

Wittgenstein and Kant on Judgments of Taste: Situations versus Faculties

Christian Helmut Wenzel, Puli, Taiwan

Both Kant and Wittgenstein said aesthetics could never be a science, a science that would tell us which objects are beautiful and which are not. Wittgenstein said: "You might think Aesthetics is a *science* telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes well" (LC II 2); and Kant wrote: "The Germans are the only people who currently make use of the word 'aesthetic' in order to signify what others call the critique of taste. This usage originated in the abortive attempt made by Baumgarten, that admirable analytical thinker, to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles, and so to raise its rules to the rank of a *science*. But such endeavours are fruitless." (CPR, A21/B35) Thus both philosophers share the view that aesthetics is not a science. They also share a concern with language, Kant in his theory of judgment, Wittgenstein in his language games.

Despite these points of agreement, Wittgenstein and Kant reacted to different ideas, and they suggested different alternatives. Kant reacted to Baumgarten and the rationalists in general, who tried to reduce sensibility to reason. Wittgenstein thought that looking at judgments like "This X is beautiful" is taking a much too narrow perspective. He said that a word such as "beautiful" is "entirely uncharacteristic" (LC I 5) and that it is only people "who can't express themselves properly" that "use the word ["lovely"] very frequently" (LC I 9). When offering alternatives, Kant, on the one hand, offered an analysis of our ability to make judgments of taste, an analysis he carried out with regard to the categories and with the aim of revealing new *a priori* grounds for our power of judgment. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, pointed out the need to pay more attention to the complexities of situations in which aesthetic judgments are made and in which the more fine-tuned reactions and expressions occur, such as "Look at this transition", "The passage here is incoherent", "His use of images is precise" (LC I 8). He even, and more importantly, pointed out the relevance of gestures and facial expressions, which are much more fine-tuned than words. Kant and Wittgenstein thus pursued different projects, one examining our *faculty of judgment*, the other *situations and expressions*.

Kant focused on the judgment "This is beautiful", whereas Wittgenstein dismissed the relevance of the word "beautiful" and emphasized the relevance of the situation in which it is used: "We are concentrating, not on the words 'good' or 'beautiful', which are entirely uncharacteristic, generally just subject and predicate ('This is beautiful'), but on the occasions on which they are said – on the enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place, in which the [verbal] expression itself has almost a negligible place" (LC I 5). Would Wittgenstein dismiss Kant's analysis of the judgment of taste as well? In defense of Kant we can say that, although he focused on judgments of taste of the form "This X is beautiful", he certainly did not get entangled in an analysis of the word "beautiful", nor of sentences in which it occurs. Rather, he studied our ability to make such judgments and what this ability involves and requires.

As I see it, the main difference between Kant and Wittgenstein on judgments of taste is that Wittgenstein keeps looking for expressions, more and more fine-tuned expressions in words, gestures and facial expressions, whereas Kant freely makes use of concepts of mental faculties, such as 'imagination' and 'understanding'. This is the difference between looking at expressions and situations versus looking at faculties and subjective grounds for making judgments of taste.

Wittgenstein pays attention to the details of particular social and cultural *situations* in which aesthetic reactions have their place and in which expressions are used (words) or made (gestures and faces). He looks *outside*, while Kant looks also *inside*. Although Kant did not want to do psychology, certainly not empirical psychology, it is nevertheless difficult to deny psychological elements in his transcendental philosophy, especially the aesthetics-part of his third *Critique*, which is about feelings such as the "relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which ... the subject feels itself" (CPJ, par. 1). For Kant 'imagination' and 'understanding' are concepts that have *explanatory power*. He takes it as a fact that we all have imagination and understanding and that they have certain *functions*: Imagination is the faculty of intuitions and understanding the faculty of concepts. He subscribes to this set-up and operates, thinks and argues in these terms. Wittgenstein, at least the later Wittgenstein, did not do any such thing.

The crucial question here is what a theory in terms of faculties, a theory such as the one we have in Kant, can *explain*. Kant makes use of *idealized* notions, such as 'disinterestedness' and 'claim to universal agreement'. Not everyone would agree that such elements are at work in aesthetic experience. I once heard a Viennese musician exclaim that there is no such thing as 'disinterestedness' in listening to great music, and someone else told me that he never makes any such 'claims to universal agreement' in his aesthetic judgments. Kant's accounts are certainly idealizing. Nevertheless, for him these elements underlie judgments of taste and are essential to it. Without them you simply do not have a judgment of taste. This view was not uncommon in Kant's time. But for him they are also "moments" of a judgment of taste, a Kantian idiosyncrasy based on his theory of the "categories of pure understanding". Kant thus developed the "free play of imagination and understanding" and found the *a priori* "principle of subjective purposiveness". All of this is idealizing, theory laden, and somewhat constructed.

Wittgenstein would never have embarked on such a transcendental voyage. It would have been too speculative and too metaphysical for his taste. We seem to get a feeling for this from his remarks about Freud, whose theory of dreams he criticized for its lack of evidence and its speculative nature. "Take Freud's view that anxiety is always a repetition in some way of the anxiety we felt at birth. He does not establish this by reference to evidence – for he could not do so. But it is an idea which has a marked attraction. It has the *attraction* which *mythological explanations* have ... And when people do accept or adopt this, then certain things seem much clearer and easier for them.

So it is with the notion of the unconscious also.” (LC p. 43). These are strong criticisms. Would they also apply to Kant’s theory, which involves the categories, disinterestedness, the claim to universality, the free play of imagination and understanding, and so on? Does Kant’s theory have “the attraction which mythological explanations have”? Is it some kind of sophisticated mythological explanation?

The Kantian concepts certainly are not easy to grasp and they do not have an “attraction” for the general public. They might have an attraction for some philosophers, though, scholars who have worked themselves into the Kantian system and feel at home there. For them the Kantian concepts often do have an attraction and make “certain things seem much clearer and easier”. But these “things” are then not nightmares, dreams, or feelings of guilt. Rather they are other concepts from the Kantian philosophical system. But do things go further than that? Do also some “things” from our *every-day lives* “seem much clearer and easier” once we understand Kant’s theory and apply it? Here we could point at genius, art, aesthetic ideas, free and dependent beauty, and morality. To all these, Kant applied his general theory of taste, and not without success. His theory seems not without use.

Wittgenstein said of Freud that he established his theory of dreams not “by reference to evidence – for he could not do so”. Does Kant fare better here? Could he provide evidence? Can we? And what evidence would that have to be? Freud looked for causes, Kant for reasons and grounds. Freud wanted a science, Kant a transcendental philosophy. Thus Wittgenstein’s criticisms do not so easily carry over to Kant.

Psychology is not physics, nor is it the same as aesthetics. In physics we have strict laws, such as the laws of causality. In psychology we might hope to find such laws, but we don’t, and hence we “feel there is something unsatisfactory” (LC 42). Freud cannot show the necessity of the connections he is pointing out. He cannot show what the real causes are. “This procedure of free association and so on is queer, because Freud never shows how we know where to stop – where is the right solution” (LC 42). The explanations Freud gives might be simply wrong, mere speculation and ‘superimposed interpretations’ (LC 44). Nevertheless, they are attractive and tempting because certain things seem to make sense once one has accepted them. The explanations might be comforting, giving us excuses. When interpreting a painting for instance, we can say that this hat is a phallic symbol, and this can be convincing. But “the fact that we are *inclined* to recognize the hat as a phallic symbol does not mean that the artist was necessarily referring to a phallus in any way when she painted it” (LC 44). Wittgenstein accuses Freud of counting on such inclinations. Even *dis*-inclinations, he points out, have an element of inclination in them (LC 43), and Freud makes “intelligent” but illegitimate use of this. “To learn from Freud you have to be critical; and psychoanalysis generally prevents this” (LC 41).

But Kant’s analyses usually do not affect us in this way. They are more abstract and not about dreams and sexuality. They are not so “attractive” and comforting. But certain passages in Kant might make one wonder whether one is dealing with some kind of ‘superimposed interpretation’ (LC 44) as well. For instance, at the beginning of section six of the third *Critique*, where Kant gives an argument for the judgment of taste’s claim for universal agreement, he dangerously shifts from third-person to first-person perspectives. By way of empathy, he presents an argument as actually being made by – and somehow within –

the subject that makes a judgment of taste: “The beautiful is that which ... is represented as the object of a *universal* satisfaction. This definition of the beautiful can be *deduced* from the previous explanation of it as an object of satisfaction without any interest. For *one cannot* judge that about which he is aware that the satisfaction in it is without any interest in his own case *in any way except* that it must contain a ground of satisfaction for everyone. For since it is not grounded in any inclination of the subject ..., but rather the person making the judgment *feels himself completely free* with regard to the satisfaction that he devotes to the object, he *cannot discover* as grounds of the satisfaction any *private* conditions, pertaining to his subject alone, and *must therefore regard it* as grounded in those that he can also presuppose in everyone else; consequently he *must believe himself to have* grounds for expecting a similar pleasure of everyone.” (CPJ, § 6) Here a logical argument – if not in me (personally), then necessarily in everyone (universally) – is imbedded (by Kant?) in an act of reflection supposedly taking place within the subject who is in a state of aesthetic contemplation and makes a judgment of taste. Kant first argues more from the outside, that one can “deduce” something and that one “cannot judge” such and such “in any way *except* that” so and so. Then he repeats the argument, but this time more from the inside, taking on the role of the judging subject, getting into his skin, and thereby discovering what grounds he, the judging subject, “*must believe himself to have*” to make a judgment of taste. But why should *that man* need to look for any grounds at all? And even if he did, why should he have to follow the way of reasoning Kant suggests? Might this not be similar to taking the painting of a hat to be referring to a phallus? Might this way of reasoning, similar to the reference to a phallus, not be superimposed and projected?

Kant later on, in section nine, gives another argument for the claim to universal agreement, one that offers new grounds for this claim. (For a comparison of the two arguments, see Wenzel, p. 27-30). But these grounds turn out to be a certain ‘play of our faculties of cognition, imagination and understanding,’ and the ‘*a priori* principle of subjective purposiveness’. One again wonders whether these grounds might not be ‘superimposed interpretations’ (LC 44) or some kind of metaphysical *deus ex machina*. – But what kind of “evidence” can we reasonably look for in a transcendental philosophy? Freud is looking for causes, Kant for grounds. Thus Freud can be pressed for experimental evidence, not so Kant.

In the context of his criticisms of Freud, Wittgenstein says that “aesthetic questions have nothing to do with psychological experiments, but are answered in an entirely different way” (LC II 36). For him, aesthetics is not about tracing mechanisms and causality. Thus the more Wittgenstein sees Freud as a (pseudo-) scientist trying to find mechanisms and causal connections, the more he not only remains skeptical about his theory of dreams but also sees psychology – at least Freud’s psychology – as different from aesthetics (LC III 8, 11). But what then is aesthetics? Would Kant’s theory not be a suitable one?

Wittgenstein says that we have to learn many things (such as harmony in the case of music) in order to “get a more and more refined judgment” (LC I 15). Kant would most likely agree. But he was interested in our basic ability to make judgments of taste, and not in empirical ramifications. Wittgenstein, looking at some such ramifications, namely particular situations, says that they are so complex that it is impossible to describe them (LC I 20). So he leaves it there.

As Hume was skeptical about causality, so Wittgenstein was skeptical about dream connections: Both Hume and Wittgenstein were skeptical about certain alleged *necessities* (in causality and in our dreams). Kant tried to make progress over Hume by asking more radically (within his transcendental philosophy, based in particular on his notion of subjectivity of time and space) for the conditions of the possibility of our perceiving and understanding causal events *in the first place, as such*. It is in this sense that we should also understand his *a priori* principle of aesthetics. But Wittgenstein did not go in for so dramatic a transcendental turn, or transcendental twist (against Freud, for instance). Although he did show some sympathy for considering motives, justification, and the court of law in this context (see LC III 12-16) – which would bring us closer to Kant – he does not develop this into an aesthetic theory. Kant did.

Literature

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Email: wenzelchristian@yahoo.com