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Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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*Beyond Internalism / Externalism Dispute on
Aesthetic Experience: A Return to Kant*

Monika Jovanović⁴⁰

Department of Philosophy,

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

ABSTRACT. This paper consists of four parts. In the first part, I mention different ways in which one can view our aesthetic experience, and I elaborate upon a distinction that seems to be the most fruitful one, namely Shelley's classification of the main views as internalist and externalist.⁴¹ In the past few decades, the externalist view has seemingly prevailed, and this was brought upon in part by Dickie's criticism of Beardsley's internalist position. However, one cannot fully grasp the argumentative significance and potential of aesthetic experience without including both elements. In the rest of the paper, I aim to show how, starting from Kant, we can go beyond the dispute between internalists and externalists. In the second part of the paper, I discuss internal elements of Kant's conception of aesthetic experience and, at the same time, his argument for the universal validity of judgments of taste. In the third part, I put an emphasis on the key external component of his views – namely, the notion of the formal purposiveness, which pertains to the object we judge to be beautiful. In the fourth part of the paper, I discuss two main interpretations of Kant's argument and his conception of aesthetic experience – Paul Guyer's and Hannah Ginsborg's. Neither interpretation takes into account the external aspects of aesthetic experience. This, as I claim, makes such conceptions vulnerable to the 'everything is beautiful' objection.

⁴⁰ Email: mojovano@f.bg.ac.rs.

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1. Contemporary Approaches to Aesthetic Experience

The concept of aesthetic experience is one of the most prominent concepts in contemporary aesthetics. It has exceptional historical significance. Namely, the shift from beauty to aesthetic experience (initially called ‘pleasure of the imagination’⁴²) marked the end of traditional aesthetics and the beginning of modern aesthetics. Aesthetic experience has maintained its prominence in the following centuries, with no equally radical shift. However, its impact goes far beyond the history of aesthetics: many of the most prominent debates in contemporary aesthetics – debates about the definition of art, interpretation, and evaluation of artworks, to name just a few – feature to a greater or lesser degree a specific view of aesthetic experience.

One of the clear signs of the ubiquity of this concept are not only various debates, but also distinctive classifications of positions taken within those debates. Here I will mention only four of the many relatively recent attempts to summarize these debates. First, Noël Carroll distinguishes between the content-oriented account and the affect-oriented account (Carroll, 2001, p. 8). The second classification is that of Garry Iseminger (Iseminger, 2003), who sees the debate as involving primarily those philosophers who favor the phenomenal conception of aesthetic experience and those who favor the epistemic conception. Third, Robert Stecker mentions five different conceptions of aesthetic experience: the selfless absorption account, the object-directed pleasure account, the two-level conception, the minimal, view and the content-oriented conception (Stecker, 2010, ch.3). Finally, and most importantly for my goal, James Shelley states that the debate on aesthetic experience is best viewed as the dispute between internalists and externalists (Shelley, 2017). Shelley outlines this dispute by drawing a contrast between Monroe Beardsley’s and George Dickie’s views in the following way:

According to the version of internalism Beardsley advances in his *Aesthetics*, all aesthetic experiences have in common three or four (depending on how you count) features, which “some writers have [discovered] through acute introspection, and which each of us can test in his own experience” (Beardsley, 1958, 527). These are focus (“an aesthetic experience is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon [its object]”), intensity, and unity, where unity is a matter of coherence and of completeness (Beardsley, 1958, 527). [...] Dickie’s most consequential criticism of

⁴² One of the most prominent early authors who views experience in this way is Addison. His theory was first formulated at the beginning of the 18th century (Addison and Steele, 1712/1879).

Beardsley's theory is that Beardsley, in describing the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, has failed to distinguish between the features we experience aesthetic objects as having and the features aesthetic experiences themselves have. So while every feature mentioned in Beardsley's description of the coherence of aesthetic experience—continuity of development, the absence of gaps, the mounting of energy toward a climax—surely is a feature we experience aesthetic objects as having, there is no reason to think of aesthetic experience itself as having any such feature. (Shelley, 2017, 2.4)

As we can see, the question of what is distinctive for aesthetic experience, compared to other types of experiences, according to this view, can be approached from two different perspectives. We may ask what is characteristic of the experience itself, as a psychological state, or we may wonder what causes that experience. What is important about our aesthetic experience and, furthermore, what defines it, according to internalists, has to do with its psychological features: what aesthetic experience consists of, what it is like to be in such an experiential state. This perspective is an instance of an overall introspective approach to human experience that has long been the dominant view. The fact that this mentalistic picture is largely rejected certainly influenced the abandonment of aesthetic internalism. However, a more immediate aesthetic reason for turning toward the opposite, externalistic approach, pertains to a debate between Dickie (Dickie, 1964; Dickie, 1965; Dickie, 1974; Dickie, 1988) and Beardsley (Beardsley, 1958; Beardsley, 1962; Beardsley, 1982), which resulted in Beardsley's modifying his position.

By expounding Kant's view of aesthetic experience, I will try to show that both internalistic and externalistic elements of aesthetic experience should be taken into account in a plausible conception of aesthetic experience. The merit of such a comprehensive view is apparent when we judge it not only by its coherency and its extensional adequacy but also by its explanatory force which can be seen when, for instance, aside from explaining aesthetic experience itself, we have a more general goal, i.e., answering the question whether aesthetic evaluation has inferential structure or arguing for the thesis that aesthetic judgments have universal validity. Plausible answers to these central aesthetic questions require both the elements of the experience itself and the causes and conditions under which it occurs.

2. The Role of Aesthetic Experience in Kant's Argument

In the 'Analytic of the Beautiful', Kant (Kant, 2000) contrasts the judgments of taste with judgments of the agreeable and theoretical judgments. What distinguishes judgments of taste from the other two types of judgments is, according to him, a combination of two properties – their subjectivity and their generality. However, there are numerous disputes on how to understand the thesis that aesthetic judgments are, at the same time, subjective and universally valid. Many commentators agree that Kant was torn between two tendencies. On the one hand, he was leaning towards aesthetic subjectivism. This was mainly due to his idealist turn toward the subject. On the other, Kant wanted to show that, despite the subjective ground of aesthetic judgments (the fact that these judgments rest on aesthetic experience), aesthetic relativism is untenable, that there are criteria of validity of our aesthetic judgments.

I believe that Kant didn't completely abandon the idea that beauty is an objective property. He considered it to be an external source of aesthetic experience, as a quality in an object 'by means of which it corresponds with our way of receiving it' (Kant, 2000, 5:282). Only with this assumption, Kant can resist the 'everything is beautiful'⁴³ objection and answer the question why some objects cause what he terms 'the free play of understanding and imagination', which in turn enables him to argue for the universal validity of aesthetic judgments. This shows that every plausible conception of aesthetic experience which aims to be part of a comprehensive aesthetic theory must account for both internal and external elements.

To make this obvious, we can draw a distinction between internalist and externalist elements in Kant's 'Analytic of Beautiful'. Having expounded the thesis of disinterestedness in the first moment of the judgement of taste, at the very beginning of the second moment, in paragraph 6, Kant puts forward the thesis that the universal validity of the judgment of taste stems from disinterestedness in the pleasure we feel toward a given object.⁴⁴ However, he immediately makes a caveat and no longer claims that universal validity is a logical

⁴³ There is a wide range of authors ascribing this difficulty to Kant's view, and it is sometimes even used as an argument against the validity of an interpretation of his views. See, for instance, Ginsborg, 2014 and Guyer, 2017. See also: Merbote, 1982, p. 82, and Ameriks, 1982, p. 295-302.

⁴⁴ As Guyer says, this is an 'ill-fated claim that the definition of the beautiful as the object of a universal delight is deducible from the definition of it as the object of a delight free of any interest' (Guyer, 1979, p. 118).

consequence of disinterestedness, but rather that the subject who (believes that he) has excluded every interest feels that his pleasure is free and (necessarily) sees it as a state that has its basis in something that can be *assumed* to be the case for every other subject. (Kant still doesn't say what that is. The ideas of a 'universal voice' and '*sensus communis*' are introduced later, in paragraphs 8 and 20, respectively. See also: Guyer, 1979, p. 118-127). Restating his thesis a few sentences later, he puts forward a stronger claim from the beginning of the paragraph and says, as if there really was a logical implication, that the judgment of taste, through elimination of all interests, 'lays claim' to universal agreement.

In that section, Kant seems to waver between the internalistic and externalistic views of disinterestedness. According to the first, one can introspectively recognize not only pleasure but also its disinterestedness. According to the second, disinterestedness is, as a negative condition, a part of the causal history of a mental state. In the end of the paragraph, Kant chooses the internalist view according to which the subject's awareness that he has excluded all interests guarantees that no interest plays a role in making the judgment of taste. If this is true, it seems that he has abandoned the view, put forward in *The Groundworks of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1996), according to which we can err in recognizing our 'pathological' inclinations or lack thereof, and, in my opinion, made his position less plausible.⁴⁵

This view of disinterestedness can be successfully defended only under the assumption that interests are transparent mental phenomena and that the subject can't be mistaken in recognizing them. However, since our interests are dispositional motivational factors, as to which we can err, the internalistic view of disinterestedness appears to be quite problematic. Even if that weren't the case, the very fact that all interests have been excluded still wouldn't imply that our judgment has universal validity, because human beings could still, *ex hypothesi*, differ in other, non-conative respects. Contrary to the thesis that Kant implicitly endorses in paragraph 6, disinterestedness is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the universal validity of judgments of taste.⁴⁶

Aside from the aforementioned internalist elements of Kant's conception, his view

⁴⁵ Guyer notes that Kant 'undermines the traditional view that the nature of our mental states must always be immediately transparent to us' (Guyer, 1979, p. 105). However, he doesn't consider whether Kant really did move away from this view. This, though, cannot be further pursued here.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Allison's account and his criticism of Guyer's view in: Allison, 2001, ch. 5.

features another, even more distinctively internalist element – the free play of imagination and understanding, which we are aware of at an affective and quasi-introspective level. By drawing a distinction between judgments of the beautiful and judgments of the agreeable, Kant claims that judging of an object must precede the feeling of pleasure (Kant, 2000, §9). Since it doesn't depend on anything empirical, which could vary from subject to subject, but only on the (common) cognitive structure of all subjects, it functions the same way in every subject. In other words, the common cognitive structure is a precondition for the universal communicability of the judgments of taste. The idea of common sense, as Kant also calls it, has a transcendental role in Kant's argumentation for the universal validity of the judgments of taste because it helps us answer the question of how judgments of taste are possible.

3. External Source(s) of Aesthetic Experience

Kant's argumentation in paragraph 9 crucially depends on the similarities and differences between the way in which we formulate empirical cognitive propositions such as: 'This table is rectangular' and the way in which we make aesthetic judgments such as: 'This rose is beautiful'. Aesthetic judging is a quasi-cognitive process resembling empirical knowledge: they both start with perception and comprises the same cognitive powers. However, in making judgments of taste we don't subsume intuitions under concepts, so there is no real analogy between these two activities. What, then, guarantees that the thesis from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that we use our cognitive faculties in the same way and have a common cognitive structure, can plausibly be extrapolated to this case, considering that our cognitive powers play entirely different roles in this context?⁴⁷

Aside from this, disinterestedness and common cognitive structure are not sufficient to justify the inference that judgments of taste are universally valid: even when these conditions are satisfied, without an explanation of why some objects elicit the free play of imagination and understanding, while other objects do not, it seems that we still must accept that 'everything is beautiful', which is untenable. It seems that, just like before, Kant was at least partly aware that his argument must be supplemented with a discussion of the object. As Guyer states:

⁴⁷ Guyer seems to suggest a similar point in: Guyer, 2017, p. 8.

The third moment represents Kant's attempt to accomplish the traditional objective of aesthetics: that of directly specifying certain properties or even kinds of objects which license judgments of taste, without a need for further reflection on our response to these aspects or kinds of objects. (Guyer, 1979, p. 185)

Kant's aim is, as we can see, to identify what it is with respect to a beautiful object that renders a judgment of taste appropriate. In Kant's words, the beauty of an object is 'the form of *finality* in an object, so far as it is perceived in it *without representation of an end*' (Kant, 2000, 5:236). The object that satisfies this criterion has formal purposiveness, i.e., purposiveness without purpose. We can now see how the first two moments can be distinguished from the third moment. The theses of disinterestedness and common cognitive structure pertain to the subject and correspond to the transcendental ideality of beauty, thereby having a predominantly internalist character. By introducing the notion of formal purposiveness Kant, by contrast, emphasizes the empirical reality, which is an externalist element.

By introducing this externalist condition which pertains to the content of aesthetic experience, Kant goes a step further and tacitly equates the formal purposiveness of an object with its purposive form. The question is whether Kant is correct in doing so, since the two are categorically different. Formal purposiveness is purposiveness without purpose (and thus without a concept that determines the purpose), whereas a purposive form is a shape in the literal sense: a drawing, a composition, etc. In talking about purposive form, Kant most likely advocates the doubly formalist thesis that some property can be aesthetically relevant only if 1) it is manifest and 2) it belongs to the form of intuition (unlike colors and sounds).

If we, following Guyer, interpret the formal purposiveness of an object as 'its disposition to produce in us [the free play of imagination and understanding]' (Guyer, 1979, p. 69), we have a way to answer the 'everything is beautiful' objection; namely, we can reply that only beautiful objects have this property. However, we are immediately faced with the following problem. It seems circular to say that representations of beautiful objects arouse the free play of our cognitive powers because they have the capacity to do so. This objection can be answered by giving a detailed account concerning the basis of such a capacity. The representation of the object, we might say, has formal purposiveness because the object to which it pertains has a purposive form. Going beyond this is both risky and unnecessary.

Kant, however, adds that shapes which arouse the free play cannot be reduced to simple symmetry and regularity, and this makes his answer seemingly more informative. However, that view is only a natural implication of the relation between the purpose and the concept and doesn't really add anything new. If we want to remain true to the thesis that in giving judgments of taste we don't apply any concepts, it is clear that there can be no concrete answer to the question what the properties of the objects which arouse in us the free play are.

Although Kant doesn't state necessary and sufficient conditions for assessing whether the form of an object in our intuition is purposive, in the third moment he clearly adds an externalist element to his argument, and thus to his view of aesthetic experience. However, both his argument and his view of aesthetic experience are usually interpreted as internalistic, almost certainly under the influence of two main interpretations.

4. Main Interpretations as Essentially Internalistic

The first of these interpretations, the 'two-act view', is put forward by Paul Guyer (Guyer, 1979; Guyer, 2017). According to him, aesthetic experience consists of the two-step judging of the object. The first step, or act, is a simple reflection of the object, that is, a reflection that has been devoid of any interest. The expression 'simple reflection' refers to the free play of imagination and understanding, where 'simple' doesn't mean anything negative, but merely points to the view that this activity does not consist in the application of the concepts to individual cases. It is a quasi-cognitive activity in which indeterminate concepts play a role and which Kant sometimes calls knowledge in general. None of these concepts is further expounded by Kant. However, it seems that their main function is to make it clear that the activity in question is not genuinely theoretical.

The simple reflection results in a pleasure that pertains to the form of the object in subject's representation. Saying that it is 'disinterested' doesn't suggest that we are talking about some qualitatively distinctive type of pleasure, but that we merely talk about the causal history of this feeling. To say that pleasure is disinterested is to say that it is free (that it doesn't pertain to any interest). The former is a negative; the latter a positive formulation of the same thesis. Guyer's 'second act' refers to genuine aesthetic judging, that is, to a genuine judgment of taste. This act, or process, consists in some sort of analysis of the causal history of pleasure

which results from the ‘first act’. A subject’s claim that no interest occurs among the antecedent factors that led to our pleasure is, according to Guyer, the proper judgment of taste which is universally communicable.

Several criticisms have been put forward against this interpretation, from the thesis that it represents an uncharitable reading, according to which some of Kant’s views from paragraph 9 seem like nonsense or remnants of the views that Kant previously rejected (Allison, 2001), to the thesis that it focuses on a contingent relationship (Zinkin, 2006) which cannot explain normative necessity (Ginsborg, 1989; Ginsborg, 2014; Ginsborg, 2017). Hannah Ginsborg levies one of the strongest charges against Guyer by saying that his view is vulnerable against the ‘everything is beautiful objection’. Her main criticism is that Guyer seemingly equates an element of aesthetic reflection with two elements of synthesis Kant discusses while elaborating on theoretical cognition – the apprehension and reproduction (Guyer, 2017, p. 6). As the objection goes, since those elements are present in each cognitive act, and they are supposedly identical to an aspect of aesthetic reflection, then every time we cognize an object we have to render an aesthetic judgment:

Does the concept-free performance of apprehension and reproduction require only those capacities needed for the application of concepts to the manifold, or does it call on capacities over and above those required for ordinary synthesis in accordance with concepts? On the face of it, the first alternative may seem more plausible: if we take literally Kant’s suggestion of a threefold synthesis, then there may seem to be no reason why apprehension and reproduction should not occur without the final stage of recognition. But this alternative appears to lead to an unacceptable consequence, namely that we should feel pleasure in every act of cognizing a perceptually given object. (Ginsborg, 2014, p. 35).

Immediately afterward, Guyer proceeds to defend his interpretation by pointing out that:

[The free play of imagination and understanding] must be something like a sense of unity in the experience of an object that *goes beyond* the unity dictated by whatever empirical concepts are recognized to apply to the object. [...] I do not see why [this clarification] would entail that every object of knowledge will be found beautiful. Only some objects will allow this extra sense of unity in their experience. (Guyer, 2017, p. 7).

However, there is one general difficulty with Guyer's interpretation. If genuine aesthetic judging does consist in what Guyer says it does, then the true judgment of taste isn't aesthetic, but rather a theoretical judgment. Furthermore, it is a paradigm of a theoretical judgment (X causes Y). It looks like Guyer (implicitly) equates two types of judgments which Kant wanted to differentiate.

The second interpretation of Kant's argument comes from Hannah Ginsborg. According to her view, aesthetic experience is a singular, homogenous whole in which judging, judgment, and pleasure blend into one. Pleasure is not merely something we feel, but it also claims something (as if it were a judgment). This judgment, which is at the same time a feeling, has no (determinate) content (i.e., matter), and is in so far purely formal. But, this still doesn't mean that the judgment of taste refers to nothing at all. Namely, it recursively refers to itself and claims its own universal validity. As Ginsborg describes her view:

To say that we find something beautiful in virtue of being in a state of mind which self-referentially claims its own universal validity is [to have the thought] '*This* state of mind is universally valid', where the demonstrated state of mind has a phenomenal specificity which is not exhausted by its incorporating a claim to its own universal validity. [...] This claim to the universal validity of our experience does indeed imply that everyone should feel pleasure in the object, that everyone should judge the object to be beautiful, and that everyone's faculties should be in free play, but it also implies something more specific, albeit something which cannot be conceptually articulated: that everyone should feel *this* pleasure, that everyone should experience *this* beauty, and that everyone's faculties should be freely harmonizing in *this way*. (Ginsborg, 2014, p. 125)

It seems to me that here, as in the case of Guyer's interpretation, we have one general problem: can there really exist legitimate reasons for equating categorically distinctive things such as pleasure and judgment? Furthermore, her own view is itself the subject of the 'everything is beautiful objection', which Guyer formulates in the following way:

[Ginsborg's] account now seems open to the objection that she made against mine, namely that it will make everything beautiful. For certainly the experience of every object, or at least of many objects that we would not ordinarily judge to be beautiful, has the kind of specificity that can only be captured by pointing and saying 'this'. For example, if I now stare at the contents of my office wastebasket I will be having an experience of which, after I have said it looks like it contains some plastic wrapping, a card advertising a service I don't want, etc., I can only say 'it looks like *this*',

but of which I can also say ‘and if you are not colour-blind, and don’t have a bad astigmatism, etc.) it will look like *this* to you too’ – but none of that is enough to make it look beautiful or pleasing to any of us. (Guyer, 2017, p. 11-12)

Setting aside the potential issues that each of these interpretations faces, what they have in common is a reflexive or recursive view of aesthetic experience: Guyer sees aesthetic experience as a two-step mental act or process, whose one element refers to the other, whereas Hannah Ginsborg sees aesthetic experience as a homogenous unity of pleasure, judgment and judging. Even though Guyer and Ginsborg extensively discuss formal purposiveness elsewhere, they interpret Kant’s view of aesthetic experience and his argument for universal validity of aesthetic judgment as *par excellence* internalistic. Without appealing to external elements of aesthetic experience, it would be difficult for either of them to answer, on Kant’s behalf, the version of the ‘everything is beautiful’ objection outlined in the previous section.

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