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AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

Robert Clewis on Kant and Aesthetic Normativity

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Abstract

In the *Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*, Robert Clewis characterises Kant's early views of aesthetic normativity in terms of a synthesis of a rationalist appeal to laws of sensibility and an empiricist appeal to rules of taste that are arrived at through consensus about great works of art. On the consensus approach, sharing the experience of beauty with others is itself a source of pleasure and normativity. For Clewis, the mature Kant no longer ties aesthetic normativity to sociality, but instead grounds it in the a priori principle of judgement. In these comments, I challenge Clewis' narrative about Kant's development and argue that the mature Kant continues to connect aesthetic normativity to the sociality of taste.

Keywords: aesthetic judgement; aesthetic normativity; common sense; beauty; aesthetic communitarianism

At the beginning of Chapter One of *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge 2023, henceforth cited only by page number), Robert Clewis quotes from a review of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*. The reviewer, Edward Robinson, says of this work that it is 'the most insolent monstrosity ever perpetuated in the history of music' and compares the tune to 'the wail of an obstreperous back-alley cat' (Clewis p. 23 quoted from Lanford 2011: 243). Is this just a striking statement of the reviewer's preferences or are there standards of judgement that underlie this bold claim? As Clewis notes, the question of aesthetic normativity pervades not only Kant's thinking about aesthetic judgement but also contemporary art criticism and aesthetics. Indeed, although Clewis' book is a scholarly work that carefully and engagingly traces the development of Kant's views in aesthetics, it is not just intended for Kant scholars and historians of philosophy. By choosing to focus on those topics that are of continued interest in aesthetics, including aesthetic normativity, aesthetic formalism, genius, the sublime, ugliness, and humour, Clewis hopes to make Kant a resource for contemporary aestheticians working in these areas. I suspect that this book will primarily be of interest to those who are already Kantians and to whom the details of Kant's philosophical development matter for their historical research, but I share Clewis' overall view that there is much in Kant that is of interest to contemporary aesthetics. At the same

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time, I disagree slightly with Clewis about which parts of Kant's theory will be of most interest to contemporary audiences, a point to which I will return in what follows.

One of Clewis' main aims in the book is 'to gain possible insights into the meaning and wider context of' Kant's aesthetic claims in the first half of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* by examining Kant's earlier aesthetic views, in particular how these views were shaped by his predecessors and contemporaries' (p. 5). Clewis often succeeds in this aim. In Chapter 2, for example, Clewis turns to Kant's aesthetic formalism in the third *Critique* and notes that there is some tension in Kant's account. The text supports a strong, moderate, and weak reading of formalism. Although Kant insists that aesthetic judgements are responses to an object's 'form', it is not clear what Kant means by this. Does he mean the object's spatiotemporal form (as on the strong reading), whatever is in the object that allows for the manifold of sensation to be united by the imagination (as on the moderate reading), or merely any representation that can elicit the free harmony of the faculties (as on the weak reading) (pp. 56–9)? Rather than advocate for one of these readings, Clewis traces each of them back to a different phase of Kant's development. Thus, we can fruitfully see the tension in the text as reflecting Kant's own changing views on formalism. There are many such insights to be found in Clewis' book.

In these comments, I want to focus on one area where I think that Clewis' narrative of Kant's development risks obscuring rather than illuminating the mature theory. The narrative I am interested in concerns Kant's changing views of the source(s) of aesthetic normativity. Clewis takes the early Kant to ground aesthetic normativity in laws of sensibility along with consensus over time about great works of art, where the sociality of aesthetic pleasure contributes to its normativity. The mature Kant, by contrast, grounds aesthetic normativity in an a priori principle of judgement. To be clear, I think this is broadly right. What it overlooks, however, is the way that sociality continues to function as a source of aesthetic normativity in the mature Kant. Rather than focus on the discontinuity between the mature Kant and his earlier view, as Clewis does, we should see far more continuity between the two in this case. As I see it, Kant does not give up the view that aesthetic normativity is grounded in the sociality of aesthetic pleasure. Instead, he replaces an appeal to empirical sociality with an appeal to an a priori form of sociality that is grounded in shared human capacities. This point is not only of interest to Kant interpreters but also to contemporary aestheticians who are exploring communitarian theories of aesthetic value.

Let us look more closely at the story Clewis tells of Kant's development. Clewis distinguishes between two strands of thinking about normativity in Kant's early aesthetics. Following the German rationalists, Kant sought to ground aesthetic normativity in laws of sensibility, in particular, the principle of sensible comprehension, according to which beauty is tied to ease in comprehension (pp. 32–40). It is an empirical fact that ease in sensible comprehension, such as that which is facilitated by symmetry, regularity, and harmony in the spatiotemporal form of objects, comes with pleasure, but this fact is rooted in universal laws of human sensibility. Thus, our judgements about the beauty of particular objects are empirical, yet they have a foundation in universal laws of sensibility. Slightly later and following the British empiricists, Kant adopted a consensus-based approach, according to which empirical rules of beauty are gleaned from great works of art about which there is

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consensus over time (pp. 40–3). As Clewis notes, there is some conceptual overlap between the two views, as the consensus-based approach is based on responses to works of art that are mediated by the laws of sensibility (p. 40).

As Clewis observes, an important aspect of the consensus-based account is that sociality is itself a source of pleasure and a ground of normativity (p. 43). In notes from the late 1760s and early 1770s, Kant repeatedly highlights that the pleasures of taste are social pleasures. Kant writes, for example, 'Taste is really the faculty for choosing that which sensibly pleases in unison with others' (R 647, 1769–70; 15: 284; cited by Clewis p. 43). Indeed, as Paul Guyer notes, during this time, Kant connects the pleasure in beauty with 'the satisfaction of a desire for communication present only in a social situation' (1982: 44). The normativity of aesthetic judgements is thus importantly linked to the *communicability* of the pleasure in beauty. That is, part of what we are taking pleasure in is the fact that our pleasure in the object is shared with others. This, in turn, is linked to the normativity of our judgements. Our judgements of taste should be grounded on rules that can support their communicability. Furthermore, I take it that the communicability of our pleasure gives us a reason to make judgements of taste.

In the mid-1770s, Kant continued to emphasise the connection between beauty and sociality, but in Clewis' narrative, this changed when Kant discovered the a priori principle of taste (the principle of purposiveness) (p. 44). In Kant's mature aesthetics, it is the pleasure in the free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding – a pleasure which is governed by the a priori principle of purposiveness – that is the source of aesthetic normativity. For the mature Kant, there are no rules of taste that can compel one's pure aesthetic judgements. Nevertheless, there is an a priori principle that grounds the expectation of and demand for agreement in matters of beauty.

This story is not exactly wrong. There is certainly an important shift in Kant's thinking about aesthetic normativity when he discovers the a priori principle of judgement. At the same time, however, Clewis' narrative of Kant's development obscures the fact that the sociality of aesthetic pleasure continues to be a core aspect of Kant's mature theory of aesthetic normativity. To begin, if we look at the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View,* composed after the third *Critique*, we see that Kant continues to make remarks about the sociality of taste that are in line with his earlier view. He defines taste, for example, as 'a faculty for making social judgments' (*Anth*, 7: 241) and criticises the aesthetic egoist who 'isolates himself with his own judgment' and 'seeks the touchstone of artistic beauty only in himself' (7: 129–30). He claims that taste involves 'the effort [one] makes in his social situation to please others' (7: 244). The person of taste, as Kant puts it in the third *Critique*, 'is not content with an object if he cannot feel his satisfaction in it in community with others' (CPJ §41, 5: 297).[1]

Here, I think Clewis would likely acknowledge that the sociality of taste continues to be important for Kant, but that it is no longer a ground of the normativity of aesthetic judgement. Indeed, if we look at §41 of the third *Critique*, Kant seems to suggest as much. In this section, Kant notes that we often take an interest in the beautiful because of the way it serves our empirical need for social connection with others, yet he also emphasises that this interest is 'indirect' and merely 'empirical' (5: 297). But I think that we need to distinguish between the empirical sociality that is

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indirectly combined with the beautiful from what we might call the 'a priori sociality' that belongs essentially to it.

To explain what I mean, let us look first at how Kant characterises pleasure in a judgement of beauty. In §9, where he considers the question of whether pleasure in the object precedes the judgement of taste or follows from it, Kant writes that 'it is the universal capacity for the communication of the state of mind in the given representation which, as the subjective condition of the judgment of taste, must serve as its ground and have the pleasure in the object as its consequence' (CPJ, 5: 217). In a footnote, Clewis briefly acknowledges that it is the *universal communicability* of our state of mind in the experience of beauty that is the ground of our pleasure in the object (and hence presumably also of the normativity of the judgement) (p. 43, fn. 39), but he more often refers only to the pleasure in the free harmony of the faculties (e.g. pp. 61, 122). There is, of course, a debate about which pleasure grounds a judgement of beauty: pleasure in the free play of the faculties (Guyer 1997: 139–40) or pleasure in the universal communicability of the pleasurable free play (Longuenesse 2006). Clewis might side with Guyer in this debate, but I think that Longuenesse is right to emphasise that the universal communicability of our state of mind is itself the source of 'the peculiar pleasure that leads us to describe the object as beautiful' (2006: 206).

This is reflected in the phenomenology of the experience of beauty. The experience of beauty, for Kant, is one that reaches out, as it were, to other judging subjects, even when the subject is alone. Part of the experience is its universal communicability, or shareability, if not its actual communication. As Longuenesse has so aptly put it, in the experience of beauty, there is 'a feeling of communion with "the universal sphere of those who judge" that transcends all determinable concepts' (2006: 206). Although this communion is one we feel even when alone, we are also eager for others to share our judgements; this is what is behind our 'demands' for agreement. As I have argued elsewhere, these demands are better understood as invitations to others to engage their faculties towards the goal of shared appreciation (Williams 2024). We want to share the experience of beauty with others. Recognizing this point is crucial for overcoming an 'individualist' reading of the third *Critique*, which focuses solely on the individual as the locus of aesthetic experience and the source of aesthetic value. Kant is better read as a communitarian, that is, someone who emphasizes that aesthetic life and aesthetic value are deeply social.[2] For Kant, an a priori community of feeling, of shared humanity, is built-in, as it were, to the judgement of taste. Our pleasure in belonging to *this* community is distinct from the empirical pleasure we might take in bonding with the actual others who in fact share our judgements, although Kant also recognizes the importance of the latter, even if it does not contribute to the normativity of our judgements in the way that the former does.

Thus far, I have been talking about the role of pleasure in universal *communicability* in grounding a judgement of taste. There is, however, a way in which exchanging our judgements in community with others – and thus actual communication – contributes to the normativity of taste for Kant. To appreciate this point, we need to briefly look at Kant's account of aesthetic common sense and its relation to the a priori principle of purposiveness, on the one hand, and to the maxims of common sense, on the other. Judgements of taste are reflective judgements that are guided by the a priori principle of purposiveness. In a judgement of beauty, we judge that the form of an object is

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purposive for human faculties; it is as if the object were designed for our faculties. But the *way* that we make this judgement is through a feeling of pleasure, the faculty for which Kant refers to as 'common sense' because what is in question is a sense or feeling of the relation of our faculties that we also presuppose is shared with other judging subjects. Thus, the specific principle that we subsume a given object under in a judgement of taste is the principle of (aesthetic) common sense, 'which determines what pleases or displeases only through feeling and not through concepts' (CPJ §20, 5: 238). Kant writes, 'In all judgments by which we declare something to be beautiful, we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore make our ground not as a private feeling, but as a common one' (§22, 5: 239). Aesthetic common sense, for Kant, is what allows us to make judgements of the subjective purposiveness of objects.

Although the principle of common sense is a subjective principle, Kant writes that it 'could demand universal assent just like an objective one – if only one were certain of having correctly subsumed under it' (CPJ §22, 5: 239). Part of aesthetic reflection, then, involves reflecting on the grounds of our judgement to determine whether they are truly common ones or whether we have mistakenly grounded our judgement on 'subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective' (§40, 5: 293).[3] For this reason, Kant claims that aesthetic common sense is a form of common sense more generally, which he understands as a 'a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else's way of representing in thought' (§40, 5: 293). Furthermore, Kant thinks that the maxims of logical common sense – '1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself' – help to 'elucidate the fundamental principles of taste' (§40, 5: 295). Although these are epistemic maxims that serve as normative principles for 'the purposive use' of our cognitive capacities, I take Kant to be suggesting that aesthetic analogues of these maxims also guide aesthetic reflection, at least aesthetic reflection that is aimed towards the goal of the shared appreciation of beauty. When aesthetic reflection is guided by these maxims, we can have more confidence that we have correctly subsumed aesthetic judgements under the principle of aesthetic common sense and thereby correctly determined the subjective purposiveness of objects.

While Kant's first maxim 'To think for oneself' reflects the importance of aesthetic autonomy – that is, making judgements for oneself based on one's own feelings of pleasure or displeasure – the second maxim 'To think in the position of everyone else' encourages us to adopt communal practices of aesthetic reflection, in which we engage with the judgements of others. This maxim provides an important corrective to the first maxim, which, if taken to the extreme, would lead to aesthetic egoism. Admittedly, in the third *Critique*, Kant writes that reflecting from a universal point of view 'happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others' (§40, 5: 294). Yet, he is clear elsewhere that our ability to do this depends on engaging with the actual judgements of others. Indeed, this is part of Kant's defence of the freedom of speech in his essay 'What is it to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' (8: 144). Thus, while the normativity of judgements of taste is grounded on the a priori principle of purposiveness, our ability to apply this principle in practice depends on further regulative principles (maxims) that require us to 'judge[] in community with others'.[4] In this way, sociality, in the form of an aesthetic

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community that is guided by the maxims of common sense, continues to serve as a normative ground for judgements of taste.

Appreciating this point helps to answer a normative question that is left open by Kant's Deduction of judgements of taste. Even if we can be assured that other judging subjects would find an object beautiful *if* they were to attend to it, what reason do they have to actually attend to the objects we find beautiful? The social nature of aesthetic reflection helps us to answer this question. When we make judgements of taste, we take ourselves to belong to a community of judging subjects. This is what it means to speak with a universal voice. But as members of such a community, this means we must be responsive to the aesthetic judgements that others make. Recall Kant's criticism of the aesthetic egoist in the *Anthropology*, which I cited above. We should not isolate ourselves, as the aesthetic egoist does, but seek out shared aesthetic experiences and shared appreciation. Let me be clear. This is *not* the requirement to agree with the judgements of others. That would violate what Kant calls the autonomy of taste. Kant is clear that when we make judgements of taste, we must judge for ourselves (CPJ §32). But it is a requirement to cultivate taste in community with others, through aesthetic education, and to take seriously the judgements of others in aesthetic dialogue. In this way, we gain confidence that our judgements are in fact based on universally communicable feelings of pleasure.

Clewis does not discuss common sense or the role it plays in Kant's account of aesthetic normativity, briefly explaining in the Introduction that he does not include this topic because of his 'aim of reaching contemporary audiences' (p. 6, fn. 13). It should be clear by now that I think that Kant's account of aesthetic common sense is, or at least should be, of great interest to contemporary audiences because it is at the heart of his communitarian theory of aesthetic normativity and value. Considering the increasing interest in aesthetic communitarianism among aestheticians, this means that readers should pay special attention to this part of Kant's aesthetics. It is thus a topic that I would have liked to see included in the book, not only for its contemporary interest but also because I think that Clewis' careful historical approach would likely shed further light on this important part of Kant's theory.

Notes

1 Quotations from Kant are drawn from the Cambridge Edition of Kant's works, with pagination in standard form by reference to volume and page of Kant (1900 -).

2 For recent discussion of aesthetic communitarianism, see Riggle (2022).

3 See Matherne (2019) for further discussion of this point.

4 I have borrowed this phrase from Melissa Merritt (2011: 236), who discusses the maxims of common sense in the context of enlightened moral pedagogy.

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