

**Kant and Aesthetics:
an Introduction**

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Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 and died in 1804, having lived most of his life in Königsberg, a small German city with an undistinguished university. In 1766 he was appointed professor for the first time at the university. He gave an inaugural lecture as required and then proceeded to publish nothing at all for a dozen years. Why?

The answer came in 1781 with the publication of the first of three great critiques that he was to write, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (or, more clearly, the critique of reason purely employed). Without exaggeration one may say that this book revolutionized philosophy and much of the remainder of the intellectual map as well.

What did Kant do? To answer that question, we must first ask: what do philosophers do? And what major transitions have occurred in their manner of doing it? The answers, as with all philosophical answers, are matters of disagreement within philosophy, but here they are.

Philosophy is the discipline within which we try to determine how we *ought to be*:

how ought we to believe (that is, what is true)?
how ought we to behave toward each other (that is, what is ethical);
how ought we to structure our lives (that is, what if anything is teleological);
how ought we to structure works of art (that is, what is beautiful);
and so forth.

At various times various of the above questions have taken precedence. I believe, however, that the history of philosophy has witnessed only three major transformations.

1. The origination of philosophy by the Greeks in their attempt to distinguish reality from appearance (hence the focus on ontological questions).
2. The 'Copernican Revolution' of Kant in his attempt to distinguish what we can know from what we can only conjecture (for there may be things which are real but cannot be known to be real).

3. The linguistic transformation of Wittgenstein in his attempt to distinguish what we can say from what we cannot say (for there may be things, he believed, that can be known but cannot be said). (I suspect that a fourth transformation may occur, namely a consensus that perhaps Wittgenstein went too far. We must rather, long after Plato, refocus upon what can be *taught*, for what can be taught can be known regardless of whether it can or cannot be said).)

Kant, therefore, precipitated the first major transformation *within* philosophy 2000 years after its birth, and many philosophers believe that he got it essentially right (that the latter linguistic transformation, that is, was either a momentary aberration or simply the working out of ideas already present in Kant).

With that background, let's look more directly at what Kant did in his three great critiques, concluding with a sketch of his theory of the beautiful – for otherwise we shall surely misunderstand the point of the latter.

(I shall try to speak with as few technicalities as possible - and that, with Kant, is not simple.)

The First and Second Critiques

What in summary was the argument of Kant's first two critiques of 'reason' (originally intended to be a single work establishing the scope and limits of reason in both its theoretical and practical employment)?

1. Example of book before me: distinction between book as it appears and book as it is in itself, and hence between the book phenomenally construed as distinct from being noumenally construed. (Note: the world phenomenally construed is identical to the world noumenally construed; it is the same world!)
2. Similar distinction with respect to self.

Now, two questions:

What can we know about the world as it appears to us?

What can we believe (perhaps ought to believe) about that world as it is in itself?

We answer the first question by noticing that we can only know by judging, and thus the forms of possible judgment delimit the possible forms of the world as it appears (after being filtered through the pure intuitions of space and time – space and time

conditioning particular encounters, and the schematized categories conditioning our general judgments about them).

We answer the second question by noticing that we must frequently choose either to act in accordance with duty or otherwise (we are obliged by a moral imperative to act morally); and that we can act as we ought only if our maxims can be universalized. But that is to act *as if* we were free and immortal and *as if* our actions had an integrated place in a purposeful universe designed to accord with our cognitive and ethical purposes (to act, that is, *as if* God existed and were directing the universe purposefully for our benefit).

We are thus justified through moral considerations in acting *as if* we are free and immortal and *as if* God existed.

The Third Critique

After writing the first two critiques, however, Kant realised that he had inadvertently disclosed a gulf between the world as recognized and the world as desired (between the world as encountered by reason in its theoretical employment, that is, and in its practical employment). Could this gulf be bridged? Is there something other than the faculties of understanding (cognition) and desire (morals) that could serve as a bridge between them (for as moral agents we assuredly seek by willing to impose moral order on this amoral world)?

Kant suggested that the faculty of judging itself, when acting disinterestedly in aesthetic contemplation, effects this bridge, for beautiful works are the objects that we encounter that draw our attention most directly to the noumenal construal of the world – objects that appear necessarily to us to be *purposive* but without a concept of *purpose*.

To understand Kant's claims about judgments of the beautiful, we must first distinguish sharply between two kinds of judgments. Suppose, for example, that I were to affirm the following six things of a chair.

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Objective judgments: | The chair is red. |
| | The chair is heavy. |
| | The chair is metallic. |

Subjective judgments: The chair is interesting
 The chair is valuable.
 The chair is desirable.

The latter *subjective* judgements seem to say something about the chair but actually say something only about how I *relate* to the chair. They affirm more exactly that

I am interested in the chair.
I value the chair highly.
I desire the chair.

The difference between judging objectively and subjectively is crucial to comprehending the nature and consequences of Kant's account of how we encounter things as beautiful.

To Kant, a judgment that an object or event is beautiful is a *subjective* rather than objective judgment.

To claim that something is beautiful is to affirm how one *relates* to it rather than how it *is*.

What does such a judgment tell us about the relationship between the subject and the object? To encounter an object or event as beautiful, Kant thought, one must be aware of two things.

- a. The object or event must *seem* to be designed to serve a particular purpose (it must appear, that is, to be *purposive*), even though one cannot conceive of any purpose for which it is designed;
- b. When attempting to fathom its seeming purposiveness, one must *feel* the harmonious and free interplay of one's understanding and imagination as a uniquely *disinterested* pleasure.

So far, so subjective! Because the pleasure of our encounters with beautiful objects and events is uniquely disinterested, however (because, that is, of its formal or nonsensuous nature), two consequences follow that bridge the gulf between the world as encountered objectively versus subjectively and therewith phenomenally versus noumenally as well.

c. Being disinterested (that is, formal or nonsensuous), the pleasure accruing to our encounters with beautiful objects and events justifies our conviction that *any* being encountering them with similar understanding and imagination (that is, any being capable of *experiencing* them) ought to feel and thus judge of them as we do.

d. Upon reflection, therefore, the beautiful objects and events that we encounter within our world as phenomenally construed *symbolise* (that is, draw our attention to) the same world construable noumenally, reminding us thereby of the bedrock *moral* nature of our human way of being within it.