

KANT FINDS NOTHING UGLY?

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I

IN HIS article 'Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly',¹ David Shier argues that 'within Kant's aesthetics, there cannot be any negative judgements of taste' (pp. 412–413).² All judgements of taste, whether affirmative or negative, must be 'made independently of determinate concepts', and yet they must 'have universal subjective validity' (p. 413). Shier claims that within Kant's aesthetics, negative judgements of taste cannot satisfy both of these conditions at the same time. His argument goes as follows (I will put in italics those words where I think the argument is problematic): 'In judgements of taste, Kant argues, what is universally communicable is the subject's mental state', and 'what is universally communicable in the negative judgement of taste must also be the mental state of the subject' (p. 415). Since the mental state of aesthetic judgements 'is not that of any definite cognition, the only way it could admit of universal communicability is to *satisfy* the necessary conditions of cognition in general' (p. 416). And, Shier goes on, it can only do so if the cognitive faculties harmonize: 'No cognition whatsoever can possibly take place unless the understanding and the imagination *interact harmoniously*. Every definite cognition rests upon *such harmony* of the cognitive powers. A state of mind which refers to cognition in general *can only be this state of harmonious free play*, for this *is* the subjective condition of cognition' (p. 416). The 'harmonious free play is always pleasurable' (p. 418), and hence the judgement in question must be a positive judgement of taste and can never be a negative judgement of taste. 'Therefore, within Kant's aesthetics, and contrary to the obvious fact of the matter, negative judgements of taste about free beauty are quite impossible' (p. 418).³

¹ David Shier, 'Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 38, no. 4 (October 1998), pp. 412–418. Subsequent page references are given in the text.

² Negative judgements of taste are to be understood here as judgements about the ugly, i.e. judgements of the form 'X is ugly', which is more than merely claiming that X is not beautiful.

³ A quite similar claim and argument has been made by Reinhard Brandt in his article 'Zur Logik des ästhetischen Urteils', in Herman Parret (ed.), *Kants Ästhetik, Kant's Aesthetics, L'esthétique de Kant* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 229–245, see especially pp. 239–241. My criticism applies to this article as well.

Garrett Thomson claims in his article 'Kant's Problems with Ugliness' (*Journal of Aesthetics and*

It is true that there is almost nothing said in the *Critique of Judgement* about negative judgements of taste. Nevertheless, I will argue, first, in section II, that there are good reasons for believing that Kant thought of negative judgements of taste ‘along the same lines’ (in a sense to be explained below) as he did about positive judgements of taste. Secondly, in section III, I will suggest positive *a priori* grounds for negative judgements of taste and their subjective universal validity within the framework of Kant’s aesthetics. The main idea will be that, contrary to Shier’s understanding, we should make a greater distinction between the ‘harmony’ (i) of the faculties underlying a judgement of cognition—let us call it the ‘cognitive harmony’—and the ‘harmony’ (ii) underlying a positive judgement of taste—let us call it the ‘aesthetic harmony’. By making this distinction more explicit, we will be able to see that the *disharmony* of the faculties underlying a negative judgement of taste—let us call it the ‘aesthetic disharmony’—is not that different from aesthetic harmony. We will see that aesthetic harmony and aesthetic disharmony are related to cognition in general in ways sufficiently similar to each other to justify on equal grounds the claim to universal validity of positive *and* negative judgements of taste.

II

(a) In *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* (1763),⁴ Kant makes a strong plea for certain oppositions to be ‘real’ and not merely ‘logical’ (p. 171). Kant gives various examples, among them the opposition of the beautiful and the ugly. About real oppositions in general he writes: ‘Mathematicians make use of the concepts of this real opposition in the case of mathematical magnitudes’ (p. 172) by introducing the signs ‘+’ and ‘-’ in a certain way. ‘[T]he sign “-”, as it occurs in the example “ $-9 - 4 = -13$ ”, does not signify a subtraction but an addition, in exactly the same way as the sign “+”, as it occurs in the example “ $+9 + 4 = +13$ ”, signifies addition’ (p. 173). Regarding

Art Criticism, vol. 50, no. 2 [Spring 1992], pp. 107–115) that ‘Kant fails in his avowed claim of bridging the moral and the natural realms. Ugliness precludes phenomenized morality’ (p. 114). But there are several misunderstandings in his arguments, some of which have been pointed out already by Paul Guyer in his comment ‘Thomson’s Problems with Kant: A Comment on “Kant’s Problems with Ugliness”’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 317–319.

There are two articles arguing in favour of negative judgements of taste, i.e. that they do fit well into Kant’s aesthetics: Hud Hudson, ‘The Significance of an Analytic of the Ugly in Kant’s Deduction of Pure Judgments of Taste’, in Ralf Meerbote (ed.), *Kant’s Aesthetics* (California: Ridgeview, 1991), North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy, vol. 1, pp. 87–103; and Dieter Lohmar, ‘Das Geschmacksurteil über das faszinierend Hässliche’, in *Kants Ästhetik*, pp. 498–512.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, trans. and ed. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1992). The page numbers of the Akademie Ausgabe (AA) edition are indicated in the margin of the English edition by Walford and Meerbote; I refer to these page numbers, and follow their translation.

real opposition, *both* sides must be thought of as positive because both have ‘positive grounds’ (p. 175). One is not simply the negation of the other. Kant gives various examples: ‘The passage of the ship westwards is just as much a positive motion as its passage eastwards’ (p. 176); ‘impenetrability just as much presupposes a true force in the parts of the body, in virtue of which they collectively occupy a space, as does the force in virtue of which another body strives to enter this space’ (p. 179); displeasure has its positive grounds as much as pleasure (pp. 180–181) and can be called ‘negative pleasure’ (p. 181). Similarly, ‘aversion can be called a negative desire, hate a negative love, ugliness a negative beauty, blame a negative praise’ (p. 182). All of them have their positive grounds and are not simply negations of each other.

Opposites can be represented mathematically along one straight line, with negative signs on one side, positive signs on the other, and zero in the middle. The point Kant is trying to make is that what is represented by negative numbers is as real as what is represented by positive numbers. This conception can also be found in various *Reflections*: ‘Beautiful, ordinary, ugly’ (‘Schön, alltägig, hässlich’, R 669, my translation), ‘That which hinders our free play and against which our mind has to fight, that we dislike’ (‘Dasjenige missfällt, dem unsere Gemütskraft widerstreitet als einem Hindernis ihres freien Spiels’, R 1922, my translation), and ‘Beautiful +; not beautiful (dry) 0; ugly –’ (‘Schön +; nichts schön (trocken) 0; hässlich –’, R 1946, my translation).⁵ The idea that ugliness has its positive grounds can also be found in *Logik Philippi* (1772): ‘Ugliness is thus something positive, not merely lack of beauty, but the existence of something opposite to beauty’ (‘Hässlichkeit ist also was positives, nicht eine blosse Abwesenheit der Schönheit sondern auch das Daseyn dessen, was der Schönheit zuwider ist’, XXIV, p. 364, my translation); also in *Logik Dohna-Wundlaken* (1792): ‘Ugliness is something positive as well as is beauty’ (‘Hässlichkeit ist ebensowohl positiv als Schönheit’, XXIV, p. 708, my translation), and ‘Counterplay is not merely something negative, but really something positive’ (‘Das Widerspiel ist nicht

⁵ Christian Strub draws attention to these three *Reflections* in his detailed and informative article ‘Das Hässliche und die “Kritik der ästhetischen Urteilskraft”. Überlegungen zu einer systematischen Lücke’, in *Kant-Studien*, vol. 80 (1989), pp. 416–46, see pp. 416, 421. Strub does not refer to Kant’s conception of real opposites in *Attempts to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*. The conception of a free disharmonious play Strub believes to be ruled out by his observation that we avoid a state of displeasure and that a free and disharmonious play which is accompanied by displeasure cannot be sufficiently lasting (pp. 437–439). But I find this contrary to what we often observe when we find something ugly: we indeed find ourselves often fascinated by something ugly, as has already been pointed out by Lohmar (‘Das Geschmacksurteil’, p. 506). Instead, Strub claims that imagination and understanding engage in free play *independently* of each other. ‘Es muss . . . ein freies *Einzelspiel* von Einbildungskraft und Verstand vorausgesetzt werden’ (p. 436); compare also: ‘Die Erkenntniskräfte Anschauung/Einbildungskraft und Verstand spielen zunächst nicht miteinander, sondern für sich, selbständig’ (p. 429). I think this construction of imagination and understanding playing independently of each other is not necessary for a justification of negative judgements of taste and their claim to subjective universal validity.

allein etwas Negatives, sondern wirklich etwas Positives', XXIV, p. 710, my translation).⁶

(b) The passages cited above in II(a) make it seem reasonable to expect Kant to have believed in *a priori* grounds for *negative* judgements of taste as well as he did regarding positive judgements of taste. One might object to this expectation that the passages are out of context, that they are not taken from the *Critique of Judgement* itself, and that it is therefore not clear how they relate to the question of *a priori* grounds for negative judgements of taste. But one can also give systematic reasons for expecting *a priori* grounds for negative judgements of taste. For Kant, it is a given fact that it can always happen that A claims X to be beautiful whereas B claims X to be ugly; that both A and B firmly believe their judgements to be true and universally valid; and that neither of them could possibly be convinced by any kind of argument that he or she is mistaken. Kant takes it as a given fact that such opposing judgements of taste and a possibly infinite quarrel⁷ of taste are possible. It is then the task of the 'Analytic of the Judgement of Taste' to explain the judgement of taste in such a way that this possibility of opposing judgements can be justified. Now, if negative judgements of taste had no *a priori* grounds, the possibility of such possibly infinite quarrels of taste could not even arise, because whoever makes a negative judgement of taste could always be led by introspection to drop his or her claim to universal validity. This can be seen from the following passage in section 6 of the *Critique of Judgement*:

[I]f someone likes [dislikes] something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [disliked] that holds for everyone. He must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking [disliking] from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking [disliking], any private conditions. (p. 211)⁸

Without subjective *a priori* grounds there would be only empirical grounds; these could be discovered by introspection and one would then drop one's claim to universal validity. This would always end a quarrel of taste which, in turn, would make superfluous the 'Analytic of the Judgement of Taste' regarding its task to justify such a quarrel, and it would also make the antinomy of taste impossible.⁹

⁶ Lohmar draws attention to these passages in 'Das Geschmacksurteil', p. 505.

⁷ As finite beings we actually cannot quarrel for an infinite length of time. Hence there is, strictly speaking, not even the possibility of an infinite quarrel for us as finite beings. But abstracting from the empirical fact that we are, individually, granted only a finite lifespan, there is no reason for such a quarrel to come to an end. And it is in this sense that I am speaking of a 'possibly infinite' quarrel.

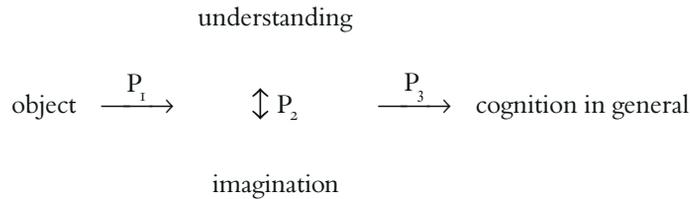
⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 211. The page numbers refer to the Akademie Ausgabe edition which are also indicated in Pluhar's translation. I follow Pluhar's translation.

⁹ This systematic argument for the apriority of negative judgements of taste can already be found in Strub, 'Das Hässliche', p. 433.

III

For the reasons given in section II one should expect Kant to believe in positive *a priori* grounds for negative judgements of taste as well. Nevertheless, the ‘Analytic of the Aesthetic Judgement’ turns out from the very start to be merely an ‘Analytic of the *Beautiful*’. But, rather than claiming that ‘Kant finds nothing ugly’, as does Shier, I believe, first, that what is achieved in the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ is sufficient for the larger purpose of the *Critique of Judgement*, that is, for establishing judgement as a third cognitive power endowed with its own *a priori* principle, namely purposiveness, subjective or objective; and, second, I believe that it is possible to read and modify Kant’s explanations given in the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ in such a way as to obtain the ‘Analytic of the Ugly’. In order to see this, let us start by examining Kant’s conception of subjective purposiveness. We then will be able to see some kind of ‘negative subjective purposiveness’ in the case of negative judgements of taste.¹⁰

Purposiveness, I claim, is involved in a positive judgement of taste in at least three different ways. There is purposiveness: in the relation of the object to the faculties of imagination and understanding (P_1), in the relation of these faculties to each other while contemplating the object (P_2), and in the relation of this very relation to cognition in general (P_3):



There are now various ways of introducing some kind of ‘negative purposiveness’ into this scheme in the case in which an object is judged to be ugly. This I will show in the following.¹¹

¹⁰ Hud Hudson, arguing for negative judgements of taste as fitting into Kant’s aesthetics, goes through all four moments of taste, and argues for ‘contrapurposiveness’ (p. 92) regarding the third moment. I will give a more detailed picture by showing that purposiveness is involved in three different ways and how negation can come into this threefold purposiveness in different ways.

Hudson discusses the ‘attunement’ (‘Stimmung’) of the faculties of cognition and various ‘degrees’ (p. 99) of proportions. He claims that a ‘proportion of subjective contra-purposiveness’ (p. 99) is ‘the *worst* degree of attunement in which this inner relation is *least* conducive to (mutual) quickening of the two cognitive powers with a view to cognition in general’ (p. 99). But this seems to me to miss the main point, namely Kant’s conception of the ugly as having its own *positive* grounds. Hudson does not argue for a free disharmonious play of the faculties as such a positive ground.

¹¹ The diagram I introduced above, which exhibits the threefold structure of subjective purposiveness, is, I find, also very useful for a better understanding of Kant’s arguments in the analysis of the third moment of judgements of taste and in other places in the deduction where Kant simply

If I see something and find it ugly, why should it not occupy my mind? Why should I not contemplate it, although with displeasure? Why should there not be a free *disharmonious* play of imagination and understanding? I might well find an object to be purposeful (P'_1) for such a play. In this play imagination and understanding act not in harmony but in disharmony. Nevertheless, they occupy, challenge, and thus strengthen each other in a relationship that can be regarded as being in this sense purposeful (P'_2) for each of the faculties involved and hence as purposeful (P'_3) for cognition in general. On the other hand, their disharmonious relationship is not suitable for the possibility of subsuming the representation of our imagination (intuition) under a concept of the understanding. Hence the disharmony might be regarded as *opposing* such a subsumption. (This opposition can be regarded as a 'real opposition' comparable to the 'true force' presupposed by the 'impenetrability', or at least it can be regarded as analogous to such a true force, a force Kant argues for in *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitude into Philosophy*, as indicated above in section II.) There would then be in this sense some sort of 'negative purposiveness' ($-P_2$) in the relation between the disharmony of the faculties and a 'negative purposiveness' ($-P_3$) regarding the possibility of cognition. Underlying a negative judgement of taste we have the consideration of the object as resisting a free harmonious play and hence as being 'negative purposeful' ($-P_1$) for such a play. Imitating Kant's terminology for real opposites mentioned above in section I, we might thus speak of 'negative purposiveness' and of something being 'negative purposeful'.

Now what about Kant's arguments regarding communicability and subjective universal validity? In section 9 of the *Critique of Judgement* Kant writes: 'Nothing . . . can be communicated universally except cognition, as well as presentation insofar as it pertains to cognition' (p. 217, trans. Pluhar). How shall we understand the expression 'pertains to cognition' ('zum Erkenntnis gehört')? The state of mind in a free harmonious play (aesthetic harmony) is quite different from the state of mind when an intuition is subsumed under a concept (judgement in its determining function) or when such a subsumption is intended and searched for (judgement in its reflective function). Calling both states of mind, the aesthetic *and* the cognitive state, 'harmonious' can be misleading. Indeed, Shier wrongly tends to *identify* both states of mind with each other when he argues: 'A state of mind which refers to cognition in general *can only be* this state of harmonious free play, for this is the subjective condition of cognition' (see section I above, my italics). But things are not that simple. Aesthetic reflection is at the same time *more* and *less* than epistemic reflection: aesthetic reflection is essentially accompanied by pleasure or displeasure (which is *not* the case for epistemic reflection), and at the same time no cognition is

speaks of subjective purposiveness (or formal purposiveness or purposiveness of form) without being too explicit about what kind of purposiveness he has in mind.

intended (which *is* the case in epistemic reflection). Kant expresses himself very carefully when he speaks of ‘the mental state that we find in the relation between the presentational powers [imagination and understanding] insofar as they *refer* a given presentation to cognition in general’ (‘sofern sie eine gegebene Vorstellung auf Erkenntnis überhaupt *beziehen*’, p. 217, trans. Pluhar’s, my italics). Why should a given representation not be ‘referred’ to cognition in general by means of a *disharmonious* free play? That is, why should a given representation not be ‘referred’ to cognition in general when we find the representation not suitable for cognition in general, and when we find it *resisting* a possible subsumption of intuition under a concept? The free harmonious play is not a preliminary stage towards a judgement of cognition, so why should the disharmonious play be such a preliminary stage? In free harmonious play we merely reflect (with pleasure) about the form of the object *regarding* the possibility of cognition (without having a specific concept in mind) and find it suitable for cognition in general. Why should we not similarly reflect with *displeasure* and find the form of the object *unsuitable* for cognition? It is this aesthetic reflection, be it in a harmonious or a disharmonious free play, that justifies universal communicability because it is a reflection regarding cognition in general, be that we find the given representation suitable or unsuitable for cognition.

There is a case I have not discussed so far and which is not mentioned by Shier, namely the neutral case, when we judge the object to be ‘dry’ (trocken) or ‘ordinary’ (alltäglich). This case would be mathematically indicated by ‘o’. I suggest that in this case neither a harmonious nor a disharmonious free play takes place, but that the object nevertheless has been drawn into consideration and tested regarding its suitability for either of these plays. When we say that an object is ‘ordinary’ or ‘dry’, we make this judgement according to an aesthetic reflection that is neither a free harmonious nor a free disharmonious play but at least attempts such a play, and already in this attempt there is a certain ‘regard’ for cognition in general. Speaking of ‘testing’ an object regarding its suitability for a free play or of ‘attempting’ such a play seems to reveal an intentional state of mind which seems to contradict the required disinterestedness underlying judgements of taste. But, first, this disinterestedness is disinterestedness of pleasure or displeasure, and there is neither pleasure nor displeasure underlying the neutral judgement of taste, and secondly, there is nothing wrong with the idea that we simply find ourselves finding an object ‘dry’ or ‘ordinary’, i.e. that we simply find ourselves neither feeling pleasure nor displeasure based on a free harmonious or disharmonious play of our faculties. Hence also the aesthetic reflection which underlies our judging the object to be ‘dry’ or ‘ordinary’ is a reflection regarding cognition in general, and hence also this neutral judgement may justifiably claim universal validity.

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