

Reflective Taste — In-Between Logical-Rational Objectivity and Emotional Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I argue that Kant's description of reflective taste shows a very valuable possibility to overcome the dichotomy between logical-rational objectivity and emotional subjectivity. Kant offers a middle ground, which is crucially based on an ambiguous relation to concepts. I argue that we can understand this by positing empty or undetermined concepts. I explore three different interpretations of such undetermined concepts: either as the concept of the ground of transition from the realm of understanding to that of reason, or as the free subsumption of the faculty of imagination to the faculty of understanding, or, lastly, as referring to a concept of reason as opposed to a concept of understanding. Finally I suggest a way to reconcile these three different interpretations and show how we can understand them as being intrinsically inter-related through the symbolic connection of beauty with morality, which enables the transition between the two realms of philosophy, i.e. practical and theoretical philosophy.

1. Introduction

In this paper I want to argue that one of the most intriguing and important aspects of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement* is his description of reflective taste as being characterised by a subjective generality. There-with Kant draws our attention to the fact that there are many different ways of contemplation: we do not have to be stuck in the all too common dichotomy of rational (logical) deliberation versus mere emotionality (i.e. decisions based on fully subjective feelings). With reflective taste Kant introduces a middle ground. This is not only relevant for aesthetics, but

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potentially also for other fields, especially for epistemology and (following Arendt's work on judgement) political philosophy.¹

Yet, this idea of a middle ground between objectivity and subjectivity, on which reflective judgement is located, is a complex one that raises many problems as well. In this paper I will elaborate on this middle ground. In what way can a judgement be in between subjectivity and objectivity? I will argue that the key to understand this issue is to posit empty or undetermined concepts. In this way reflective taste can be simultaneously subjective (not based on, nor leading to, concepts) and general, i.e. almost-objective (referring to concepts in some way).

2. Between Subjectivity and Objectivity

But let us first see how Kant describes the exact relation of reflective taste to subjectivity and objectivity. Judgements of taste possess, according to Kant, a *subjective generality* (*subjektive Allgemeinheit*): they are universally valid (i.e. general), but without a concept (i.e. subjective). Kant needs to ascertain this aspect in order to demarcate the faculty of judgement from the understanding, i.e. the faculty of concepts. Judgements are based (rather than on concepts) on the *feeling* of pleasure and displeasure, i.e. they are based merely on the *effect* an object has on *us*. Therefore they are subjective.

However, Kant distinguishes between reflective and sensual taste: judgements of reflective taste (concerning beauty) are based on the effects an object has on our cognitive faculties and are not based on interests. Judgements of sensual taste (concerning the comfortable), on the other hand, are based on the immediate effect an object has on our senses and are connected with interests. Thus the latter are fully subjective without any claim to generality, whereas the former do have such a claim to generality.

¹ With this emphasis on the concept of subjective generality, I do not want to deny the importance of other aspects of Kant's characterization of reflective judgement (such as purposiveness without purpose, etc.). In this paper I want to explore in depth the issue of subjective generality because I believe that it is of great significance not only to aesthetics, but also to other philosophical fields, especially epistemology and (following the work of Hannah Arendt) political philosophy (cf. Arendt, 1992).

This generality is based on the fact that the judgement is based on the effect on the mere *formality* of our cognitive faculties and on the fact that it is based on no interests. Possible private reasons and predispositions are not decisive for the judgement. Therefore, judgements about something comfortable are merely subjective, judgements about the good as well as scientific or logical judgements are fully objective, whereas judgements about beauty or the sublime possess a subjective generality. They do not postulate everyone else's agreement, they merely request (*ansinnen*) it.

It is in this sense that Kant refutes the general saying that "there is no arguing about taste". Kant says there is arguing *only* about taste (i.e. reflective taste). The *comfortable* (i.e. judgements of sensual taste) is purely subjective and indeed there is no arguing about that. We do not expect anyone to agree with us. Therefore, even if there are different opinions, there is no argument; not least because we are incapable of communicating something so entirely subjective.

The *good* on the other hand (just as scientific knowledge or logical statements) is fully objective: there is no arguing (*streiten*) about that either, there is only disputing (*disputieren*), i.e. deciding according to proofs (*durch Beweise entscheiden*²): If two people have different convictions this can be settled by bringing forward proofs, and the moment person A has seen the proofs for the truth of person B's statements, there is no arguing anymore because A will be compelled by the proofs and "forced", as it were, to agree.

Only about reflective taste (e.g. in the case of *beauty*) there is arguing because these types of judgement are a matter of opinion and not truth. Thus the argument cannot be resolved by proofs. Yet, aesthetic judgements claim generality, i.e. they request everyone else's agreement. Because we do not leave the claim undecided, there is arguing). And it is only because these judgements possess a (albeit limited) generality that they are communicable.

Reflective taste is, thus, this middle ground between subjectivity and objectivity. It is subjective, yet claiming generality; it is based on a *feeling* of pleasure and dislike, yet more than a mere subjective feeling of comfort

² Cf. §56, p. 338.

(in this regard it differs from sensual taste); it is not based on nor leading to any concept (in this regard it differs from determinative judgements leading to knowledge claims³). Thus reflective taste is not based on nor leading to any concept, yet it does refer to concepts in some way, i.e. it is more than simply without any concept at all.

We see that the ambiguity regarding the relation to concepts is a necessary and constitutive element of judgements of reflective taste. Kant needs to ascertain that these judgements are not based on a concept. Otherwise the responsible faculty would not be the power of judgement, but understanding or reason. The judgement would then be intellectual and not aesthetic, it would be objective and not subjective (or subjectively general). Yet, judgements of reflective taste cannot be without concepts altogether because then they would conflate with judgements of sensual taste. Some conceptuality is needed in order to ensure communicability and the claim to generality.

Thus, the conception of a reflective activity of our faculties related to, but not based on, a concept (or concepts) opens up a new approach to our cognitive faculties. There is more than the simply dichotomy of rational-logical thought or pure irrational subjectivity.

The key aspect of this middle ground in between subjectivity and objectivity is that a judgement of reflective taste is more than without any concept and yet less than with a concept. However, this relation of judgements to concepts is very ambiguous and Kant's statements concerning this issue are anything but clear. In the *Introduction*, for example, Kant describes the "mere apprehension of the form of an object of intuition *without a relation of this to a concept*" as a key element of aesthetic judgement, yet in the very next sentence he writes, "that apprehension ... can never take place without ... *relating intuitions to concepts*".⁴

I suggest that we can understand these ambiguous claims by positing empty or undetermined concepts: the judgement of taste is not based on, nor referring to any *specific* concept, i.e. it is not determined by a concept.

³ Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason* (A51=B75): "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." Here concepts are crucial. Not so in reflective taste.

⁴ Introduction VII, p. 189-190, my emphasis: "bloße Auffassung der Form eines Gegenstandes der Anschauung, *ohne Beziehung derselben auf einen Begriff*"; but: "jene Auffassung ... kann niemals geschehen, ohne ... Anschauungen *auf Begriffe zu beziehen*".

However, it creates the *structure* for a concept, but leaves the *concept undetermined*. The concept is, we could say, *free*: it is merely a *placeholder* for a concept.⁵

Reflective taste is, then, based on undetermined concepts. Kant's text offers ground for three different interpretations of the exact meaning of this idea of an undetermined concept as constitutive characteristic of the aesthetic judgement: It can be the concept of the ground of transition from the realm of understanding to that of reason (*Introduction II*). Alternatively it can refer to the subsumption of the faculty of imagination to the faculty of understanding (§35). Or, lastly, it can mean a concept of reason as opposed to a concept of the understanding (§57, §59).

3. The Undetermined Concept as Ground of Transition

Firstly, it can be the concept of the ground of transition from the realm of understanding (theoretical philosophy) to that of reason (practical philosophy). Before understanding the meaning and nature of this concept, we first need to grasp what is at stake with this transition.

Kant writes that the two domains of philosophy (theoretical and practical) are divided by an "incalculable gulf" so that "no transition is possible".⁶ Theoretical philosophy produces no knowledge of the things in themselves (i.e. of the supersensible), only of appearances or things for us (i.e. the sensible). Practical philosophy, on the other hand, deals with the thing in itself, but cannot represent it in our intuition. Therefore it yields only practical, but no theoretical knowledge of the supersensible.

These two domains are thus completely separate and cannot influence one another. Nevertheless there *should* be an influence from one to the other, "namely the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world."⁷ That means that morality (which is characterized by freedom) should be realized in our sensible, nat-

⁵ "die zu irgendeinem Begriffe (*unbestimmt welchem*) führt": it leads to *any* concept, *undetermined which*, §4 p. 207, cf. also §57, p. 340f.

⁶ *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Introduction II, p. 175-6: "unübersehbare Kluft", "kein Übergang möglich".

⁷ Ibid. p. 176: „nämlich der Freiheitsbegriff soll den durch seine Gesetze aufgegebenen Zweck in der Sinnenwelt wirklich machen“.

ural world (which is determined by causality). Thus there needs to be a unity of the supersensible as it is contained in the (theoretical) concept of nature and the (practical) concept of freedom respectively.

In the introduction, when explaining the relation of his three *Critiques*, and the place of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* within his philosophical system, Kant writes:

There must, therefore, be a *ground of the unity* of the supersensible, which lies at the basis of nature, with that which the concept of freedom practically contains; and the *concept of this ground*, although it does not attain either theoretically or practically to a knowledge of the same, and hence has no peculiar realm, nevertheless makes possible the transition from the mode of thought according to the principles of the one to that according to the principles of the other.⁸

This concept that makes possible the transition from the mode of thought of the one realm to that of the other, this concept is the concept of the faculty of judgement. We can understand that Kant is talking about the concept of the power of judgement here, because he mentions repeatedly that the power of judgement enables the transition between understanding and reason.⁹ And it is clear that the transition he talks about in this quote is that from understanding to reason: Understanding is our faculty of cognition, which deals with nature (thus it has an idea, but no knowledge¹⁰, of the supersensible “which lies at the basis of nature”). Reason, as our faculty of volition directed at freedom, has an idea of the supersensible “which the concept of freedom practically contains,” but without

⁸ transl. J. H. Bernard, Introduction II, p. 176, my emphasis. “Also muss es doch einen Grund der *Einheit* des Übersinnlichen, welches der Natur zum Grunde liegt, mit dem, was der Freiheitsbegriff praktisch enthält, geben, *wovon der Begriff*, wenn er gleich weder theoretisch noch praktisch zu einem Erkenntnis desselben gelangt, mithin kein eigentümliches Gebiet hat, dennoch den Übergang von der Denkungsart nach den Prinzipien der einen zu der nach Prinzipien der anderen möglich macht.“

⁹ Cf. e.g. Introduction III, p. 177: „...ein Mittelglied zwischen dem Verstande und der Vernunft. Dieses ist die Urteilskraft.“ Or Introduction IX, p. 196: „Die Urteilskraft gibt den vermittelnden Begriff zwischen den Naturbegriffen und dem Freiheitsbegriffe“

¹⁰ Introduction II, p. 175: „... das Übersinnliche ..., wovon man die *Idee* zwar der Möglichkeit all jener Gegenstände der Erfahrung [d.h. Objekte des Erkenntnisvermögens, Anm.] unterlegen muss, sie selbst aber *niemals zu einem Erkenntnis* erheben und erweitern kann“, emphasis added.

being able to represent it in intuition (*Anschauung*). Thus the concept of the ground of this unity of the supersensible contained in understanding and reason respectively, is the concept of the power of judgement.

It also fits to the other descriptions and characteristics given of the concept of the power of judgement, i.e. that it does not produce any knowledge,¹¹ or that the power of judgement does not have a corresponding philosophical domain of its own.¹² Nevertheless, it is because this concept of the unity of the supersensible constitutes the transition from one way of thinking to the other, i.e. from practical to theoretical philosophy, that the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* is of vital importance for and within Kant's philosophical system.

But how does this description of the concept help to explain how the power of judgement is and is not based on a concept, i.e. is based on an "undetermined concept" as I phrased it? The concept of the ground of the unity of the supersensible is not a concrete concept: it does not determine what this ground is (it does not lead to any knowledge of it), but as a free (placeholder) concept of the power of judgement it merely denotes that there is (or has to be) such a ground. Kant writes:

Through the possibility of its a priori laws for nature the *understanding* gives a proof that nature is cognized by us only as appearance, and hence at the same time an *indication of its supersensible substratum*; but it leaves this entirely *undetermined*. The *power of judgment*, through its a priori principle for judging nature in accordance with possible particular laws for it, provides for its supersensible substratum (in us as well as outside us) *determinability* through the intellectual faculty. But *reason* provides *determination* for the same substratum through its practical law a priori; and thus the power of judgment makes possible the transition from the domain of the concept of nature to that of the concept of freedom.¹³

Understanding indicates that there must be a supersensible substratum be-

¹¹ Cf. e.g. §1 "Das Geschmacksurteil ist *kein Erkenntnisurteil*," or p. 169: "einen Begriff..., durch den eigentlich *kein Ding erkannt wird*." Emphasis added.

¹² Cf. e.g. Preface, p. 168: „... obgleich ihre [d.i. der Urteilkraft, Amn.] Prinzipien in einem System der reinen Philosophie keinen besonderen Teil zwischen der theoretischen und praktischen ausmachen dürfen...“

¹³ Introduction IX, p. 196, emphasis added.

hind its sensual perceptions, but does not have any knowledge about it and thus leaves it *undetermined*. The *power of judgement* now provides *determinability* of this supersensible substratum. And *reason*, finally, *determines* it through reason's practical law. This *determinability* is the first possible meaning of the "undetermined concept".

4. The Undetermined Concept as Free Subsumption or Lawfulness without Law

The second possible interpretation derives from an analysis of the harmony of the faculties, which is the ground for an aesthetic judgement. Kant claims that the pleasure we experience in the face of something beautiful, is based on a harmony of our cognitive faculties, which is brought about by the contemplation of that beautiful object. This harmony is the free submission of the faculty of imagination to the faculty of understanding.

Usually understanding gives concepts and thereby subjects the imagination, which is now limited by those concepts. However, since in judgement no concepts of understanding are involved, the imagination is in a free play ("productive and self-active"¹⁴) but in that free play (in the case of beauty) subjects itself freely to the *capacity* of the faculty of understanding to produce concepts or to proceed from images (*Anschauungen*) to concepts. Thus the imagination schematizes without concept, i.e. freely submits itself to the lawfulness of the understanding even without there being involved a particular concept.

The subsumption under a general rule of the aesthetic judgement, is thus indeed not the subsumption of intuitions under concepts, but "of the *faculty* of intuitions or presentations (*i.e.* the Imagination) under the *faculty* of the concepts (*i.e.* the Understanding); so far as the former *in its freedom* harmonises with the latter *in its conformity to law*."¹⁵

¹⁴ Remark, p. 240: „produktiv und selbsttätig“.

¹⁵ § 35, p. 287, emphasis in the original: "...ein Prinzip der Subsumption, aber nicht der *Anschauungen* unter *Begriffe*, sondern des *Vermögens* der *Anschauungen* oder *Darstellungen* (d.i. der *Einbildungskraft*) unter das *Vermögen* der *Begriffe* (d.i. den *Verstand*), sofern das erstere in *seiner Freiheit* zum letzteren *in seiner Gesetzmäßigkeit* zusammenstimmt."

This harmony is stimulated by the beautiful object. But despite it is dependent on an external stimulus, it is nevertheless subjective and not objective, because it is the internal response of our faculties to that external stimulus, not any aspect of the external object itself. Yet, since our faculties could be stimulated by that object in such a way and since everyone else possesses the same faculties, we suppose that everyone else *should* (but does not objectively have to, hence the possibility for disagreement and argument) react in the same way. Hence the claim to generality.

Kant calls this experience a “common sense”, by which he means “not ... any external sense but rather the effect of the free play of our cognitive powers”.¹⁶ The common sense is thus really universal since it is based merely on the *formal* characteristics of our cognitive faculties (subjection of faculty to faculty), which all people share in common. The necessity of pleasure is therefore a subjective one, but represented as objective under the presupposition of a common sense.

The undetermined concept in this case refers to the subsumption of the faculty of imagination to the faculty of understanding and in this sense functions indeed as a placeholder: understanding does not give any particular concept, but imagination submits to the general potential of understanding to give concepts.

5. The Undetermined Concept as Concept of Reason

The third interpretation takes as a starting point the solution of the antinomy of taste as presented by Kant by means of the differentiation of concepts of understanding and concepts of reason. Concepts of understanding are determinable by sensual intuition. Concepts of reason, on the other hand, cannot be determined through intuition (since they concern the supersensible). Thus, the undetermined concept in the aesthetic judgement can be considered a concept of reason. Whereas, when we say aesthetic judgements are not based on concepts, nor create any, we refer to concepts of understanding.¹⁷

¹⁶ §20, p. 238: „wodurch wir aber keinen äußeren Sinn, sondern die Wirkung aus dem freien Spiel unserer Erkenntniskräfte verstehen“.

¹⁷ Cf. §57.

However, there is a way in which we can underlay a concept of reason with an intuition nevertheless: that is in a *symbolic* way. (If we underlay an empirical concept with an intuition, it is an example; for a concept of understanding it is a scheme, and for a concept of understanding a symbol (cf. § 59)). Thus, since no empirical image will ever be adequate for the concept of reason, we can underlay it only symbolically. In this way, the beautiful is a symbol of the morally good.¹⁸ The opposite of a concept of reason, is an aesthetic idea:

by an aesthetical Idea I understand that representation of the Imagination which occasions much thinking, without, however, any definite thought, *i.e.* any *concept*, being capable of being adequate to it; it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language.¹⁹

I believe that these two (aesthetic idea and concept of reason) are more closely related than explicitly stated. I want to claim that it is an aesthetic idea with which we underlay the concept of reason. And this is why the beautiful becomes a symbol of the morally good. In this way also, we can come to see a possible reconciliation of the three different interpretations of the idea of the undetermined concept.

6. Connection of the Three Interpretations & Conclusion

We saw that in aesthetic judgements the understanding does not give any concept, which invites the imagination to freely submit to the potential of creating concepts. The absence of an (adequate) concept defines aesthetic ideas. But I suggest, that the fact that no intuition will ever be adequate to the concept of reason in turn inspires the imagination to be even more creative (and hence again also more impossible to be grasped by one determined concept of understanding). Maybe we have to understand the mutual enhancement of the faculties in the contemplation of beauty in this way. Surely this is the case when the pleasure in beauty is connected with an intellectual interest.

¹⁸ §59, p. 353: “Das Schöne ist das Symbol des Sittlichen; und auch nur in dieser Rücksicht (...) gefällt es mit einem Anspruch auf jedes anderen Beistimmung”.

¹⁹ §49, p. 314.

An important characteristic of aesthetic judgements is that they are disinterested. Yet, the pleasure taken in a beautiful object can be *disinterested* and yet nevertheless *interesting* (cf. footnote to §2). Kant distinguishes between two kinds of interest: either empirical or intellectual. The empirical interest is indirect and ex post facto. It is experienced in society. Due to our social nature (sociability) we take pleasure in being able to share our experience of beauty. And thus we have an interest in the existence of the beautiful object. The communicability of the experience of pleasure is thus promoting (furthering) our natural disposition and thereby creating an interest (cf. §41).

The intellectual interest in the beautiful is different in that it is not added ex post facto, but is related to the judgement a priori. This interest is experienced in solitude, and not concerned with objects of art, but with the beautiful in nature. The person who has an intellectual interest in the beautiful loves the object of beauty so much, that he does not want to miss it. Thus he has an interest in the existence of the object, but without any benefit – the interest is intellectual. In this interest we see the transition from the aesthetic judgement to the moral one. As we have seen, reason is interested in the fact that its ideas have objective reality, i.e. it is interested in the purposiveness of nature. Thus the intellectual interest in the beautiful is moral by affinity (cf. §42).

In the case of an intellectual interest in beauty it is thus clearly the case that the beautiful functions as a symbol for morality and that the faculties (imagination, understanding and reason) thereby mutually enhance each other in the way described above. But I would go so far as to claim that this is the case not only when the pleasure in beauty is connected with an intellectual interest, but that this is in fact *always* the case. The following quote supports this claim:

the Beautiful is the symbol of the morally Good, and that it is *only in this respect* (a reference which is natural to every man and which every man postulates in others as a duty) that it gives pleasure *with a claim for the agreement of every one else*.²⁰

We could, then, understand the harmonic interplay of the faculties in the following way: A beautiful object is given to imagination, to which the

²⁰ §59, p. 353, my emphasis.

understanding does not supply any determined concept. The imagination submits freely to understanding as the faculty which has the capacity to provide determined concepts (interpretation 2). In this sense the power of judgement provides a “placeholder” for a concept: through the free submission of imagination to understanding we have a free schematization which is more than no concept at all, but at the same time less than an actual determined concept. We experience this as free purposiveness (again, the purposiveness is not determined by any specific purpose).

By the fact that no determined concept is adequate to our aesthetic ideas we are reminded that the concept we are aiming at is the undetermined concept of reason to which no intuition is adequate (interpretation 3). Thus we underlay the undetermined concept of reason (the concept of freedom) with the aesthetic idea in a symbolic fashion. The free concept of a purposiveness without purpose thereby refers to the possibility of a final purpose (Endzweck), which, as a moral concept, belongs to reason. But since it is imagined as realized (or realizable) in the sensual realm it forms the bridge between understanding and reason (interpretation 1).

In that way the power of judgement makes possible the transition from the mode of thought of understanding to that of reason through the principle of purposiveness. In this way, too, all the faculties inspire and vitalize each other, while at the same time not determining each other through concepts so that their harmony is truly free. And this harmony is the common sense and as such communicable and shareable with others.

In this paper I argued that Kant’s description of reflective taste opens a very valuable possibility to overcome the all-too common strict dichotomy between strictly logical-rational objectivity and merely emotional subjectivity. Kant offers a middle ground, which is crucially based on an ambiguous relation to concepts. I argue that we can understand this by positing empty or undetermined concepts. I explored three different possible ways of interpreting this notion of undetermined concepts: either as the concept of the ground of transition from the realm of understanding to that of reason, or as the free subsumption of the faculty of imagination to the faculty of understanding, or, lastly, as referring to a concept of reason as opposed to a concept of understanding. Finally I suggested a way to reconcile these three different interpretations and showed how we can understand them as being intrinsically inter-related through the symbolic

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