

Immanuel Kant

Critique of the Power of Judgment

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Objectives

1. Describe Kant's distinction between determining and reflecting judgments.
2. Explain why Kant thinks judgments of taste lay claim to universal validity.
3. Identify the two subjective conditions that Kant thinks are necessary for judgments of taste.
4. Explain why Kant claims that "beautiful art is possible only as a product of genius" (5:307).
5. Interpret Kant's claim that "it would be absurd...to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered" (5:399).
6. Clarify Kant's understanding the moral significance of aesthetics and teleology.

Reading Assignment

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews.

Commentary

Introduction

In his 1790 book, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment (CPJ)*, [Immanuel Kant](#) (1724-1804) examines the human capacity of judgment by analyzing aesthetic experience, on one hand, and our ability to comprehend organic life, on the other. Kant argues that this treatment of judgment sheds light on questions about morality and metaphysics that lie at the very heart of his overarching philosophical project. Accordingly, it will be helpful to begin by considering the role of *CPJ* in Kant's critical philosophy.

I. The Role of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in Kant's Critical Philosophy

Kant self-consciously participates in a distinctively modern approach to philosophy that is devoted to the project of '[enlightenment](#).' The enlightenment project grows out of a disillusionment with the philosophical tradition as it existed in the context of [medieval philosophy](#) and theology, which sought to subordinate human thought and action to the authority of divine revelation or natural law. The enlightenment rejects this medieval tradition and encourages humans to reason for themselves about how they might improve themselves and their world. Even as he embraced the project of enlightenment, however, the trenchant criticisms of early modern conceptions of scientific and instrumental reason offered by [David Hume](#) and [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), respectively, led Kant to realize that enlightenment rationalism required a more definitive justification than it had previously received. Ultimately, Kant came to see that it is necessary to clarify the nature, power, and limits of reason in order to discover how reason can and should be at work in human life, before it can be exercised for the sake of the enlightenment's attempt to promote the welfare of the human race.

Kant carries out the latter project over the course of three major works: the [*Critique of Pure Reason*](#) (*CPR*), the [*Critique of Practical Reason*](#) (*CPrR*), and *CPJ*. *CPR* argues that reason naturally seeks knowledge of metaphysical first principles that it cannot know (such as God or the soul) and that it must limit itself to the world of experience in which knowledge is possible for human beings. In this way, Kant aims to demonstrate the legitimacy of scientific knowledge of nature, while simultaneously preserving the possibility of freedom and morality. Subsequently, in *CPrR*, Kant argues that reason is essentially moral, that humans are bound by a moral law that is inherent in reason, that our awareness of this moral law provides us with insight into the reality of our own freedom, and that we are obligated to exercise our freedom in order to moralize ourselves and the world we inhabit. Ultimately, then, Kant's first two *Critiques* give rise to a tension between our scientific knowledge of the causally-determined order of the natural world, on one hand, and reason's moral demand that we exercise our freedom in and on the world, on the other. As Kant expresses the problem in the Introduction to *CPJ*, "there is an incalculable gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible" despite the fact that reason demands that "the latter **should** have an influence on the former" (5:175-76).

Kant characterizes *CPJ* as an attempt to resolve this tension between nature and freedom. In keeping with reason's moral demands, Kant posits that "nature...must be able to be conceived in such a way" that it is "in agreement" with humanity's pursuit of reason's moral projects (5:176). And, though he maintains that we can never understand the relationship between nature and freedom in a way that allows us to "throw a bridge from one domain to the other," Kant claims that *CPJ* discloses a way of thinking about the unifying ground of nature and freedom that can assuage concerns that the world is inhospitable to moral action (5:195). Accordingly, *CPJ* plays a crucial role not only in Kant's critical philosophy, but also in the history of philosophy—by ensuring the coherence of Kant's philosophical system, it completes Kant's attempt to legitimate the modern enlightenment's effort to make autonomous reason the authoritative principle for human thought and action.

II. Judgment

The Introduction to *CPJ* provides a general account of human judgment, which lays the groundwork for its subsequent treatments of aesthetics and teleology. Kant defines judgment as the capacity for "thinking of the particular as contained under the universal" (5:179). But, he observes, the attempt to think of a particular in terms of a universal can take two forms: "If the universal...is given, then the power of judgment...is **determining**. If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely **reflecting**" (5:179). So, for example, if I know what an oak tree is and identify a particular tree as an oak, I make a determining judgment, while if I encounter a tree I do not recognize and work to discover how it should be categorized, I am exercising reflecting judgment.

The *Critique of Judgment* is especially concerned with reflecting judgment. Unlike determining judgment, which is always already governed by the universal it seeks to apply, reflecting judgment must govern its own activity—it must "give itself...a transcendental principle as a law" (5:180). More specifically, Kant argues that reflecting judgment is only possible because it always already proceeds as if the world is susceptible to its attempt to ascend from particulars to universals. As Kant goes on to explain, this principle of nature's purposiveness for the power of judgment is necessary not only to natural science's effort to discover the system of laws that describes all observable phenomena, but also to the capacity of human beings to form concepts on the basis of our experience of the world. For present purposes, however, it is especially important to note that Kant characterizes aesthetic judgment

and teleological judgment as forms of reflecting judgment, thereby introducing the principal themes of *CPJ* proper.

III. Beauty

The principal task of Kant's [aesthetics](#) is to develop an account of the nature of beauty. According to Kant, the experience of beauty is grounded in the distinctive way humans encounter and judge the world. Accordingly, Kant's account of beauty takes the form of an analysis of our "capacity for judging the beautiful" (5:203). Kant calls the latter capacity taste and describes the judgments that allow us to discern beauty 'judgments of taste.' Ultimately, then, Kant's account of beauty takes the form of an analysis of judgments of taste.

In accordance with his '[transcendental' approach to philosophical questions](#), Kant's analysis of judgments of taste begins from the fact that humans experience beauty and proceeds to investigate what this experience is like and what must be true about us and about the world for this experience to be possible. Kant begins by distinguishing judgments of taste from logical, cognitive judgments. Whereas logical, cognitive judgments identify the type of thing an object is or describe a characteristic or quality of an object, Kant holds that our experience of beauty has less to do with the object being judged than it does with the way the object affects the judging subject. More specifically, Kant claims that judgments of taste discern whether or not the way the judging subject represents a given object gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. Accordingly, Kant characterizes judgments of taste as subjective, aesthetic judgments (5:203-4).

However, Kant emphasizes the difference between judgments of taste and other forms of subjective, aesthetic judgment—especially judgments about 'the agreeable,' which concern merely sensual pleasure (5:205-7)—by arguing that judgments of taste are 'disinterested.' For Kant, a judgment is 'interested' if it is practical, i.e., if it is concerned with bringing a certain object or state of affairs into existence. But, when it comes to questions about beauty, Kant claims that "one only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation" (5:205). Judgments of taste are disinterested, then, because they are independent of the realm sensual desires and moral duties that tend to preoccupy us in our daily lives.

Having established their disinterestedness, Kant proceeds to highlight three further characteristics of judgments of taste. First, because they are not determined by the personal preferences or idiosyncratic interests of the judging subject, Kant argues that judgments of taste must be grounded in conditions common to all judges so that "there must be attached to the judgment of taste, with the consciousness of an abstraction in it from all interest, a claim to validity for everyone" (5:212). Accordingly, Kant concludes that judgments "make a claim to subjective universality" (5:212). Second, Kant argues that the fact that an object gives rise to a form of pleasure that grounds a subjective but universally valid judgment demonstrates that this object's distinctive form is purposive for human judgment as such, despite the fact that the object itself does not exist for the purpose of giving us pleasure (5:221). Third, because they lay claim to subjective universality, Kant argues that judgments of taste also assert their own necessity, such that anyone who finds an object beautiful cannot but conclude that, under similar circumstances, it is necessary that everyone else agree with their judgment (5:236-37).

With this account of judgments of taste in mind, it is important to wonder how Kant can think that a judgment based on a feeling of pleasure—seemingly the most personal and subjective of experiences—can lay claim to universal validity. How can such a claim be legitimate? Kant describes his answer to this

question as “the key to the critique of taste” and argues that the ultimate ground of the pleasure we take when we contemplate a beautiful object is a distinctive cognitive activity, namely, the “free play” of the imagination and the understanding (5:216-17). Kant’s account of this free play as the ground of aesthetic pleasure not only lays the foundation for his ‘Deduction of Taste,’ which argues that the claim to universality implicit in judgments of taste is justified because it grounded on a form of cognitive activity that is necessary for objective knowledge, whose legitimacy Kant takes himself to have demonstrated in *CPR* (5:289-90). It also allows him to resolve the apparent contradiction between our awareness that it is impossible to prove that something is beautiful because judgments of taste are not determining judgments and our belief that it is meaningful to solicit others to agree with our judgments of taste because they are grounded in a cognitive activity that can be shared by all (5:339-41).

While he stresses the significance of his account of the free play of the imagination and the understanding, Kant goes on to identify a second subjective condition of judgments of taste. Because our experience of beauty consists in the pleasurable feeling of the free play of the imagination and the understanding, Kant recognizes that we must be capable of taking pleasure in this free play and therefore that we must have a capacity that allow us to discern or ‘sense’ this free play by means of a feeling of pleasure. Further, Kant sees that the subjective universality of judgments of taste entails that all judges must possess the latter capacity in ‘common.’ Accordingly, Kant concludes that a ‘common-sense’ is a necessary condition of judgments of taste (5:237-38) and argues that we have good reason to think that all humans possess such a capacity (5:238-39). In the final analysis, then, the free play of the imagination and the understanding and the common-sense that allows us to take pleasure in this free play are distinct but equally necessary subjective conditions of judgments of taste.

IV. Art

As we have seen, Kant holds that judgments of taste involve the pleasurable feeling of the free play of the imagination and the understanding. For this free play to be possible, however, we cannot judge the object we are contemplating on the basis of a pre-determined conception of what it is or what it ought to be because this sort of determining judgment would constrain the activity of the imagination and render the free play of the imagination and the understanding impossible. Kant describes judgments of taste that do not involve a concept of the object being judged as ‘pure’ judgments of taste, and he indicates that, strictly speaking, only pure judgments of taste are genuine judgments of taste (5:229-36).

If this conclusion seems reasonable, however, it makes it difficult to see how art can be beautiful. As Kant observes, works of art are made by artists whose productive activity is guided by a concept of the object they seek to produce. In order to judge something as an artwork, then, it is necessary to judge it as the product of an artist’s intention, i.e., to judge it in terms of our understanding of the artist’s concept of the thing they aim to produce. But, judging an object in terms of such a concept undermines the possibility of a pure judgment of taste. It appears that we can judge something as an artwork or as beautiful, but never both.

That said, Kant thinks it is evident that art can be beautiful, and he attempts to explain how beautiful art is possible through his account of genius. On Kant’s account, genius names a “natural gift” or “talent” rooted in an “inborn predisposition of the mind” that allows nature to work through an artist in order to “give the rule to art” (5:307). Though all art must be the product of an artist’s intention, art produced by genius derives its distinctive character and/or content not from a self-conscious, rational decision that the artist makes, but rather from a non-rational “inspiration” that the artist receives (5:308). Accordingly, “the author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to

plan, and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products” (5:308). And, because the artist does not know and cannot communicate a determinate conception of the artwork they produced, the judge of this artwork cannot immediately judge it in terms of a concept of what it is or should be. Thus, Kant concludes, it is possible for an artwork to provoke a pleasurable and free play between the imagination and the understanding, so long as it is produced by genius.

V. Teleology

After examining how reflecting judgment is at work in our experience of beauty, Kant turns his attention to a second important way that reflective judgment functions in human intellectual life—namely, its role in our investigation of living organisms. In general, Kant defends the modern approach to natural science initiated by [Francis Bacon](#), [Galileo Galilei](#), and [René Descartes](#) and culminating in [Newtonian physics](#). This approach is rooted in a critique of [Aristotelian physics](#) and its reliance on [teleology](#)—i.e., the attempt to explain the motion of each substantial being in terms of that being’s essential purpose. Rejecting Aristotelian teleology as naïve anthropomorphism, modern natural science offers [a mechanistic account of nature](#) and reconceives of natural science as an attempt to discover laws that describe observable processes in terms of [efficient causality](#)—i.e., an analysis of the causal order that attends exclusively to chronologically prior sources of motion and their subsequent effects without considering whether the motion is guided by an overarching purpose or intention. While Kant holds that natural phenomena ought to be explained in terms of the chain of efficient causes and subsequent effects, *CPJ* argues that living organisms cannot be understood in this manner. Biology, Kant claims, requires a teleological account of natural phenomena in terms of their purposes, but it requires a chastened form of teleology that is compatible with the premises and methodological commitments of modern natural science.

Kant’s account of the role of teleology in natural science is derived from his concept of a “natural end” as “something that one cognizes as a product of nature” even though one cannot help but judge that it is the result of some purposive, intentional, and therefore non-natural mode of production (5:370). To the extent that a natural phenomenon is explicable in terms of efficient causality, Kant argues, it should not be characterized as a natural end because it is sufficient to understand it as the outcome of mechanistic processes. However, Kant observes, a living organism cannot be explained adequately in terms of efficient causality because it is “an **organized and self-organizing being**” whose parts are responsible for maintaining the whole organism and allowing it to function at the same time that the whole organism is responsible for the generation, existence, and activity of each of its parts (5:373-74). Accordingly, Kant highlights that living beings exhibit a form of simultaneous, bi-directional, and reciprocal causality that cannot be explained in terms of the chronological, unidirectional series of efficient cause and subsequent effect. Kant concludes the reciprocal causality at work in living organisms can only be captured by means of a reflective, ‘teleological judgment,’ which posits the unity, systematicity, and inherent purposiveness of the organism, judging the organism as a natural end “**in which everything is an end and reciprocally a means as well**” (5:376).

Even if it is necessary to judge living beings in terms of purposes, however, Kant’s account of teleological judgment does not contradict modern natural science’s rejection of Aristotelian teleology. Whereas Aristotle indicates that the motion of living beings is determined by an essentially purposive nature, Kant merely suggests that we must judge organisms ‘as if’ their motion was purposive in order to make sense of the reciprocal causality we observe. Contra Aristotle, Kant denies that natural scientists ought to be concerned with identifying the final causes of the organisms they examine. Instead, Kant suggests that natural scientists should strive to offer a complete description of the series of efficient causes that

determine the processes that are necessary to sustain life. Further, Kant argues that the teleological judgment of organisms is necessary to the natural scientist's attempt to discern the biological processes that they ought to examine, thereby "guiding research into objects of this kind" (5:375). Even as he denies that the reciprocal causality at work in living beings can be explained in terms of efficient causality, then, Kant seeks to show that the form of teleological judgment he describes is not only compatible with and necessary to the progress of the modern scientific project.

VI. Morality

The question of the moral significance of aesthetics and teleology serves as unifying theme of the *Critique of Judgment*, as a whole. For our purposes, three points are especially noteworthy. First, in addition to its treatment of the beautiful, Kant's aesthetic theory offers an account of [the sublime](#). Kant argues that the experience of the sublime arises when one encounters something whose size or power is so immense that it cannot be grasped by the imagination or the understanding but can nevertheless be comprehended by reason (5:245-46). In the case of the sublime, an initial cognitive failure ultimately gives rise to an awareness of reason's infinite freedom and its superiority to anything we might encounter in nature. And, because he holds that reason is essentially moral, Kant concludes that the experience of the sublime awakens us to reason's freedom and empowers us for moral action.

Second, Kant argues that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good" because judgments of taste are formally analogous to moral judgments (5:353). As Kant observes, neither form of judgment is determined by physical sensation or natural inclination and both lay claim to universality (5:353). Even as he denies that the experience of beauty makes us moral and highlights the disanalogies between judgments of taste and moral judgments (5:354), Kant concludes that the experience of beauty promotes morality in an indirect manner by distancing us from our inclinations, desires, and passions, thereby preparing us to make the sort of autonomous, rational judgments required for morality.

Third, Kant indicates that the teleological judgment of living organisms cultivates a way of thinking that is conducive to morality. Because we cannot help but judge living beings as if they are purposive, we cannot help but thinking of them as if they are produced by an intelligent artist in accordance with a purpose. But, the thought that an intelligent artist has produced a particular natural being points beyond itself to the thought of an intelligent God who is the author of nature as a whole. Ultimately, Kant argues that teleological judgment inexorably leads not only to a form of [natural theology](#) that posits God as the cause of nature and its properties (5:436-42), but also to a form of moral theology which judges the entirety of nature as if it existed for the sake of furthering humanity's moral progress (5:442-47). Though it does not make us moral, then, Kant holds that teleological judgment leads us toward an outlook on the world that is conducive to our moral efforts.

VII. Metaphysics

As we saw at the beginning of this entry, Kant conceives of *CPJ* as the completion of his critical project and as a decisive moment in the development of the modern enlightenment project because he thinks it provides important insight into the unifying ground of the causally-determined, mechanistic order of the natural world, on one hand, and humanity's freedom to realize reason's moral demands in the world, on the other. We are now in a position to note three ways *CPJ* carries out this task.

First, the fact that we discover that certain natural objects are beautiful and find that we make progress in our scientific investigations of nature on the basis of teleological judgment, despite the fact that we cannot know in advance that the experience of beauty or the progress of science will be possible, indicates that nature is purposive for our cognitive activity and suggests the possibility that nature will

be receptive to humanity's moral projects. Second, Kant's account of the moral significance of judgments of taste and his exploration of the moral theology implied by teleological judgments both indicate not simply that nature is receptive to morality, but that the natural world might further humanity's moral interests. Third and most fundamentally, Kant suggests that his investigations of aesthetic and teleological judgment provide indications of the reality of a "supersensible substrate" that underlies and unites nature and freedom. On one hand, because it is grounded in the pleasure we take in the free play of the imagination and the understanding, the experience of beauty highlights the kinship and coherence of one's sensible nature and one's rational capacities, thereby illuminating the unity of the human being and suggesting a unifying ground of nature and freedom within us. On the other hand, because it points to the possibility that a moral God is the ground of the natural world, teleological judgment indicates the possibility of a unification of nature and freedom outside us. Much more needs to be said about each of these points than is possible in the context of this entry, but each of them suggests one way that *CPJ* "makes possible the transition from the manner of thinking in accordance with the principles of" nature "to that in accordance with the principles of" freedom and morality (5:176).

Conclusion

Kant's *CPJ* is a complex and ambitious work that addresses important philosophical questions on a variety of topics, including philosophy of mind, epistemology, aesthetics, philosophy of science, ethics, and theology, among others. Given the complexity of *CPJ*, it is unsurprising that readers often tend to compartmentalize the text, focusing on the particular concepts, arguments, and themes that are of most interest to them, while overlooking the parts of the text that they find less relevant to their own concerns. While this piecemeal approach has had certain benefits, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Kant sees the various elements of *CPJ* as parts of a single, comprehensive work, which offers an account of the various modes of human judgment in order to shed light both on the unity of the human being and on nature's receptivity to humanity's concern with the true, the good, and the sacred. Attending to *CPJ*'s overarching, unifying project is crucial to not only an adequate understanding its place within Kant's thought, but also to a proper appreciation of Kant's place within the history of philosophy. This fact begins to explain why *CPJ* was a major source of inspiration for Kant's followers and why it continues to demand and reward careful study today.

Questions for Self-Review

1. What is the difference between determining and reflecting judgments, on Kant's account?
2. How does Kant argue that judgments of taste lay claim to universal validity?
3. What are the two subjective conditions of judgments of taste that Kant identifies as necessary to judgments of taste, and why are they necessary?
4. What leads Kant to conclude that "beautiful art is possible only as a product of genius" (5:307)?
5. Based on your understanding of Kant's account of teleological judgments, why do you think Kant claims that "it would be absurd...to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered" (5:399)?
6. How does Kant think that aesthetic and teleological judgment contribute to human moral life?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading

All citations in this entry refer to the volume and page number of the Academy edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, which appear in the margins of the translation by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews.

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