(Zweckmässigkeit), the idea that the world appears to us as if it had been designed for our awareness:

Someone who feels pleasure in the mere reflection on the form of an object, without any concern about a concept, rightly lays claim to everyone’s assent, even though this judgment is empirical and a singular judgment. For the basis of this pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective, condition of [aesthetic] reflective judgments, namely, the purposive harmony of an object (whether a product of nature or of art) with the mutual relation of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding) that are required for every empirical cognition. (CJ 191, emphasis added)

We experience beauty or aesthetic delight, Kant declares, when we recognize that the order we perceive in the world is a reflection of the order we require for meaningful, intelligible experience. In other words, moments of beauty, for Kant, are moments when we glimpse the conditions of possibility of experience.

Isn’t this simply a restatement of the premise that there is a necessary interrelationship between mind and nature? The only way a philosophy which starts from the point of view of the subject can explain objectivity, it would seem, is to make the rather grand assumption that mind and nature simply interlock. Kant is not guilty of this though. To rely on the indeterminate concept of nature’s subjective purposiveness, he avers, is not to assume that the laws of nature are the laws of our understanding, ‘for it is only reflective [as opposed to determinative] judgment that uses this idea as a principle... In using this principle, judgment gives a law only to itself, not to nature’ (CJ 180). Kant is not asserting that nature has been designed for our awareness, not arguing for the presence of a particular order in nature. This distinguishes him from the Enlightenment belief that our categories cut reality at the joints and deliver to us conceptually all that the world can be. Instead, Kant is arguing for the possibility of order, the state of affairs upon which any experiential, intelligible purchase on the world is conditional. Without this, empirical differences ‘might still be so great that it would be impossible for our
understanding... to divide nature’s products into genera and species’ (CJ 185).

Purposiveness, he writes, is

a principle by which judgment prescribes, not to nature (which would be autonomy) but to itself (which is heautonomy), a law for its reflection on nature... We must think nature, as regards its merely empirical laws, as containing the possibility of an endless diversity of empirical laws that [despite being laws] are nonetheless contingent as far as we can see... And yet we must necessarily presuppose and assume this unity, since otherwise our empirical cognition could not thoroughly cohere to [form] a whole of experience... (CJ 183-86).

By transforming the determinate notion of ‘purpose’ (Zweck) into the indeterminate notion of ‘purposiveness’ (Zweckmäßigkeit), Kant is reconciling another pair of philosophical opposites. Eighteenth-century science was trying to accommodate two world-views: Aristotelian teleology and Renaissance empiricism. Teleology is the study of purpose in nature. It derives from Aristotle’s concept of ‘final cause’ or telos. Every inanimate object or organism, Aristotle argues, has a ‘natural place’ or ‘state’ and all motion or growth can be explained in terms of transition towards this final state. For example, objects fall to the ground, Aristotle suggests, because the earth is their ‘natural state’. The Renaissance though brought the recognition that knowledge could be generated simply by detecting regularity through observation, and much of the evidence of the senses was found to conflict with Aristotle’s system, e.g. his theory of the celestial spheres. As a result, Aristotle’s influence waned. However, deriving mechanical laws from observed regularities cannot explain the sense of organization found in organisms where parts interact in the interests of the greater whole. Thus the Aristotelian notion of purpose was still a necessary explanatory component. In Kant’s system, purposiveness (or the appearance of a purpose) becomes the transcendental principle which explains how the apprehension of regularity in experience is possible.

One question raised by this account is the source of the indeterminate concept of nature’s subjective purposiveness. Where does it come from? This is a taxing question
for a metaphysics which is trying to extrapolate conditions of possibility from a minimal set of relations between sensibility (phenomenal nature and our sensory being) and supersensibility (noumenal reality or reality as it is in itself and our capacity for free, independent thought and action), and which, therefore, cannot rely upon a ghost in the machine, an architectonic-saving device that is parachuted in from outside. I said above that judgment ‘presupposes’ the concept. In writing this, I am following Kant’s language. For example, he writes:

"Judgment must assume, as an a priori principle for its own use, that what to human insight is contingent in the particular (empirical) natural laws does nevertheless contain a law-governed unity, unfathomable but still conceivable by us, in the combination of what is diverse in them to [form] an experience that is intrinsically [an sich] possible. (CJ 183-84; emphasis added)

Judgment for Kant, to clarify the term, is one of our cognitive powers, ‘a mediating link between understanding and reason’ (CJ 168). Judgment is exercised by reason, the capacity to think and act according to principles which are independent of nature, applying concepts (from the faculty of the understanding) to sensible intuition, thereby generating ordered, intelligible experience. In completing Kant’s critical trilogy, the Critique of Judgment attempts to address some of the gaps left by the previous two. Judgment becomes the focus because Kant reasons, by analogy, that it is the ‘territory’ to explore for laws which can bridge the gaps. However, it would appear the precise nature of the origin of purposiveness remains unresolved. Equating purposiveness with ‘the subjective principle [of] the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us’, Kant declares that its sources are ‘concealed from us’, that ‘we can do no more than point to it’, and ‘there is nothing we can do that would allow us to grasp it any further’ (CJ 340). While it might appear that a gap remains in Kant’s system at this crucial point, it is important to note that Kant is sensitive to the boundaries of what can be known and articulated; his critical project is, after all, a study of the limits of reason. There are several declarations within the third Critique to the effect that it is beyond reason’s grasp what happens at the supersensible level (see, for example, CJ 411, 412, 422). This
though might sound like an all-too-easy get-out clause: when the architectonic gets tough, just hold up your hands and say it’s ‘an art concealed in the depths of the human soul’. It cannot be denied that Kant’s enquiry has a self-referential aspect: to make a determinate, theoretical proposition about a supersensible source would effectively contradict the aim of the first Critique: to demonstrate the possibility of knowledge within experience, and the impossibility of knowledge beyond the limits of experience. However, there are studies which argue that Kant does carry out various ‘pointing’ and ‘grasping’ gestures with regard to the supersensible via analogy, and his account of ‘rational ideas’ (of which purposiveness is one): an idea which ‘can never become cognition because it contains a concept (of the supersensible) for which no adequate intuition can ever be given’ (CJ 342).

In making my selections from the Critique of Judgment, I have chosen extracts which fit together to give an indication of the relationship which the third Critique (on art and teleology) has with its predecessors (the first on epistemology and the second on morality). The majority of the sections reproduced here show how the problems posed by aesthetic judgment and the experience of beauty lead to the concept of purposiveness and, more especially, purposiveness as it is displayed in art. Purposiveness, as the ‘feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers’ (CJ 306), is the basis of the relationship between mind and nature which allows us to bring nature under concepts. It is therefore the term which completes Kant’s explanation of finitude from the Critique of Pure Reason, the necessarily interwoven nature of concept and intuition. There are sections from the ‘Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment’ and the ‘Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment’. The analytic–dialectic structure is common to all three Critiques: ‘analytic’, in this context, refers to what can be said about judgment (bringing an intuition under a concept) as it applies to experience, whereas ‘dialectic’ refers to the transcendental reasoning beyond experience Kant undertakes in order to resolve the antinomies of metaphysics. The ‘Analytic’ sections outline the significance Kant attaches to fine art, and the contradictory aspects of aesthetic judgments (subjective statements making objective claims) which define the antimony of taste. Reproduced from the ‘Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment’ is the solution to the antimony.
There is still disagreement within Kantian scholarship over the relation between beauty and morality in Kant’s critical system. The key issue for some commentators is whether Kant’s theory of taste can be regarded as complete and coherent on its own terms, i.e. independently of a theory of reflective judgment, or whether it requires isomorphic links to other parts of his architectonic. Each path, of course, leads to a different interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics and, more significantly, provides a different account of the universal condition which underpins the normativity of aesthetic judgment. Guyer and Allison maintain (albeit for different reasons) that the universal validity of aesthetic judgment is fully accounted for in epistemological terms. For Guyer, the ‘strategy of Kant’s deduction of aesthetic judgment’ consists in ‘the argument that attribution of pleasure to the harmony of the faculties makes it universally valid just because this state is the subjective condition of knowledge in general’. In a comparable vein, Allison argues that the deduction of aesthetic judgment has at its core the argument that the subjective formal conditions of judgment which underlie our liking an object are also the conditions of judgment per se, therefore, they can be held to apply to everyone.

In contrast, a number of commentators (for example, Elliott, Genova, Gotshalk, Kemal, Pluhar and Rogerson) insist that the normativity of aesthetic judgment cannot be justified purely in epistemological terms and that the universality which is required is in fact supplied by an analogical link to Kant’s moral philosophy. These accounts also rely upon and promote the strategies of interpretation which can be applied when Kant’s critical philosophy is regarded as a coherent unity. What distinguishes the epistemological interpretation of normativity from the moral approach is the importance which the latter places on §59, the final paragraph of the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgment’ (included here), where Kant asserts that beauty is the symbol of morality. Various suggestions are made as to how the symbolic or analogical link between aesthetics and morality is to be understood. To give two examples, one from Kemal, the other from Gotshalk. Emphasis is placed by Kemal on the purposiveness of nature considered heuristically as design by God, where the concept of design or ‘technic’ is conceived by analogy to the human production of art. On this basis, Kemal argues, ‘the beauty of nature [is given] an importance because nature appears to be art,
as if it had freedom and a rational will at its base’. A different perspective is offered by Gotshalk, who concentrates upon the analogy between art and morality used by Kant to characterize the expressive, unbounded nature of aesthetic ideas. The connection which Gotshalk makes is that ‘since the moral life has a similar aspiration towards achievements of infinite [or unbounded] quality’, nature expressed through aesthetic ideas in art therefore can be regarded as presenting ‘evidence of a congruence between its [nature’s] being and the laws and powers properly guiding our conduct in the realm of freedom’.

The critical trilogy is a very elaborate structure, and its overall coherence as a unified system continues to be the subject of contemporary scholarship. The importance it holds for aesthetics is immense, since it positions the aesthetic as that realm of human experience where we appraise the relationship between the world and our conceptual understanding of it. We enjoy art, literature, and music because they move us subjectively to offer objective judgment, and it is this tension or interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, Kant affirms, which we find in moral reasoning, the construction of knowledge, and, in fact, every waking moment. Thus, the demands made by an artwork on us to find the right words to describe its effect or significance are paradigms for the conceptual or interpretative decisions which have to be made in moral and epistemological judgments. Fine art, for Kant, is the product of genius. The concept of ‘genius’ is formulated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism (arguably as an extension of the ancient image of the inspired poet and the Renaissance concept of the divino artista), and is presented as the capacity of an artist to produce work which transcends the established rules of composition. In Kantian terms, the genius is an artist who can give phenomenal form to ‘aesthetic ideas’. An ‘aesthetic idea’ is ‘a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it’ (CJ 314). The artist-genius can also display some sense of purposiveness through their artwork. ‘In [dealing with] a product of fine art’, Kant writes, ‘we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness [the appearance of design or purpose] in its form
must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature’ (Cf 306).

The appearance of art ‘as if it were a product of mere nature’ would seem to suggest that Kant confines fine art to mimesis. This is not the case. While it is true that much eighteenth century painting seeks to define or perfect beauty in nature, it is important to remember that Kant makes beauty a function of the interplay between our cognitive faculties and the world. Fine art then, for Kant, is first and foremost an activity through which we explore the nature of our moral and perceptual contact with the world. This means art and aesthetics become practices in which new alignments between concept and intuition are generated, and can be theorized in Kantian terms on account of the way they force us to reconceptualize what we experience. Kantian appraisals of the revolutions in representation generated by modernism, such as impressionism, fauvism, cubism, can be given in terms of the concepts we have to import from studies of light, materiality and movement, for example, in order to describe and appreciate them. The acoustic art (das Neue Hörspiel) which emerged from experimentations with radio in 1920s Germany is another example.21 Here the aesthetic and technical properties of the medium prompt directors to montage sounds, e.g. speech, animal cries, natural sounds of wind and water, machinery and the noises generated by radio itself, in a way which thwart the listener’s stable categorization and placing of the source objects in the world. Kant also has relevance for postmodern aesthetics. One of the distinctive characteristics of postmodern practice, according to Fredric Jameson, is a complexity of conceptual borrowing and intermingling which frustrates any simple or straightforward assimilation of that practice in the name of a given or predicted end.22 As a result, in the context of art, the postmodern aesthetic, in Jameson’s words, has a ‘schizophrenic’ effect on its audience, that is to say, the audience is completely and utterly disoriented when, instead of being presented with a familiar, shared narrative, they are confronted by a network of competing styles.23 Kant’s philosophy can be considered here in as much as it offers a framework for dealing with those occasions when our cognitive faculties are overwhelmed or cannot get a purchase on what is in front of them. The position which aesthetic experience holds in Kant’s critical framework has also lead to interest in his philosophy from philosophers and scientists working in neuroaesthetics.24
Extracts from ‘Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement’ and ‘Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement’, *Critique of Judgment*
Immanuel Kant

[Insert original Kant extracts]

Translated by Werner S. Pluhar

Select bibliography of major works by Immanuel Kant in English


*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), trans. L.W. Beck, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1950 [now Macmillan].


Further reading

For introductions to the systematic nature of Kant’s aesthetics, see Kemal (1997), McCloskey, and Wenzel. Closer, more technical studies of the structure of his aesthetic philosophy including the place of art, beauty, taste, aesthetic pleasure, and imagination in his theory, are given by Allison, Banham, Berger, Crawford, Guyer (1993, 1997, 2005), Kirwan, Pluhar, Rogerson (1986, 2008) and Schaper (1979). Anthologies providing a range of perspectives are Chadwick and Cazeaux, Cohen and Guyer, Guyer (1992, 2003), and Rehberg and Jones. For a dictionary of Kantian concepts and themes, see Caygill (1995).

The systematic nature of Kant’s critical philosophy means that the relationship between the subjects of his three Critiques – knowledge and experience, morality, and art and teleology – is a vital question for Kantian scholarship. The relation between aesthetics, knowledge and cognition has been explored by Cazeaux (2003), Gasché, Ginsborg, Hughes (2007), Kukla, and Rush. The question of the relation between aesthetics and morality, and the unity of Kant’s critical philosophy as a whole, is addressed by Allison, Banham, Bell, Cazeaux (2007), Cohen, Crowther, Elliott, Genova, Gotshalk, Guyer (1993, 1997, 2005), Henrich, Kemal (1992), Kneller, Rogerson (1992), and Wachter. On purposiveness, arguably the pivotal concept in the third Critique, and Kant’s entire critical system, see Hughes (2006, 2007), Pluhar, and Zuckert.
Many studies focus on individual themes within the *Critique of Judgment* or apply its content to debates within contemporary aesthetics and culture. For assessments of the importance of the third *Critique* to questions of hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and ontology, see Caygill (1989), Derrida, Gasché, Makkreel, de Man, Rehberg and Jones, Ross, and Shaviro. How Kant’s aesthetics fares in the encounter with works of art is considered by Caygill (1997), De Duve, Gaiger, Kemal, Savile, and Winchester, with Crowther, Lazaroff, Lyotard, Makkreel, and Pillow paying special attention to the sublime.


Immanuel Kant


Notes
[to follow Editor’s introduction to Kant]
The project of uniting the sensible and the supersensible ultimately leads Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, to the problem of reconciling two concepts of the supersensible: the supersensible substrate of all appearances in accordance with the laws of nature, and the supersensible substrate of our freedom to act in accordance with the moral law; or in other words, the supersensible as the substrate of nature and as the substrate of our freedom to act in ways which are not determined by nature. It is by means of analogy that Kant identifies our power of judgment as the principle to which we should turn in order to achieve the desired resolution. He does this in his second introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*. Reviewing his work from the first two *Critiques*, Kant observes that the concepts of nature ‘which contain *a priori* the basis for all theoretical cognition, were found to rest on the legislation of the understanding’, and similarly that the concept of freedom ‘was found to contain *a priori* the basis for all practical precepts that are unconditioned by the sensible, and to rest on the legislation of reason’ (*CJ* 176). On this basis, he argues,

we have cause to suppose, by analogy, that [judgment] too may contain *a priori*, if not a legislation of its own, then at least a principle of its own, perhaps merely a subjective one, by which to search for laws. Even though such a principle would lack a realm of objects as its own domain, it might still have some territory; and this territory might be of such a character that none but this very principle might hold it. (*CJ* 177)

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A141, B180-81, pp. 82-83.


Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, p. 176. These accounts from Guyer and Allison, it should be pointed out, do not amount to the claim that taste and morality are not connected in Kant’s philosophy; both accept that a connection exists. What they do deny is that judgments of taste are grounded by the connection between taste and morality.


Pluhar presents his interpretation of the normativity of aesthetic judgment as part of the introduction to his translation of the *Critique of Judgment*, especially pp. lxi-lxvi.


Ibid., p. 118.

19 Gotshalk, ‘Form and expression in Kant’s aesthetics’, pp. 154-55.


23 Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and consumer society’, *The Cultural Turn*, p. 3.