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Sensible Knowing in Kant's Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. This paper treats the distinctive form of knowing found in Kant's aesthetics that follows the idea of sensible cognition first introduced by Baumgarten in his *Aesthetics*. My argument is to show how Kant still legitimates this sensible knowing in his aesthetics, despite his insistence on the non-knowledge of the aesthetic judgment. I develop my argument under three considerations. First, I situate Kant's aesthetics in relation to that of Baumgarten in order to show how Kant can regard the sensible ordering of aesthetic experience in the beautiful to be like reason and can be of the sensible without being merely sensible. Second, I analyze the ordering into unity that Kant attributes to the beautiful in relation to the reflective judgment in order to show just how Kant can attribute order to sensible experience without an ordering by a concept, and specifically without an ordering by a concept of perfection. Third, I analyze the notion of a generative connection in aesthetic experience made possible by the principle of purposiveness in order to show how the beautiful is related to the feeling of the furtherance of life. It is this feeling of life, which produces a connection among things, that reason cannot produce and at the same time generates a "sensible knowing."

1. Introduction

In this paper I want to consider the peculiar form of knowing that is in place in Kant's aesthetics. That Kant's aesthetics involves knowing is undoubtedly a controversial claim since Kant insists in the *Critique of Judgment* that the aesthetic judgment cannot be a judgment of knowing because it does not meet the restricted requirements for knowing established by the first Critique. The aesthetic judgment, a judgment concerning the beautiful, is not a matter of knowledge because it does not meet the requirement of the ordering of the concept necessary for knowledge. What I intend to show is not really so controversial when we recognize from a

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broader perspective that Kant employs a very restricted criteria for knowledge. To the point, with it he appears to have completely abandoned the distinctive kind of knowing that characterized aesthetics when it was first introduced by Baumgarten as a science of sensitive cognition. For Baumgarten aesthetics is the science of sensible knowing qua sensible—a science that Baumgarten also identifies as a theory of the liberal arts, suggesting by this that it would be a science appropriate to the knowing that takes place in the humanities.¹ In what follows I want to specifically show how Kant in fact still legitimates this sensuous knowing in his aesthetics, despite his insistence on the non-knowledge of the aesthetic judgment.

2. First Consideration

As a first consideration, I want to situate Kant's aesthetics in relation to that of Baumgarten. When Baumgarten first characterizes aesthetics as a science of sensible cognition, he does so within the framework of the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition in which the science of reason comes to express the perfection of the world through the requirements of clarity and distinctness. While Baumgarten acknowledges the determination of the character of sensible cognition in this regard, namely, that sensible cognition can be clear because, like reason, it is capable of allowing someone to recognize the thing represented, it cannot produce distinct knowledge. It does not allow someone to enumerate the marks that would sufficiently distinguish one thing from another, and, as confused rather than distinct, sensible cognition is inferior to rational cognition. Baumgarten's unique claim, though, is that a greater cognitive value can be given to confused cognition. He argues that the sensible has a richness of particularity that is lost in the attempt to construct universal science. More so, he insists

¹ Alexander Baumgarten's (1714-1762) *Aesthetics* is a two volume work written between 1750-1758. The work remained unfinished. Baumgarten was a student of Christian Wolff and follows in the same line of development of the German metaphysical tradition as Kant. It is worth noting that in this same period in France Abbé Batteux wrote *The Fine Arts reduced to a Single Principle* (1746). And in England Edmund Burke writes *An Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756). Kant's own early work on aesthetics from 1764 has the interesting title *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*.

that this confused knowing does not necessarily lead to error, but is itself a condition for the discovery of truth. "Nature," he writes, "does not jump from darkness to clarity. It is thus through dawn that we travel from night to noon" (Baumgarten, 1750, §7).

Baumgarten will call this science of sensible cognition aesthetics, and if there is to be aesthetic truth in this regard, it will require establishing a norm, a measure, appropriate to its order of knowing.² For Baumgarten this norm could not be produced through a species of an inductive logic, which simply extracts generalities from sense and leads away from a science of sensible knowing dealing with particulars, with its element of feeling. For Baumgarten this norm is nothing other than that of perfection. As characterized by Leibniz, perfection involves the "power to harmonize with the greatest number of conditions" and reality is to be measured by its perfection. For Wolff, following Leibniz, this perfection is understood on a formal level as the order or harmony of the parts in a whole—a unity affirmed by its harmonious parts—and in the sensible this perfection is attributed to the beautiful.³ Baumgarten, who follows Wolff, will also attribute perfection in this sense to the beautiful. The beautiful is thus defined as the perfection of sensible cognition, where perfection is simply the ordering in the agreement of the manifold, in relation to which there is a manifestation of a feeling of pleasure analogous to an attribute that when manifest in rational knowing is called truth (Bosanquet, 1922, p.184). Aesthetics as a science of the beautiful is similar to reason; it is an *ars analogon rationis*.

There is something undoubtedly daring in this claim that the realm of the sensible with its element of feeling has something of the same character as reason. If we are to believe Hegel, this daring amounts to a foolishness or at best "wearisome on account of its indefiniteness and emptiness," since feeling is "the indefinite dull region of the spirit; what is felt remains enveloped in the form of the most abstract individual subjectivity" (Hegel, 1975, p. 32). But is this art, which Baumgarten also describes as a theory of the liberal arts, foolishness? It might be if the *analogon* would be

² Such aesthetic truth could be, for example, a particular narrative in which there would be traits that are not mutually contradictory, as well as a coherence and unity to the narrative.

³ For Wolff, "*perfectio est consensus in varietate*" (Wolff, 1736, §503).

understood as similar to reason in the weakest sense of similarity, i.e., as merely the sensible presentation of logical perfection. But Baumgarten understands this art as truly parallel to that of reason insofar as both involve a connection among things—an ordering not unlike a ratio—despite the fact that the connection among things in the confused cognition of the sensuous involves several powers, including memory and imagination, as well as sensuous anticipation.⁴ In the perfection of sensuous cognition there is a unity of a material richness and the beautiful designates that ordering of the object that is bound not by reason, but by the sensuous itself. The beautiful, as that peculiar sensuous ordering, is not reason, while being like reason, and is of the sensuous without being merely sensuous—the same designation for the beautiful that appears in Kant's aesthetics.

But when Kant then writes his aesthetics of the beautiful it becomes evident that he is not developing further Baumgarten's aesthetics, since he dismisses the status of cognition in aesthetics. And yet Kant too recognizes its autonomy and also sees in the beautiful the quality of ordering, establishing thereby a relating of one to another, of part to a whole, not unlike the operation of reason.⁵ In the beautiful there is the feeling of universal life, a feeling in which intelligent life comes into accord with itself. Thus for Kant too there is no retreat from a daring to see in the sensuous something of the character of reason.

⁴ The *analogon rationis* is thus not an expression intended to privilege the logical, but is intended as a way of expressing for the first time the very autonomy and legitimacy with respect to knowing of sensuous representation. Aesthetics is to be that science that does not turn away from the essential medium of the sensuous. The art of the *analogon rationis* is an attempt to take hold of what the logical cannot grasp, namely, the sensuous particularity and the individuality commensurate with it. The science of the beautiful looks to the sensuous connection without the ordering of the concept.

⁵ In recognizing the autonomy of aesthetics Kant actually takes over in a decisive way, with the proper qualification the quality of perfection in the beautiful that functions as an ordering of multiplicity. The qualification is Kant's refusal to define the beautiful through a concept of perfection in the object. In §15 of the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant argues that the judgment of taste is independent of the concept of perfection in the sense that the object of taste is not conceived by means of a concept of purpose and thus does not involve the perfection of the object. Accordingly, Kant is opposing the substantial sense of perfection as suitability, but not necessarily the formal sense of perfection as harmonious order (See, Kant, 1972, p. 62-5).

3. Second Consideration

As a second consideration, I want to pursue the ordering that takes place in Kant's aesthetics of the beautiful, the ordering that I would hesitantly call the logic of the non-logic of the aesthetics of the beautiful. For Kant this ordering is tied to the more encompassing ordering that will complete the critical system. It is tied to the non-legislating cognitive faculty of judgement which is simply "the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal" (Kant, 1972, p. 15).⁶ If the universal, i.e., the rule, is given to it, the judgment subsumes the particular under it and is a determinate judgment.⁷ If only the particular is given, as in the case of heterogeneity of the diversity of empirical laws in nature relative to the unity of the natural knowledge, the judgment must search for the appropriate universal to carry out its function of subsumption. In this case the judgment is reflective. The reflective judgment thus has the specific task of providing this unity—the unity that would not only bring the experience of nature to a higher unity, but also the life of reason with respect to nature and freedom. The peculiarity of the reflective judgment is that it brings about this order without attributing the order to objective rules, or through an ordering by a concept.⁸

⁶ In his *Logic* from 1800, Kant defines judgment as "the presentation of the unity of consciousness of several presentations, or the presentation of their relation so far as they make up on concept" (Kant, 1974c, p. 106).

⁷ At a simple level, my empirical observations can issue in a judgment, this is a book, a determination made by relating the individual thing (this book here) to a concept (of book). As the determinate judgment is employed in the legislation of understanding, a category is related/ applied to a manifold of intuition.

⁸ From early on Kant had an interest in aesthetics—more properly, what one should call an empirical aesthetics, since he did not think that a *critique* of aesthetic taste was possible. Although he writes to Marcus Herz in 1771 indicating that he intends to write a work on aesthetics, as late as 1781 he considers this critique of taste an unlikely possibility. But by 1787 Kant found what he was looking for. He is able to write a critique of taste because he finds a distinct a priori principle that would give a rule to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure involved in taste. But when Kant then names the three parts of philosophy that have a priori principles he does not include aesthetics, but names them as theoretical philosophy, teleology, and practical philosophy. The obvious question is how Kant moves from his intended purpose to write a critique of taste to teleology. While initially concerned with a reflection on taste, which Kant situates in terms of judgment, Kant soon became concerned with the unity of the system. In this concern, Kant looked

How so? Reflecting in general, Kant tells us, is comparable to a deliberation.⁹ I see an object I do not recognize, and as such I cannot assume it under a general concept, but must search for it in another manner. In this search I can only proceed by combining likenesses with others and separating out difference as a way of generating its identity. In this way, reflecting proceeds from the particular to a general in its orientation to order. And if the general concept can only be given through reflecting, the reflective *judgment*, in effect, gives “a law from and to itself.” What is decisive here is that the comparing and combining, without a concept in advance, amounts to something like an imagined ordering, generating its own measure through an expectation of order, an anticipation of an ordered unity. Without this anticipation of an ordered unity the order would be infinitely deferred. Reflection thus requires a principle that does not just provide the *necessary condition* for the judgment’s function of subsumption, but serves as a *guide* for reflecting, and as such it can only be a *subjective* principle. Kant names this principle for proceeding in reflection to bring about the unity sought the principle of purposiveness (*Zweckmässigkeit*).¹⁰

for a way to unite nature and freedom through the judgment. If the judgment is to make possible the transition between nature and freedom, it can do so only in relation to the concept of a unifying supersensible ground of nature—a ground that would in some fashion then truly unite human life. The judgment provides this orientation in the concept of purposiveness. Thus the *Critique of Judgment* is written and justified as part of the critical system on the grounds of an a priori principle, viz., the purposiveness of nature, that in fact can only be ascribed to aesthetic judgment, since the teleological judgment, which presupposes a concept of the object, is not a pure reflective judgment.

⁹ Reflecting in general is comparable to a kind of deliberation in which one is “to compare and combine given representations with other representations or with one’s cognitive powers with respect to a concept which is thereby made possible” (Kant, 1965, p. 16). “Reflektieren (Überlegen) aber ist: gegebene Vorstellungen entweder mit andern, oder mit seinem Erkenntnisvermögen, in Beziehung auf einen dadurch möglichen Begriff, zu vergleichen und zusammen zu halten” (Kant, 1974b, p. 24).

¹⁰ As subjective, the principle is only a principle with respect to a formal purposiveness of nature, providing the condition for proceeding in reflection in order to bring about the unity sought: The purposiveness of nature is a rule whereby “nature is represented by means of this concept *as if* an understanding contained the ground of the variety of its empirical laws” (Kant, 1972, p. 17). In the subsequent section of the Second Introduction, Kant explains the transcendental status of the principle and defines the transcendental concept of purposiveness of nature as “neither a natural concept nor a concept of freedom, because it ascribes nothing to the object (of nature), but only represents the

What Kant means by purposiveness is not the simple idea of purpose as an adaptation to an end, as if purpose is simply deliberate creation, like the purpose of a clock is to indicate the time of day. Rather, purpose designates a specific form of unity where the concept of purpose acts as the cause of the actuality of the object (Kant, 1972, p. 55).¹¹ It is in effect something like intelligent agency such that what is attained by the reflective judgment is an ordering—an order of design where nature is not a mere aggregate; i.e., one part is not just adjacent to another part, but has its existence connected to that other part. But what then is the unity experienced by purposiveness? It would appear to be not much different from the idea of perfection as it was presented by Wolff and Baumgarten. Purposiveness appears to be much like the harmonious unification of the parts of a manifold.¹² Kant, though, will insist that he is not introducing a concept of perfection in this context, even though he admits that objective internal purposiveness does come close to the predicate of beauty. The obvious reason for this is that perfection requires the concept of what sort of thing the object is to be. What concerns Kant is not finding the perfection in something for which there is a determining in advance what the object ought to be—a matter for objective and thus conceptual determination—but only that in reflecting we judge the “subjective purposiveness of an object, not its perfection” (Kant, 1965, p. 33). It is in this subjective purposiveness that we experience an order that cannot appear under the conditions for theoretical knowledge, but is available to us in the realm of the sensuous.

Here we rejoin the matter of aesthetics, for it is with the aesthetic judgment of taste that the reflecting subject experiences a pleasure in the agreement instituted by the principle of purposiveness. The feeling of pleasure in an aesthetic judgment of taste is bound up with a purposiveness on a merely subjective basis as the harmony of the form of the object with the cognitive powers of imagination and understanding. This pleasure expresses a subjective formal purposiveness of the object, one that can

peculiar way we must proceed in reflection upon the objects of nature in reference to a thoroughly connected experience, and is consequently a subjective principle (maxim) of the judgment” (Kant, 1972, p. 20).

¹¹ See (Zamito, 1992, p. 90).

¹² See (Cassirer, 1981, p. 287).

only “prompt” the concept of purposiveness in nature. And this ordering carried out by reflecting in relation to a formal purposiveness upon the form of the object is precisely the order of the beautiful. Accordingly, the judgment that something is beautiful is made in reference to the form of purposiveness of an object that occasions a feeling of pleasure in the harmony of the cognitive faculties.

In describing the aesthetics of the beautiful in this way, it would appear that we are far removed from any logic of sorts, even a non-conceptual logic within aesthetics. Is it possible yet to see here a “logical” ordering taking place that is distinctive to the sensuous condition of aesthetic determination? To answer this question let us note Kant’s further description of the beautiful. In order to set the satisfaction in the beautiful apart from the satisfaction occurring in relation to the merely sensuous, Kant insists that regarding the beautiful there is both a universal and necessary *satisfaction*. In the case of universality, the universality is to be understood as the general validity with respect to the feeling of pleasure. Aesthetic universality postulates a universal voice that imputes the agreement of everyone, as if to say, in making a judgment of taste such as “this rose is beautiful,” I postulate that you too would say the rose is beautiful. In the case of the necessity, the necessity is simply called exemplary; “it is a necessity of the assent of all to a judgment which is regarded as an example of a universal rule that we cannot state” (Kant, 1972, p. 74).¹³ In this context, what is exemplary always exists in an individual presentation.

Accordingly, in the beautiful there is a non-conceptual ordering in which it is impossible to give a conceptual rule. The very exemplarity of the beautiful signals an absent law. But if the rule is missing, from where do we get the exemplary force of the example? What gives the singularity of the beautiful its ordering power (the very aesthetic universality and necessity prescribed in it)? Because the ordering by the concept is restricted by Kant at every turn, we know that it cannot come from the ordering through the logic of concepts. Rather, as we have seen with respect to the self-generated, and self-binding of the principle of purposiveness in the

¹³ The idea of exemplarity also occurs in the discussion of genius in §46 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Genius is a talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given, and this originality is its first property, but its products should be exemplary in the sense that they serve as a rule of judgment for others.

reflective judgment, the ordering power comes from, for want of a better phrase, the generative connecting occurring within the sensuous. To explain this in more detail, let me turn to my final consideration.

4. Third Consideration

When Kant defines the aesthetic judgment in relation to the feeling of pleasure and pain at the outset of the Third Critique, he does so by separating this feeling from mere sensation. To quote the text: The aesthetic judgment is one in which “the representation is altogether referred to the subject and to its feeling of life under the name of the feeling of pleasure and pain” (Kant, 1972, p. 38). The feeling distinctive to aesthetics is the “feeling of life,” and we would assume that the life referred to here is something more than biological life. But how much more is not at all clear, since life in relation to pleasure and pain is certainly a component of biological life. We are able to gain some clarity on this from Kant’s remarks in his *Anthropology*. Here he defines life as the alternation of states of pleasure and pain, and describes both, but most certainly with respect to pain, as a vital force. Thus immediately we can say that the life at issue in aesthetic judgment is life in its vivification, life in its making alive of life. Pleasure is thus not a blind feeling, but the feeling of life being promoted. And pain, he tells us, must precede pleasure since in its opposition to pleasure it is “the spur of activity in which we feel our life” (Kant, 1974a, p. 100). Kant captures this distinction in his aesthetics in relation to the beautiful and the sublime. With the sublime there is a feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces, whereas the beautiful “is directly attended with a feeling of the furtherance of life [*Beförderung des Lebens*]” (Kant, 1972, p. 83). This furtherance of life appears to be possible only under the condition where life is in accord with itself, which is precisely what is displayed by the beautiful.

We have a further indication of what Kant means by this idea of the furtherance of life from his *Nachlass*. He writes: “It all comes down to life—whatever vivifies [*belebt*] is pleasurable. Life is unity; taste has as its principle the unity of vivifying sensations.” And to this Kant then adds: “freedom is original life and its coherence [*Zusammenhang*] is the condition

for the harmony [*Übereinstimmung*] of all living; thus that which furthers the feeling of universal life is the cause of pleasure. Do we feel ourselves at home in universal life?" (Kant, 2005, p. 443). The vital force of life is thus a force relative to the highest order of life, viz., freedom, which Kant identifies in the third Critique as the supersensible ground of nature.¹⁴ And in another note Kant writes: "That appearance which awakens the consciousness of the promotion of life in intuition is beautiful," adding parenthetically, "either immediately through the object (appearance) or through reflection (beautiful cognition)" (Kant, 2005, p. 511). Accordingly, we can say that in the aesthetic reflective judgment, in beautiful cognition, there is a feeling of pleasure as the feeling of intelligent life relative to its promotion. It is a feeling beyond mere passivity: "We linger in our contemplation of the beautiful because the contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself." In the feeling of pleasure there is an awareness and engagement in the world of sense—the experience of freedom bound up with its materiality. The feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) is bound up with a spiritual feeling (*Geistesgefühl*).¹⁵

But let us not take Kant's position as one that is simply concerned with the bridge between nature and freedom, which is clearly signaled by the

¹⁴ In his *Lectures on Ethics* Kant writes: "Freedom is the faculty which gives unlimited usefulness to all others. It is the highest order of life The inner worth of the world is freedom in accordance with a will which is not necessitated to action. Freedom is the inner worth of the world" (Kant, 2001, p. 125).

¹⁵ The issue here is best expressed through what Kant calls the sensible illustration in the beautiful, i.e., the beautiful as a symbol of the moral good. It is only in the capacity for symbolic sensible illustration that the beautiful

gives us pleasure with an attendant claim to the assent of everyone else, in which the mind is at the same time aware of a certain ennoblement and elevation That is the *intelligible* to which taste looks, with which our higher cognitive faculties are in accord In this faculty judgment does not see itself . . . as subject to the heteronomy of the laws of experience; it gives the law to itself in respect of the objects of so pure a satisfaction . . . ; and it sees itself, both on account of this inner possibility in the subject as well as on account of the outer possibility of nature that corresponds to it, as related to something inside the subject itself and outside of it, which is neither nature nor freedom, but which is connected with the ground of the latter, namely the supersensible in which the theoretical faculty is combined with the practical in a mutual and unknown way, to form a unity" (Kant, 1972, p.199).

In the particular vividness of the beautiful—a vividness in relation to a felt accord—the mind is strengthened, *as if* it has received confirmation that it is universal life.

idea of a spiritual feeling. Let us consider the full import of the peculiar ratio that lies within the idea of the furtherance of life. For this we have to bear in mind the precise character of the order produced by the reflective judgment. It does not produce an analytic order, as the understanding does with respect to nature, but rather, an as-if order of connectedness to the whole. Herein we encounter a very different ratio than that of theoretical reason. The contingency that remains after the understanding has performed its function, cannot be subsumed under a universal. The principle of purposiveness for the reflective judgment connects what is individual without bringing the individual under a universal that would displace the individuality for the sake of a concept of universality. Through the principle of the reflective judgment there is a rule of organization, not a concept for subsumption. It is, one could say, a ratio of harmony, of accord—a ratio in which there is a feeling of pleasure.

Let us call this organization the organization of sensible reason. It is reason occurring within a life in which the perfect rationalization of the real can at best be displayed through sensible illustration, as if for human life alone there is the beautiful. The idea of a sensible reason, though, is ultimately without construction, i.e., there can be no science of the beautiful.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I only want to briefly recall Baumgarten's idea of new science that would be an *ars analogon rationis*. For him sensible cognition is similar to rational cognition insofar as it also carries out the generally understood operation of reason: the ability to recognize identity and difference among things, and to estimate. In its parallel to pure reason Baumgarten will insist that aesthetics has a degree of truth—a degree of truth that would be in relation to what is individual. Kant's protest to Baumgarten's version of aesthetics was always in plain sight. Aesthetics for Kant is not a matter of a confused cognition, nor is it to be understood in relation to a concept of perfection. And yet, he recognizes along with Baumgarten that aesthetics belongs to human life as the way of traveling from "night to noon." He too sees the need for understanding the connection among things in a way that pure reason cannot itself produce.

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