

In: ' *Kant-Studien*, 86, 1995, pp. 331-345. [page-conform]

Kant's Regulative Principle of Aesthetic Excellence: The Ideal Aesthetic Experience

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Introduction

It is rather intriguing that we will often try to persuade people of what we find beautiful, even though we do not believe that they may subsequently base their judgement of taste on our testimony. Typically, we think that the experience of beauty is such that we cannot leave it to others to be had. Moreover, we are often aware of the contingency of our own judgements' foundation in our own experience. Nevertheless, we do think that certain aesthetic, evaluative conceptions do relate to specific experiences in a non-trivial way, especially that of aesthetic excellence. Now certain analytical aestheticians ascribe truth values to aesthetic judgements of various kinds. Such ascription would evidently have a bearing on the problem of aesthetic experience's relevance for evaluation, as we may in the end be better off neglecting the experiential altogether in virtue of treating aesthetic values in objectivist ways, as natural properties, or as reducible to such properties, descriptions of which will then indeed be true or false.¹ However, I think that it is too early yet to bury subjectivism. So let us instead defend it and try to get a better grasp on its suppositions. In this we may profit from ideas advanced by David Wiggins, who neither denies the role played by objective properties, nor neglects the subjective import. According to him, aesthetic values are somehow kinds of <property - response> relations, which are established by an elaborate process of criticism and refinement of perceptions of, and feelings toward specific natural properties.² The argument in this paper suggests that the analysis of a paradigmatic <property-response> pair regarding 'aesthetic excellence' provides us with inter-

¹ Of those who are engaged in this problematic Nicholas Wolterstorff pushes forward our merely idiosyncratic reasons for liking an object as decisive ('An Engagement With Kant's Theory of Beauty', in: Ralf Meerbote (ed.): *Kant's Aesthetics*, Atascadero, Cal., 1991, p. 105 ff). Anthony Savile (in his brilliant *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*, Edinburgh, 1993) and Mary Mothersill in her article on 'The Antinomy of Taste' (in Meerbote, 1991, p. 75 ff.), both direct our attention to the possibility of assessment of the truth value of the judgement with regard to its content.

² Wiggins, D.: *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, essay V: 'A Sensible Subjectivism?'

esting insights in the idea that our judgements of taste are founded upon an aesthetic experience.³

Now, regarding aesthetic experience we find that, apart from Wiggins' procedural account,⁴ only two rather unfelicitous strategies appear to have been available to analytic philosophers. Either the notion of aesthetic experience is being dismissed because of its alleged non-specificity in comparison with more normal cognitive experiences, or an identification of its actual instances is being attempted.⁵ The first strategy sacrifices a core item of our aesthetic discourse, whereas the second confronts two serious problems. First, no identification of empirical, contingent aesthetic experiences will help advance a theoretical, general account of aesthetic evaluation. Secondly, no satisfactory identification of empirical aesthetic experiences will even be possible, as none of its conditions will be necessary and sufficient at the same time. Now what I think is wrong with these two strategies is that they do not distinguish between our actual experiences and the use to which we put them in grounding our judgements on them. What we need is an account of the functionality of the notion of aesthetic experience within aesthetic discourse. In what follows I shall not explicitly criticize these two strategies but propose instead an interpretative reconstruction of Kant's aesthetic theory that sustains a third strategy that provides such an account without suffering from the other strategies' disadvantages.

According to Kant then, judgements of taste which make up the core of aesthetic discourse, have as their determining ground merely the pleasure we feel about the subjective finality of our aesthetic experience. Nevertheless they involve a claim to universal validity, which suggests a standard of taste. In order to make these two points come together in a plausible way, and provide a way out of the dilemma put before us by the two unfelicitous strategies, this is what I shall do: first, I shall present an interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* showing that according to Kant aesthetic discourse is legitimized with the specific awareness of the communicability of our determinations of the object, which shows forth from our feeling of subjective finality; i.e., with an awareness, and not merely with the communicability that is its subject matter. Discourse on aesthetic excellence is insufficiently

³ I do not think that the distinction between beauty and the sublime is intelligible, but will not argue against it in this paper. Instead I will treat them as on a par, and talk instead of 'aesthetic excellence', which comprises both, as everybody will agree.

⁴ I think that normally we endorse a more substantial notion of the experience of aesthetic excellence than is offered in Wiggins' idea of a process of thinking, and talking about natural properties and our perceptions of and responses to them, which leads to the point of some Aha-Erlebnis where the penny drops and the response in question is taken to be the right one. I tend to ascribe more depth, and more relevance for our lives' integrity to aesthetic experience than that. In what follows we shall see where such ascription gets us.

⁵ An important example of the former strategy can be found in Nelson Goodman's writings whereas Monroe Beardsley and George Dickie clearly follow the latter.

grounded if it remains without a certain experiential supplement.⁶ Secondly then, I argue that Kant can only explain this grounding role of aesthetic experience if he takes it as an ideal notion, and not as actual empirical experiences. And we must furthermore understand him to take this notion as functioning regulatively for the aesthetic application of the faculty of judgement.

I. Why we can argue in matters of taste

1. Common sense

According to Kant, the most crucial problem for aesthetics is the antinomy of taste: we argue a lot about aesthetic matters, and rightly so, but at the same time we are convinced that no mechanical test enables us to prove a judgement of taste. Kant argues, that if a principle of taste exists, it certainly will not consist in an enumeration of prevalent judgements, nor will it be a logical principle that would enable us to prove a thing's beauty from its properties.⁷ Kant's account of this antinomy of taste starts off with an analysis of the claims that we make in aesthetic discourse. He distinguishes pure from dependent judgements of taste, and describes the involved subjectivity in terms of the cognitive faculties playing freely. However, his account of the alleged universal validity of these judgements in terms of a common sense is puzzling. He takes taste as a typical instance of common sense and as entailing recognition of our presupposing its existence, but leaves open the overall question of how exactly common sense relates to the judgement of taste.

In more detail, Kant associates this common sense with a reasonable, and non-specific demand for consent; it is the condition of 'communicability as such'; that which makes us demand of other people that they respond to a certain object as we did.⁸ As such Kant takes the judgement of taste to be an exemplary instance of this consent, a typical

⁶ In keeping with Meredith's translation I use the term 'sound understanding' for our everyday common sense, and 'common sense' for the idea of universal rationality described in Kant's analysis, i.e., for 'Gemeinsinn'. See also section v below. References to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* are, respectively, to the Meredith translation (1928), the B-edition (1793), and the Suhrkamp edition (1974).

The demand of an experiential supplement ought to be distinguished from the Kantian position concerning knowledge being a function of the forms of intuition and of the categories in that with regard to knowledge the experiential demand is general and does not have to be met in every given case: with regard to knowledge one can be justified in believing certain claims on the mere grounds of testimony. This possibility is excluded from the aesthetic domain.

⁷ In § 17 of the *Critique of Judgement*, and again in § 34.

⁸ Cf. the note in the 'Remark' of the deduction of judgements of taste (§ 38, CJ, M147 (KU, B151, 221).

illustration of common sense's obligatory working.⁹ However, he also thinks that this common sense "... is a mere ideal norm",¹⁰ and the

⁹ CJ, M85 (KU, B68, 159).

¹⁰ CJ, M84 (KU, B 67, 159).

subjective principle of taste.¹¹ The elements of the faculty of taste laid out in the *Analytic of Beauty*, such as ‘disinterestedness’, ‘universal though conceptless pleasure’, ‘purposeless finality’, and ‘necessity’, will be united in it. Lastly, he states that our judgements of taste are possible only if a common sense is presupposed, but at the same time this common sense must be understood as merely an effect of the free play of the cognitive faculties.¹² Such paradoxical remarks as these motivate the argument of this paper. How are we to understand the subjectivity of this ‘principle’?

2. *Beauty’s ‘rule’*

One of the starting points of the argument is that we find that our judgements of taste should be universally agreed upon, even though we do not claim that they are logically necessary. This is illustrated by the fact that we do not think that something like the truth of these judgements could be established, for example, by enumerating natural properties. The only rather uncertain way to establish their ‘correctness’ is by eliminating those aspects of the involved experience, which might cloud the aesthetic relevance of the judgement.¹³ Instead, this validity claim is exemplary:¹⁴ the beautiful object is supposed to be an outstanding instance of a ‘rule’ that we cannot describe. Now what kind of rule can this be?¹⁵ For example, in a botanical encyclopedia examples of plants are depicted in such a way as to enable

¹¹ “Therefore [judgements of taste] must have a subjective principle, and one which determines what pleases or displeases, by means of feeling only and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a common sense.” (CJ, M82 (KU, B 65, 157)).

¹² “The judgement of taste, therefore, depends upon our presupposing the existence of a common sense. (But this is not to be taken to mean some external sense, but the effect arising from the free play of our powers of cognition).” (CJ, M83 (KU, B64-65, 157)).

¹³ “It may be a matter of uncertainty whether a person who thinks he is laying down a judgement of taste is, in fact, judging in conformity with that idea; but that this idea is what is contemplated [darauf beziehe] in his judgement, and that, consequently, it is meant to be a judgement of taste, is proclaimed by his use of the expression ‘beauty’. For himself he can be certain on the point from his mere consciousness of the separation of everything belonging to the agreeable and the good from the delight remaining to him; and this is all for which he promises himself the agreement of every one—a claim which, under these conditions, he would also be warranted in making, were it not that he frequently sinned against them, and thus passed an erroneous judgement of taste.” (CJ, M56-57 (KU, B 26, 130-131)). Kant alludes once more to our uncertainty in matters of taste in the following: “Hence the common sense is a mere ideal norm. With this as presupposition, a judgement that accords with it, as well as the delight in an Object expressed in that judgement, is rightly converted into a rule for every one. For the principle, while it is only subjective, being yet assumed as subjectively universal (a necessary idea for every one), could, in what concerns the consensus of different judging Subjects, demand universal assent like an objective principle, provided we were assured of our subsumption under it being correct.” (CJ, M84-85 (KU, B 68, 159-160)).

¹⁴ § 18 (CJ, M81 (KU, B 63-64, 156)).

¹⁵ § 19. Cf. also § 8, CJ, M56 (KU, B26, 131).

us to identify actual plants in nature. A conventional system is at work here: we must understand the ways in which plants differ in general from their representations to remark the resemblances between image and thing. We must reconcile differences in dimensionality, dimension, colour, mobility, et cetera. On top of this, we must be aware of the various ways in which representations of distinct plants differ from one another. There are, indeed, rules involved in such botanical identifications, and each time we succeed in identifying a plant we will be able to provide a satisfactory description of the involved rule. Now, it cannot be this way with a concrete beautiful thing being an exemplary case of a 'rule'. Clearly we do not have encyclopedic books wherein all exemplary cases of beautiful things are classified. Of course we do have books representing the paintings of subsequent ages, periods, styles, and painters, but, necessarily, these books do not assemble all and only aesthetically excellent paintings, and they do not enable one to 'cross-categorically' recognize beautiful artefacts of different kinds, such as aeroplanes, novels, musical works, sculptures, natural beauties, et cetera. This is due in the end, to the fact that each criterion of classification will be of a general nature and will therefore be irrelevant for the assessment of an individual work's aesthetic value. Secondly, To advocate the possibility or desirability of such a general, rule-governed objectivism with regard to individual beauties apparently is a contradiction in terms. Now, the incoherence of the idea of a general meaning, or essence, of the term 'beauty' might seem to furnish the suggestion that this meaning resides in some family resemblance. However, this 'family' would comprise each and every kind of perceptible object. So this would merely beg the question. The idea then that beauty is exemplary of some undecidable rule is metaphorical at best – at least if there is a literal sense in the first place to the involvement of rules in more straightforward cases of meaning attribution.¹⁶ This idea then of an undecidable rule needs elaboration.

An important part of the interpretation of this metaphor is that in claiming universal validity we acknowledge that the free play engages more normal cognitive considerations.¹⁷ This might account for the appearance that some rule is involved in aesthetic matters. Our awareness of the insufficiency of our everyday cognitive considerations, and the relationality of our evaluations with regard to our very own perspective and feelings would seem to explain then why this aesthetic rule is not a real

¹⁶ Cf. Boghossian for an elaborate discussion of the rationale of rule-following considerations: Paul Boghossian, 1989: *The Rule-Following Considerations*. In: *Mind*, 98, p. 507-549.

¹⁷ This is the purport of Kant's statement that judgements of taste are not *simply* subjective: "Proofs are of no avail whatever for determining the judgement of taste, and in this connexion matters stand just as they would were that judgement simply subjective." (CJ, § 33, M139).

one: we might come to think that idiosyncrasies in our background knowledge explain our uncertainty with regard to judgements of taste. In effect, however, our judgements of taste do not describe an object's natural properties, so our uncertainty about our evaluative judgement cannot be reduced to this acknowledgement

of our merely cognitive shortcomings. Instead, this uncertainty relates to a different theoretical point. I will go into this later, when dealing with the regulative and ideal nature of aesthetic experience.

3. Beauty's dependence on determinate concepts

According to Kant the aesthetic evaluative predicate is pure if it is not clouded by interests, emotions or concepts, although it may be related to them. Put differently, and concentrating on the role of concepts, purity means that in a judgement of taste no determinate concept may be found at the predicate place. If in specifiably different ways a judgement of taste does relate to a concept determining the object, then the judgement is dependent. The aesthetic evaluative predicate itself does not determine its object, but expresses instead the pleasure with which the free play of the cognitive faculties manifests itself. We can identify this pleasure as our awareness of this free play, and we will express it with the predicate of 'beauty'. As a consequence every judgement of beauty must be 'pure' in the Kantian sense.¹⁸ That is, although our discussions will concern natural properties of the object, it is our specific, pleasant awareness of our mental activities which we actually express in the judgement of taste. Now if we want to prevent this subjectivism to lapse into sheer idiosyncratic sentimentality, we must find a way to relate this pleasant awareness to more determinate considerations regarding the object, i.e., to the concepts with which we determine it.

Ted Cohen (1990) has argued that in the case of complex works of art (in cinema, for example) every judgement of taste is dependent.¹⁹ He thinks that the notion of dependent beauty can best be understood as explaining the role played by the concept at the subject position within the relevant proposition stating the judgement of taste, 'X is beautiful'.²⁰ With respect to complex works of art, such as those of

¹⁸ Such is the import of Kant's remarks on the botanist: he may judge the beauty of a flower in any pure way only by abstracting from his knowledge of biological functionality. (§ 16).

¹⁹ Cohen, T., 1990: An Emendation in Kant's Theory of Taste. In: *Nous* 24, p. 137-45.

²⁰ CJ, § 6. Cf. also Cohen, 1990, p. 142. Savile (1993) is of a different opinion here. He thinks that the purity of the judgement of taste relates to its justification (determining ground, is what Kant says) not to its content, i.e. not to the concepts and terms used to form the proposition with. According to him the judgement of taste is not a proposition in the first place. So a judgement of taste states certain determinate things about the object, the truth of which can be ascertained along normal lines, even though the grounds we have for including such determinations must be pure, i.e. they may not be derived from the concepts determining the measure of perfection of the object, nor from sensuous pleasures. This certainly appears to be an interesting way to look at Kant's point of view. However, it is not clear in the end what the distinction between the terms used and the reasons we have for using them amounts to. How can we alienate the truth of what we say about a beautiful object, our ascribing beauty to it, from the justification of our doing so? The evaluative predicate of the judgement of taste reflects its determining grounds. The

discussion has originated from Kant's unclear distinction, or even 'non-distinction', between the experience, and the act of judging, and the proposition stating its outcome. However, my interpretation agrees with the view that Kant provides an analysis of aesthetic discourse and tries to find its possibility conditions, i.e. it complies with a standard interpretation of his transcendental approach.

the cinema, it surely makes a difference if one appreciates a film's plot instead of its editing or lighting qualities.²¹ Now we may all agree that agreement about the concepts with which to describe the object will deepen any critical argument, but why is this the case? Descriptive agreement definitely will not suffice for an actual evaluation, because 'beauty' is not derivable from determinations of the object, nor is it itself a determinate concept, as there is no real rule involved in its application, as we have already seen.²² In order to make Cohen's remarks fruitful for our approach, we must establish two things: first, we must find out whether such determinate concepts fill in the subject concept in every judgement attributing aesthetic excellence. Secondly, we must explain the role these concepts play within the experience that founds the predicate concept.

Now it is well known that Kant took natural beauties to be pure, not dependent. However, here, as with complex works of art, it will surely make a difference to the aesthetic evaluation of a tree if we admire it because of its shades of colour rather than because of certain shapes of its bark or of its trunk, et cetera. Moreover, it appears that without a concept no representation whatsoever will be formed, as –counterfactually– our mind would be confronted with an unsynthesized heap of sense data: at least the categories of understanding will have to be involved. So our grasp of the natural world will be involved in the relevant aesthetic experience, and such a grasp evidently embraces specific determinations. In consequence, determinate concepts are involved in our judgements of natural beauties as they are in judgements of art. (I shall have more to say about this in considering Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas, in section iv.)

In general then, if we ascribe aesthetic excellence to some particular thing this will be related to the empirical concepts with which we describe the object's natural properties and relations. The excellence, however, can not be inferred from these properties or their concepts, nor may it be derived from the involved measure of perfection with regard to that concept or to the goals this concept involves. If it were, the judgement of taste would merely be a confused kind of judgement of the good. This threat of passing a confused judgement of the goodness seems to be absent with regard to natural objects, as there exist no relevant concepts of the goals of natural objects, no literal ones at least. Instead of such erratic judging we use the notion of aesthetic excellence to express our satisfaction with the way in which in the relevant case our concepts seem to fit the sensory material though not

²¹ According to Savile (1993) the notion of dependent beauty functions negatively only: a judgement of taste is precluded when too much weight is placed on the relevant concept and on the object's measure of perfection with regard to it. I think this evades the need for an account of the role of the cognitive considerations within the free play.

²² Cohen, 1990, p. 144. Cf. also Kulenkampff, J., 1990: *The Objectivity of Taste: Hume and Kant*. In: *Nous* 24, p. 93-110, p. 109: "... aesthetic predicates, as Kant showed, don't represent concepts of objects with clear cut criteria for their application."

to the measure of providing descriptions of this material. Someone, then, who wants to argue for some object's aesthetic excellence should ultimately base his remarks on his own satisfaction regarding a specific kind of experience of one's background knowledge as applied to determine the relevant object. Thus the concepts that make up the judgement's dependence somehow determine the subject matter of the experience which makes up its purity. Aesthetic excellence's relation with the involved concepts can and, I think should, be analyzed with the help of Kant's notion of a free play of the cognitive faculties. So let us consider this more in detail.

II Why no judgement of taste can be proven

4. The free play's ambiguous role

According to Kant our aesthetic acknowledgement of the common sense is a consequence of the subjective finality of the free play of the cognitive faculties, of which we become aware by our reflective feeling of pleasure.²³ Now within this free play the understanding, though servile to the imagination, can be seen as being busy with providing the concepts which imagination 'subsequently' judges and 'denies' the application. One might characterize this free play of the cognitive faculties as a dialogue, rather than a harmony, between understanding (which at the request of imagination furnishes determinate concepts) and the imagination (which denies these concepts their application). This notion of the 'free play of the cognitive faculties' performs an ambiguous role though. Kant sometimes takes the emotion resulting from the free play as decisive, and not the activities that this emotion is about, and understands this emotion as non-representative. This picture of aesthetic appreciation would, however, run counter to Kant's views on the reflective nature of aesthetic experience, and to his views on the idea of the dependence of aesthetic judgements that we have argued for. Now, if, instead, an activity (or attitude) would not merely be necessary, but would be sufficient as well, undertaking it would be the same as perceiving beauty. For several reasons this is a conclusion we are not willing to draw. Firstly, because we believe that doing our best does not warrant positive aesthetic evaluation: it cannot be enforced. Secondly, the idea that perceptive agency could secure a positive aesthetic evaluation presupposes that beauty, or its cognates, merely is a natural property with regard to which rules would have to exist which govern its correct discernment. Kant denies that such rules exist in the first place, but even if they would it will be evident to all that we do not have access to them. So if the free play of the cognitive faculties is to perform its special role, some of its aspects other than mere agency must be

²³ ... the pleasure or subjective finality ... (CJ, M 147 (KU, B 151, 221)).

what makes us decide that we are confronted with a beautiful object. This ambiguity must be resolved if

we are to develop an adequate theory of aesthetic evaluation. However, it seems to derive from Kant's distinction between transcendental idealism and empirical realism: the free play is empirically real but its functionality is transcendently ideal. Unfortunately, I cannot go further into these matters here, but propose instead a –temporary– way out through Kant's treatment of the involved pleasure.

Kant also states that the faculty of judgement in the aesthetic mode of estimating functions in order ...

"... merely to [perceive] the adequacy of the representation for engaging both faculties of knowledge in their freedom in an harmonious (subjectively-final) employment, i.e. to [feel] with pleasure the subjective bearings of the representation."²⁴

Apparently he thinks that it is "The feeling of pleasure or displeasure [which] denotes nothing in the object..." which makes the notion of the free play of the cognitive faculties function decisively.²⁵ The pleasure regarding the subjective bearings of the representation, regarding, i.e., the free play of the cognitive faculties, must then be taken as the awareness that settles our aesthetic judgement. Now, this pleasure is not an intentional activity, but a specific awareness of one, a specific way of being affected by sensation, imagination and understanding. Kant's definition of 'pleasure', in § 10, is of great interest here, since it is nominal and does not describe an allegedly substantial experience:²⁶

"The consciousness of the causality of a representation in respect of the state of the Subject as one tending to preserve a *continuance* of that state, may here be said to denote in a general way what is called pleasure."²⁷

'Pleasure' then should be taken as an adverbial determination of the involved awareness of the free play of the cognitive faculties. So it is not the perceptual and imaginative activity concerning the object but rather the pleasant awareness of such free activities that

²⁴ CJ, M150 (KU, B 155, 224). My italics.

²⁵ More than once Kant asserts this Humean view of feeling as being non-representative. Cf. CJ, M42, M63, M145.

²⁶ According to Kant sensation is mere receptivity, i.e. the senses form a faculty of obtaining representations by being affected. (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787 edition, B33.) Cf. Kant: *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Leipzig: Meiner, 1922, § 24, IV 57. Perception merely finds some succession within these inner affections schematized by inner sense with categories. (CPR, § 24.) Such self-affection is the a priori act by way of which the understanding comes to grips with a world consisting of spatio-temporally ordered objects and events. Inner sense as such is the mind's receptivity, the transcendental 'spot' where sensual data meet with transcendental and determinate concepts. (Zoeller, G., 1989: Making Sense Out of Inner Sense: The Kantian Doctrine as Illuminated by the Leningrad Reflexion. In: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29, p. 263-70, p. 270.)

²⁷ CJ, M61 (KU, B33, 135).

constitutes our judgement of taste.²⁸ For a judgement of taste the subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure is the very manner in which our

²⁸ “The consciousness of mere formal finality in the play of the cognitive faculties of the Subject attending a representation whereby an object is given, is the pleasure itself ...” CJ, § 12, M64 (KU, B36-37).

inner sense ‘correctly’ receives the aesthetic excellence of an object.²⁹ We recognize it by wanting to carry on with the involved free play.

Thus the question what exactly the free play of the cognitive faculties amounts to surfaces again. How can we understand better what is at stake in it than by returning for a moment towards its subject matter, beauty. Kant characterizes beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas,³⁰ and these he characterizes as follows:

“... that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e., concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get on level terms with or render completely intelligible.”³¹

The fact that Kant explicitly understands the beauty of nature as the expression of aesthetic ideas again sustains the idea that according to Kant all judgements of taste are dependent upon the concepts stored into the subject term of the judgement of taste. So natural beauties also induce much thought, without the possibility of any definite thought or concept being adequate to it. Apparently it will be relevant for the beauty of a specific object of nature under what description the object is perceived. And the involved concepts will ‘guide’ the proposals done by the understanding within the free play, et cetera.

However, at this point in my argument Kant’s notion of aesthetic ideas has a different relevance also in that it illustrates the appropriateness of my characterization at the beginning of this section of the free play of the cognitive faculties as a dialogue, rather than a harmony, between understanding and the imagination. Using Wiggins’ characterization of aesthetic values, the <property - response> pair of aesthetic excellence could then be defined as <aesthetic idea - free play of the cognitive faculties>.³² According to Kant aesthetic ideas derive their importance from the way in which they endow art with ‘soul’, and ‘animate’ our cognitive considerations.³³ One way to situate such notions as

²⁹ “If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to the Object by means of understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination (acting perhaps in conjunction with understanding) we refer the representation to the Subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure.” § 1, CJ, M41 (KU, B 3, 115).

³⁰ § 51:1. CJ, M183 (KU, B204, 257).

³¹ § 49:3. CJ, M175-76 (KU, B192-93, 249-50).

³² Now Wiggins clearly wants the property involved in the ‘pair’ to be a natural property. So my proposal may be dismissed on this count. However, the strength and plausibility of Kant’s account with regard to this correlative equation of aesthetic ideas with the free play of the cognitive faculties may as well suggest the limitations of Wiggins’ proposals. Unfortunately, I can not go further into this matter here, so in my paper I present Wiggins’ proposals in a way neutral to this issue.

³³ Painting, and sculpture, but also poetry and rhetoric “derive the soul that animates their work wholly from the aesthetic attributes of the objects ... [to] give the imagination an impetus to bring more thought into play in the matter, though in an undeveloped manner, than allows of being brought within the embrace of a concept, or, therefore, of being definitely formulated in language.” (§49:7; CJ M178 (KU, B196-97, 252).

‘soul’ and ‘animation’ within the argument so far, is by looking better into the involvement of common sense.

5. Why pleasure? (Everyday sound understanding)

Let us summarize some of the conclusions we have reached so far with regard to the question of how we legitimize our discourse on aesthetic excellence. Firstly, for the sake of its purity, the cognitive considerations within a judgement of taste need a subjective supplement: no testimony of either natural properties or aesthetic qualities suffices. Secondly, this subjective supplement comes down to the pleasant awareness of the common sense, which is involved in the free dialogue between our cognitive faculties. Kant describes this common sense in the following way:

“... the proportion of these cognitive faculties which is requisite for taste is requisite also for ordinary sound understanding, the presence of which we are entitled to presuppose in every one.”³⁴

Now, because we presuppose a common sense, i.e. a communicability, in our everyday communication, it may seem that we take it for granted, but the very fact that it ‘takes us by pleasure’ in aesthetic experience indicates that we do not.

Let us start at the beginning, though. In section 40 Kant distinguishes common sense from ordinary sound understanding considering the latter ‘vulgar’. The former, on the contrary, he takes as an a priori taking into account of the ‘collective reason of mankind’.³⁵ But what does this mean exactly? Surely everyday sound understanding has its proper relevance for such a collective reason; it will be mostly on this basis, if at all, that we realize universal communicability. There is, of course, one way not to use sound understanding in aesthetic argument: we cannot justify a judgement of taste by referring to ‘what the people think’. Nevertheless, we have seen above how all judgements of taste, pure though they may be, also depend on certain cognitive considerations. Moreover, within aesthetic experience our faculties are co-operating as they would in any cognitive activity.³⁶ And although it is not understanding but imagination which takes the lead here,³⁷ understanding is involved. Moreover, Kant surely does not mean with what we have constructed as his remarks on the permissibility of conceptual determination at the subject place in our aesthetic judgements, that this only regards scientific knowledge, at the expense of everyday, vulgar considerations. So we may safely conclude that everyday sound

³⁴ CJ, M150, (KU, B155, 224).

³⁵ “... the idea of a public sense, i.e. a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of every one else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind ...” CJ, M151 (KU, B157, 225).

³⁶ Cf. CJ, § 3, M45 (KU, B8-9, 118).

³⁷ CJ, M88 (KU, B71, 162). Cf. also § 36, M145 (KU, B148, 219), and M179 (KU, B198, 253).

understanding will have something to contribute to the determination of the valued object and will thus form part of what the aesthetic judgement is all about. These considerations sustain the conclusion that what is expressed in an aesthetic judgement is the pleasure regarding the communicability of our everyday under-

standing of the object, and not merely of the more specialist understanding provided by critics and experts.

Now Kant also describes the aesthetic feeling of pleasure or displeasure, i.e. our awareness of the common sense, as a feeling of life:

*"Here the representation is referred wholly to the Subject, and what is more to its feeling of life—under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure ..."*³⁸

If this specification is to help explain the judgement of taste, then this notion of the feeling of life should not refer to some vague and speculative principle of personal identity. Instead it should involve certain concrete, though fundamental, feelings that may serve as an evaluative criterion of our experiences and emotions, in much the following way: whenever the feeling of life (feeling of "Lust und Unlust") is enhanced, be it positively or negatively, there are possibilities at stake: alternatives to some actual situation. The positive enhancement of the feeling of life would then imply that there is something to be celebrated (and to be continued). If we are allowed the idea that the enhancement relates to possibilities, this celebration will regard the acknowledgement that the situation as experienced is not nearly as necessary as it might have seemed, but is nevertheless of such a nature that one would want it to continue. In other words, our aesthetic judgements express not only our awareness of the communicability of our cognitive considerations, but also the fact that there is no metaphysical necessity to it. We must understand aesthetic pleasure, then, as a reflective assessment by our feeling of life, of the contingency of the common sense that is involved in our (everyday) determinations of the object.

6. An ideal aesthetic experience

We think something is wrong with the elitist person judging aesthetic matters from a purely social point of view, citing other people's appraisals without 'looking for himself.' Yet Nelson Goodman may be right in presupposing that in an aesthetic argument we are more interested in information about the object than in some rather uninformative idiosyncratic evaluation. To state an everyday corollary to this: we do let ourselves be convinced by arguments and descriptions of the object; we do communicate about aesthetic values as if they were natural properties; and we hardly ever have aesthetic experiences corresponding to the Kantian analysis, let alone do we actually ever refer to them. Therefore, it is no coincidence that a theoretical definition of empirical aesthetic experiences is not available. Monroe Beardsley, for example, has found only a set of necessary conditions, and has argued that we are unable to state the conditions that are also sufficient for such a definition. So we may in the end be tempted to dismiss the claims involved and the notion

³⁸ CJ, M42 (KU, B3, 115). [My italics].

of aesthetic experience altogether, as Goodman does.³⁹ However, one may

³⁹ Goodman's denial of aesthetic experience also does not follow from his remarks on what he calls the symptoms of art (avoiding the implication of the definability of 'art'): the complex syntactic and semantic properties of their symbol systems. Instead, this specific complexity may be more substantial than Goodman seems to be willing to allow for. It may be the most natural correlate to our notion of the experience of aesthetic excellence: an unwitting, contemporary version of Kant's aesthetic ideas. The involved complex properties occasion the beholder to take an artwork as not merely reflecting lucidly some denotatum lying beyond it. We take account not so much of the possible referent of the work but of its referring aspect as such. The excellence of a work of art lies in what we judge to be its powers (to propose to us its referent) rather than in its referent; what Kant has named its soul, or animating impact.

as well conclude from this situation that in arguing about matters of taste, although we refer to actual experiences, we do not mean these to be decisive. Implicitly in such reference we allude to some ideal experience. This, then, is what removes the ambiguity of the role played by the free play.

So far I have attributed to Kant the view that the relevant aesthetic pleasure concerns our common sense and the contingency of its presupposition. The evaluation's lack of a provable, physical necessity is what makes the awareness pleasant in the first place. As argued above, aesthetic experience concerns the surprise involved in our awareness of the actual, and contingent, co-operation of our cognitive faculties with regard to some part of the world. Perhaps then we may conceive of aesthetic excellence as providing an experience of the central metaphysical problem of representation, of how our symbols hook onto the world. To provide an experiential awareness of this problem is a big task that we assign to aesthetic experience in aesthetic discourse; it is too big, it seems, for any concrete empirical experience to meet. (It may be too vague as well for any experience not to meet it.) This is why we think of it as overcoming us, if we are lucky enough; and why we think that, notwithstanding the trouble we go through in our perceptual contemplation, we cannot simply wring it from such contemplative activity. At some point, to miss a singular work's aesthetic excellence may be due to a lack of concentration by the beholder; however, to concentrate as strenuously as one possibly can does not guarantee its recognition. Nevertheless we do readily refer to and firmly believe in this notion of an aesthetic appreciative experience and think this notion secures our attribution of a crucial aesthetic value as aesthetic excellence, but also artistic creativity, style, and authenticity (which also illustrate the necessity of an experiential supplement). We talk along lines which ultimately point to some specific experience, and if we want to understand such referring, a better strategy than denying our actual experiences' empirical identity and relevance would lie in understanding the functionality of such reference as involving an ideal notion of this experience.

7. A regulative principle of aesthetic discourse

In keeping with the distinction Kant proposes in the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Judgement*, in the context of the aesthetic problem we should now ask whether this ideal notion of a pleasant, aesthetic, awareness of the contingency of a presupposed common sense should be regarded as constitutive or regula-

tive for our notion of aesthetic excellence.⁴⁰ In his analysis of the analogies of experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant accounts for the difference between ‘constitutive’ and ‘regulative’ with the help of a distinction between mathematical and philosophical analogies: a mathematical analogy enables us to know a fourth member if one knows three already, whereas in a philosophical analogy only some rule of recognition is implied, and an ability to recognize the next instance if it should occur, but not the possibility to infer this next instance.⁴¹ In this sense, philosophical analogies are not constitutive, but regulative.

Now we can think of a discursive domain as being constituted by a unique a priori principle only if it is independent from other domains. The alleged autonomy of our discourse on aesthetic excellence, however, is relative, because it does not imply such independence: the aesthetic domain is connected with our knowledge claims as it is with our actions, however problematically so. The notion of the pleasant awareness of common sense which forms the principle of aesthetic discourse therefore cannot be constitutive. This we could also have derived from the fact that we cannot prove a thing’s beauty on the ground of such an awareness. So the principle of aesthetic discourse must indeed be regulative: it rests upon the idea of an identifiable aesthetic experience. In short, for aesthetic discourse aesthetic experience itself functions as the regulative principle.

Again, the empirically indistinct character of aesthetic experiences with regard to their functionality can, in combination with the regulative functionality of its notion, be accounted for by taking it as functioning within aesthetic discourse as an ‘asymptotic’ ideality, rather than as an identifiable and substantial empirical event. There are two important aspects to this ideality. On the one hand the aesthetic experience may be an actuality for some of us at some specific time, but even then no determinate claims as to this actuality will provide a knock-down argument for a specific evaluation, nor will they deepen the relevant issue. We will not be convinced of a thing’s beauty by a statement such as: “Believe me, I had this aesthetic experience when contemplating this object, so it must be beautiful.” Moreover, no empirical identification of the aesthetic experience is ever going to be operable, as the symptoms of aesthetic experience reveal an obvious vagueness.⁴² As we saw above this is not accidental, but rather proves its merely regula-

⁴⁰ CJ, M4 (KU, BV-VI, 74).

⁴¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, German edition, B 222, (Stuttgart, Reclam, 1966, p. 258).

⁴² Monroe Beardsley readily conceded this. Cf. Fisher, J., 1983: Beardsley on Aesthetic Experience. In: Fisher, J. (ed.), 1983: *Essays on Aesthetics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 89. The remark at least regards attempts of providing a description of aesthetic experiences independent of their objects. If instead one would try to relate the experience in non-contingent manner to objective qualities much of this vagueness might recede. However, since objective properties cannot be taken as decisive, such a strategy does not seem available here.

tive nature. As such the aesthetic experience is an ideality, and may just as well, without loss of regulative functionality, be a figment of the imagination. On the other hand this aesthetic experience is an idealization in that we ascribe comprehensiveness, and coherence

to it, and take it to include many important realizations, such as our feeling of being at home in the world, in life, and amongst other people.

In sum, the strategy yielded by this article to account for aesthetic experience's decisive role in discourse on aesthetic excellence is twofold: first, we must understand such discourse as indistinct, in that for the involved cognitive considerations to be significant they ought to be supplemented by an experiential reflection of these. As it is, neither of these will decide a particular argument. However, secondly, the relevance of this experiential supplement derives from some ideal conception of it, not from any of its actual instances. Thus the notion of aesthetic experience regulates our discourse on aesthetic excellence. So if one wants to get rid of the notion altogether one needs other arguments than the ones stating its empirical non-identifiability.⁴³

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For their critical remarks which have protected me against several obscurities, my thanks are due to Jan Bransen, Marc Slors, Menno Lievers, Ton van den Beld, Nicholas MacAdoo, Anthony Savile, and to professors K.J. Schuhmann, W.L. van Reijen, J. Neubauer, R. Makkreel, Pat Matthews, and also to an anonymous referee for this journal. The investigations were supported by the Foundation for Philosophical Research (SWON), which is subsidized by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

***Kant's Regulative Principle of Aesthetic
Excellence:
The Ideal Aesthetic Experience***

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Abstract

Certain aesthetic evaluative concepts relate to specific experiences in a non-trivial way. An analysis of our attributions of aesthetic excellence provides us with interesting insights in the idea that our judgements of taste are founded upon an aesthetic experience. Only two rather unfelicitous strategies appear to have been available to analytic philosophers regarding the notion of aesthetic experience. Either it is being dismissed because of its alleged non-specificity in comparison with more normal cognitive experiences, or an identification of its actual instances is being attempted. The first strategy sacrifices a core item of our aesthetic discourse, whereas the second inevitably fails because no satisfactory identification of empirical aesthetic experiences will even be possible, as none of its conditions will be necessary and sufficient at the same time. Also, no identification of empirical, contingent aesthetic experiences will help advance a theoretical account of aesthetic evaluation. What is wrong with these two strategies is that they do not distinguish between our actual experiences and the use to which we put them in grounding our judgements in them. I propose an interpretation of Kant's aesthetic theory that sustains a third strategy that does not suffer from these disadvantages. First, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* will be interpreted as providing a legitimation of aesthetic discourse with the specific awareness of the communicability of our determinations of the object, which shows forth from our feeling of subjective finality; with an awareness, i.e., and not merely with the communicability that is its subject matter. Secondly, I argue that Kant can only account for the decisive role of such experiences within aesthetic discourse if he takes them not as actual empirical ones but as an ideal, which functions regulatively for the aesthetic application of the faculty of judgement.