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## **Immanuel Kant's Aesthetics: Beginnings and Ends\***

DAVID FENNER\*

University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA

### **Abstract**

Immanuel Kant and his work occupied a space at the crossroads of several important movements in philosophy. In this essay, I look at two important crossroads in aesthetics. First, the subjective turn in aesthetics, when the focus on aesthetic objects (and events) was rebalanced with the focus on the subject's experience of such objects, the weight shifting from the objective to the subjective. Second, after many years and many theories advancing the view that universality of judgment could be achieved, at least in part, through adoption of the appropriate perspective – or attitude – when considering a particular aesthetic object, Kant offers us perhaps the most sophisticated view of disinterestedness of any, and as he does so he solidifies that tradition, bringing it to its culmination, and ushers in the beginning of its end.

### **Keywords**

Subjective, Subjectivity, Disinterest, Disinterestedness, Aesthetic Attitude

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\* Academic affiliation: University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA. Email: [dfenner@unf.edu](mailto:dfenner@unf.edu)

Immanuel Kant<sup>1</sup> and his work occupied a space at the crossroads of several important movements in philosophy. The existence of these junctions may be attributed both to his particular genius as a philosopher and to confluences in the natural course of the unfolding history of ideas. He was the right person at the right time. In this essay, I would like to look at two important crossroads in aesthetics. First, the subjective turn in aesthetics, when the focus on aesthetic objects (and events) was rebalanced with the focus on the subject's experience of such objects, the weight shifting from the objective to the subjective. Second, after many years and many theories advancing the view that universality of judgment could be achieved, at least in part, through adoption of the appropriate perspective – or attitude – when considering a particular aesthetic object, Kant offers us perhaps the most sophisticated view of disinterestedness of any, and as he does so he solidifies that tradition, bringing it to its culmination, and ushers in the beginning of its end. Crossroads are not the ends of paths, and there are certainly theorists who followed Kant who would identify themselves as formalists, as aesthetic attitude theorists, or as disinterestedness theorists, but as the world of art begins preparing for the advent of Pablo Picasso and Modern Art, as theories that hold that the promise of aesthetic realism – that we can achieve universality of judgment either through appreciating the right properties of objects and/or putting ourselves in the right epistemic position – soften to allow greater acceptance of varieties of taste and even antirealist approaches, the well worn paths are left by many for the trodding of new ones.

### **The Subjective Turn**

When it comes to aesthetics and the philosophy of art, the primary focus on objects (and events) goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> And for good reason: such a focus is simply natural. When we consider objects as aesthetic objects, it is the object that is the most natural point of focus. The object is the focus of our attention; it is the content of our experience; the focus on this object – and not that – is what differentiates the experience from one where the experiential content is different. That is the first reason but

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<sup>1</sup> Kant's views on aesthetics represented in this paper come from his *Critique of Judgment*, originally published in 1790 in Germany.

<sup>2</sup> As represented in Plato's *Ion*, *The Republic*, and *The Symposium*, and in Aristotle's *The Poetics*.

there are others. If our purpose is the exploration of our judgments of an object – perhaps in an attempt to discover either what makes a judgment correct or what makes one judgment better than another – then judgments must be comparable one with another. The stability of judgments seems most easily achieved through the one item that is (fairly) stable across judgments: the object itself. Finally, if aesthetics, taken narrowly and perhaps etymologically, is about how our senses uptake objects and how we uptake them in an unmediated way, how the properties or features of those objects, through our consideration of them, give rise to our appreciation of their aesthetic properties or features, then this is yet one more reason to have as our primary focus the object. Formalism<sup>3</sup> endures for so long – even to this day (see Zangwill, 2000a and 2000b) – because it makes sense; it is the natural first port of call when considering the nature of aesthetic attention. We focus on objects and on their properties.

While Plato's discussions of art were largely part of a somewhat different agenda, Aristotle is easily recognizable as a formalist. In the middle ages, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas were formalists. Closer to the present, Clive Bell, G. E. Moore, Eduard Hanslick, José Ortega y Gasset, Oscar Wilde and James Whistler were formalists; in the twentieth century, William Wimsatt, Clement Greenberg, Cleanth Brooks, André Levinson, Heinrich Wölfflin, Roger Fry, Stuart Hampshire, and dance critic Arlene Croce were as well. It is an impressive collection of theorists, and while up to the twentieth century this was the clear trend, we find formalists well past the advent of Modern Art, even past the point when we might expect to. The reason I believe is the attractiveness of the position, as I mentioned above.

Perhaps no one more than David Hume is responsible for the initial turn toward the subjective in aesthetics. His focus may be described as more epistemological than ontological. Instead of exploring the nature of objects, properties, and kinds of objects and properties, Hume instead chooses to concentrate on the subject and to explore the conditions of what it means for a subject to know that an object is beautiful. He begins – quite famously – with his statement on the nature of taste: there is no disputing it. When

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<sup>3</sup> Nick Zangwill is the leading voice in formalist aesthetics today. "Formal properties are entirely determined by narrow nonaesthetic properties, whereas non-formal aesthetic properties are partly determined by broad nonaesthetic properties..." And he defines a narrow nonaesthetic property as: "...the word "narrow" includes both sensory properties, non-relational physical properties, and also any dispositions to provoke responses that might be thought of to be partly constitutive of aesthetic properties." (Zangwill 1999, p. 610).

one experiences an object positively, one cannot be wrong in that positive experience. Such experiences are subjective and incorrigible, and so not open to others to inspect or to correct. In this Hume is referring to the experience itself and not to its objective focus. But when the subject goes beyond the report of what Hume called “sentiment,” and she offers a claim about the object itself – a claim about the object’s beauty – the dynamic changes and so do the standards. When one makes a claim about the beauty of an object, she means to say something that is true, and so Hume asks: how does she know? There are, says Hume, certain objective qualities – or patterns of qualities – that are designed to elicit a positive response. What these qualities are Hume does not say, and that he does not say is important. Instead of offering an objective formula in the style of those mentioned directly above, Hume instead looks at the epistemic position of the subject making the claim. If that subject is in the correct epistemic position, then she is prepared for offering a judgment that is worthy to be taken seriously as a claim about the truth. He says that if a subject has the correct attributes, that subject’s judgment will be worthy: the subject must

- possess a serenity of mind,
- possess a delicacy of taste,
- be well practiced,
- be versed in comparison among objects,
- be free from prejudice,
- and have keen senses.

Whether this approach to capturing the right epistemic position to render the right aesthetic judgment succeeds may be a controversial matter. One may reject the “true judge” approach because she believes it should be reducible down to objective formulizing, because it is too idealized, because we may tend to populate the criteria of who may be a “true judge” in ways that privilege certain biases, or because of the intransigent problem of disagreement between those who can rightly claim to be “true judges.” Whether any of these criticisms land, the strongest of the lot is the last: the possibility of unresolvable differences among “true judges.” This criticism is not only

theoretic, it becomes practical when the landscape of practicing art critics – individuals who may claim to fully instantiate the range of Humean attributes listed above – includes such diversity of opinion even about specific objects and particular events.

Despite drawbacks, Hume essentially draws a bright line in the sand, separating off those who prefer exclusive or otherwise strong foci on objects and those who wish to address the hope of commonality among aesthetic judgments by focusing on the judges themselves. As I said, perhaps no one is a stronger initiator of the subjective turn than Hume.

Perhaps no one with the arguable exception of Kant.

Hume's style of epistemology is recognizable. It is, from a justificatory perspective, a reliabilist sort. So long as the mechanisms by which the beliefs are developed – in this case, those mechanisms being traits descriptive of either the subject's ability, training, or disposition – the resulting belief counts as knowledge. In other words, it counts as a true judgment about the object's beauty. Kant's focus on subjectivity is different from Hume's. Kant's focus is on the nature of the subjectivity itself. While Hume focuses on traits that are, or may be, possessed by some subjects in order to establish a basis for quality judgments, Kant focuses on dispositions that can be adopted by any subject. In this sense, Kant's path is more closely aligned with the goal of acquiring judgments that are universal across subjects.

Kant's treatment of subjectivity is nuanced and detailed in order to achieve his goal. He begins, as he does in his treatment of ethics, by understanding the problem and thereby circumscribing what may be expected in an answer. The problem is the identification of the correct means to correctly ascribe beauty (or perhaps we could take the license to say "aesthetic worth") to an object or event under our consideration or as we experience it. The symptom or hallmark of finding such a thing is that correct judgments would then be universally common among all those employing these correct means. So universality – absolute commonality – among aesthetic judgments would not only be expected in an answer to the problem, we would know that we achieved an answer if universality among judgments were the result of the employment of these correct means. This is not to say that universality among judgments is a contingent matter, a matter that if

achieved would demonstrate a particular fact about aesthetic judging; universality of judgment is instead a premise upon which we proceed. It is endemic to the very question we seek to answer.

Kant's subjective focus is augmented by taking as a still narrower focus a subject's particular experience. He is not looking for nomological devices that would range over all or even a plurality of judgments. This frees him from the potential complaint that if lawlike formulas may be found within subjects' judgments, as those judgments take as their focus and content particular objects, the search for objective patterns, and so objective formulas, should not be abandoned. Kant says that no rules or principles of taste are possible.

Next Kant narrows the possibilities of an answer to his question by making a distinction that echoes one Hume made. While there may be no disputing taste, and no disputing preferences and likes – what Kant refers to as Judgments of Agreeableness, a matter that echoes Hume's initial focus on sentiment – Judgments of Taste, aesthetic judgments, are of a different sort. Judgments of Taste are not about the preferences of an individual subject; they are about the nature of subjective judgment itself. Judgments of Taste are not matters of logic or pure rationality. They cannot be, or else rules that govern logic and rationality would be applicable here, and no special treatment for aesthetic judgments would be necessary. So “agreeableness” has a role to play; affect or sentiment is a part of the equation. Its role is in concert, in balance, with the rational. This balance Kant describes as a “free play between the understanding and the imagination.” The ability to engage in this free play is common, Kant says, to every subject; we all have this ability – it is not relegated to the few – and so if we do carefully engage it, we are part way to our goal of rendering correct Judgments of Taste.

We can complete the journey to being able to render such judgments by ensuring that our judgments are not merely Judgments of Agreeableness but truly Judgments of Taste, and this we do by ridding ourselves of those very elements that make us different, subject to subject. We rid ourselves of the particularly of our preferences, our likes and dislikes, and this we accomplish by adopting the stance of disinterest. The commonality we experience with one another as we engage in free play between the understanding and the imagination is occasioned by removing what separates us from one another in terms of our

subjectivity. Through adoption of a disinterested perspective this is achieved. We will discuss below at more length Kant's particular conception of disinterest.

When we engage the free play between the understanding and the imagination, having adopted the attitude of disinterest, we see within those objects and events worthy of positive judgments a formality, a fit of formal elements, that may be described as "purposeless purposefulness." To see an object as formally purposive – in the absence of any particular purpose it might serve (because we are disinterested) – is to see its beauty or aesthetic worth. The free play we engage in allows us to appreciate an object without consideration for any label that might be attached to it, without consideration for any kind, set, or classification under which it might be subsumed or described. We regard the object simply in terms of its phenomenal characteristics, on their own and for their own sake. And, if the object is indeed beautiful or aesthetically meritorious, its phenomenal characteristics will exhibit a formal order that we come to appreciate on its own and for its own sake. It strikes us as internally coherent and fit. But this formal order is not a feature of the object per se; it is rather found in our appreciation of its properties and how they relate to one another. This makes the project supremely subjective. We all have this common ability to see these features in objects, and as we tap into our common subjective abilities, so we come to render judgments about the aesthetic nature of our experiences of these objects that is similar to the judgments of all others similarly engaged.

Perhaps no where in the history of aesthetics do we find a more detailed description of a theory, focused on the subject, than we do with Kant. Kant does not merely invoke the focus on the subject as a constituent part of a theory aiming to show how an aesthetic judgment may be justified; he explores the nature of subjectivity in depth, finding the answers to his questions in the very essence of the subjectivity. The focus on the subject is not a "locational" shift where we replace looking at the object and the objective with the subject and the subjective. It is not as if the answers to his questions are simply in a different location. In a real sense, the location – so to speak – is the answer. It is the nature of subjectivity that provides the answer; that nature, as Kant explores it, is the answer. We move, then, from answering the more common "what" question – "what is it that accounts for justification of aesthetic judgment" – to the deeper and more rewarding "how" question – "how does the nature of subjectivity provide for the justification we seek?"

While Kant may not get the credit for the initial big move into replacing focus on the objective with focus on the subjective – Hume might get such credit, or perhaps it is more properly shared generally with the British Taste Theorists as a whole – it is with Kant that the subjective turn in aesthetics, if we should call it that, is solidified. He stands at the crossroads. Or perhaps more metaphorically precise, he paves the path that Hume began to cut, and actually creates a crossroads. Some may wish to continue on paths that are object focused, but the vast majority of the contents of the conversations in which aestheticians and art theorists have engaged for the last two centuries have been much more focused in the other direction.

### **Judgments of Taste and Disinterest**

Kant's incorporation of disinterestedness as the principle means of capturing the correctness of aesthetic judgments was not Kant's invention. Many theorists who came before – and we will examine some – included disinterestedness, or a close cousin by perhaps a different name, in their theories. But Kant's explication of disinterestedness was perhaps the most nuanced, certainly the most detailed, and his incorporated some novel elements. Many aestheticians today go back to Kant's view when considering the nature of disinterest, despite the fact that there are disinterest theories working right into the late twentieth century, one of whom in particular was especially noteworthy (we will examine the view of Jerome Stolnitz briefly below). One plausible explanation is that Kant's view was special. That specialness is not only borne out by its sophistication, a sophistication itself borne out on the interconnectedness of disinterest with the whole of his view on aesthetic judgment, but also because in Kant disinterestedness reached its historic zenith.

While Kant stood toward the beginning of the subjective turn in aesthetics, he stood toward the end of the reliance on adoption of a special aesthetic attitude to secure correctness in aesthetic judgment.

The Aesthetic Attitude tradition began a number of years before Kant. It likely began with Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's focus was objective. He was, in fact, a Platonist about beauty, but he believed, despite having an



objectivist metaphysics, that the way one appropriately epistemically accessed the property of beauty in an object was to adopt a particular perspective. That perspective was one colored by disinterest in how the object might fulfill an instrumental role in service of some purpose or other. Shaftesbury's notion of the "moral sense" allows us access to the objective property of beauty and so it allows us access to making a correct judgment as we exercise our faculty of taste. Despite the fact that Shaftesbury's views have this subjective focus, on the whole he was still primarily an objectivist and formalist: he believed that beauty was present when an object possessed "unity in multiplicity." Shaftesbury ushers in something of the subjective and a first glance at disinterest as the crux of what it meant to employ the faculty of taste, but his Platonism and ensuing formalism kept his views as merely first steps along these paths.

The next theorist to walk along the path was Francis Hutcheson. The key difference between Hutcheson and Shaftesbury was that Hutcheson was not a Platonist. Instead he took a more naturalistic tact. Instead of a "moral sense," Hutcheson talked about an "internal sense," and instead of the "moral sense" being essentially about access to the super-objective, the "internal sense" was more psychologically or, perhaps more accurately, physiologically based, like the senses of sight, hearing, and so forth. As humans see the sky as blue in an unmediated way, so Hutcheson's internal sense allowed humans to see – so long as they were properly disposed to see – beauty. This is what and how, for him, the faculty of taste is and functioned. "Properly disposed" was of course to view disinterestedly, and as color differentiation is honed by practice, so the same is true of the exercise of taste. While Hutcheson's steps are definitely along a subjectivist path, in the end he too primarily trod an objectivist and formalist one, advancing the view that the natural formula that underwrites beauty is "uniformity amongst variety."

Of a still more scientific predilection was Joseph Addison. Addison sought to take a more empiricist tact toward explaining how Hutcheson's internal sense functioned. Instead of adding to the set of a person's senses, Addison's goal was to explain how we respond to "the great, the uncommon, and the beautiful" through our basic five senses. We use our senses, through a proper focus on the qualities of the object under our perception, to judge the object's aesthetic quality. And we can know that we are successful in adopting a proper focus through practice; through reading the great time-tested, time-honored classics, and

paying attention to their objective qualities as the basis for our judgments, we can know that we are judging from the right point of view. It is, of course, to view these objects and their qualities disinterestedly that fulfills the requirements of proper viewing.

Along this path of focusing on disinterestedness -- along this path of British Taste Theory-- Addison is followed by Archibald Alison. Alison, writing at about the same time as Kant, stressed disinterestedness even more than his predecessors did, and he brought the concept even more in line with the way we may think about it today. Given that his work was at a time close to that of Kant, and given that he was working in the British tradition, the influence on him of Hume and Empiricism was strong. Like Hume and Kant, for Alison the identification of the presence of beauty was as much about the imagination and associations of the subject as it was about features of the object. Through mindful, imaginative, and attentive engagement, characterized of course by disinterest, the subject could know that the result was indeed an identification of (objective) beauty and not of mere pleasure in the object or the experience of it. Through imaginative engagement, a bridge is created whereby the aesthetic features of the object are the focus of the subject's experience, and so we have a theory where the importance of the object and of the subject's consideration of the object are in balance in importance.

This is where Kant enters. As we saw above, Kant argues that one must adopt the proper attitude or perspective in order to render the conditions necessary for making a true Judgment of Taste. This perspective is, of course, for the attender to be disinterested. As with all those theories that came before and those that come after in the "disinterestedness" tradition, disinterest begins with an absence of consideration of any function or actual purpose to which the object may be put. But it does not stop there. For Kant, "disinterest" is more. Instead of being simply removed from consideration of the instrumental uses to which the object may be employed; instead of being removed from any personal or profitable interest in the object; instead of being merely "free from prejudice" as Hume would recommend; Kant describes disinterest in terms of regard for the actual existence of the object. To be disinterested, for Kant, means chiefly to take no interest in the actual existence of the object under consideration. We care only for the object as it is an object of our attention; we care only for the phenomenal manifestation of the object as we consider its properties, its features. That there is an object that exists in space and time is of no

concern because the only “purpose” to which the object is put, when we are engaged in the free play between the understanding and the imagination, is as the focus of that free play. Nothing else.

In addition to being immune from consideration of an object's function or actual existence, Kant says that being disinterested includes avoidance of bringing the object under consideration “under any category.” We must not consider the object of our attention as a this or a that; we must consider it merely as a collection of phenomenal properties arranged in a way that is pleasing. To consider the object “under a category” is to bring the object under external relations with other objects. Instead we must consider only the internal relationships the properties of the object have with its other properties; this is the way that we may come to see the formal order of the object, how its properties form a coherent whole that suggests that the object is purposive without any purpose to which the object may be employed considered.

As is the case with so many in this tradition, Kant's version is essentially negative. Disinterest is defined in ways we should not attend to an object.

Arthur Schopenhauer continues the disinterestedness tradition after Kant, but in an important sense he does not continue along the path that Kant trod. Instead he may be seen to turn all the way back to Shaftesbury. Schopenhauer was, like Shaftesbury, a Platonist about beauty. His commitment to Platonism was more than a mere metaphysical preference; Schopenhauer's commitment was almost functionalist. The “will” for Schopenhauer is a force that binds everyone with chains of desire and striving. One way out, one way to achieve relief, however temporary, was to experience the aesthetic. Through such experience one could connect with the supernatural – by which I mean something more like the Platonic realm of ideas than God. As the will is characterized by desire, aesthetic appreciation is characterized by the opposite, by disinterest, by shedding desire. Through adoption of the aesthetic attitude, the subject actually transforms the object from one with connections to other objects and to instrumental purposes to a different kind, to an aesthetic object -- for Schopenhauer, a distinct metaphysical category. Schopenhauer's views have an attractive coherence, and both the focus on the supernatural and on disinterest fit well into an overall view of the world Schopenhauer describes. In the end, while he may be seen to advance at least the motivation for adopting an attitude of

disinterest, and that motivation may be seen as subjectively located, his metaphysics goes well beyond the natural world.

From Schopenhauer, we enter the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where there are a variety of aesthetic attitude theorists: Edward Bullough's theory of "Psychical Distance," Vincent Tomas' theory of "Non-Categorizing Aesthetic Vision," and Virgil Aldrich's theory of "Impressionistic Seeing." But none is more in keeping with the Kantian tradition than Jerome Stolnitz' reformation of disinterestedness. To some degree, each of the first three mentioned above contributes something to the disinterestedness tradition. Bullough offers a distinctly psychological way of understanding the way that adoption of disinterest may work as well as implications that follow from his view. Tomas reinforces the Kantian notion of removing from consideration of an aesthetic object all relations that object may bear not only to all others but to all forms of classification. But it is Stolnitz' view on which we want to concentrate here, as he is the clear successor to Kant's views on disinterestedness.

Stolnitz' focus was not metaphysical, as was Schopenhauer's, and it was not about aesthetic judgment, as was Kant's, but it was firmly fixed on the adoption of the attitude of disinterest in order to secure the appropriate conditions for an experience properly labeled "aesthetic." Stolnitz begins by noting that all attention is selective; we select various aspects of the presented world for our attention and we ignore others. This is natural and necessary given the amount of sensory stimulation with which we would need to deal if we were to attend to it all. The selection of our focus is largely directed by our purposes. If we are hungry and our purpose is to address that hunger, then our focus will be on acquisition of food and on the nutritional and gustatory aspects of that food. It is when, says Stolnitz, we are attending to an object (or event) in the absence of purpose – when we are attending simply to the phenomenal properties of the object on their own, for their own sake -- that our experience will be an aesthetic one. Stolnitz coupled "disinterest" with "sympathy" in his articulation of the correct posture for aesthetic viewing and in so doing he ensures that "disinterest" cannot, in attending in the absence of consideration of purpose or instrumentality, devolve into "lack of interest." This is a notion that strongly mirrors the views of Bullough, mentioned above.

There are of course critics of both theories of disinterestedness and the notion that there exists a special attitude that renders experiences aesthetic or provides the appropriate subjective platform for quality aesthetic judgment. George Dickie being perhaps the most important of the latter, his view is that attention need not be divided into different kinds, aesthetic and not. Consideration of an object can incorporate at the same time attention to its aesthetic features and to features having to do with, say, the moral point of view being expressed by the object or perhaps by the artist. I have criticized the disinterestedness tradition by articulating the view, following in the spirit of Dickie, that on occasion the aesthetic value of an experience – the “aesthetic” value per se – can be enhanced when attention includes focus on the purpose of the object, such as being frightened when watching a horror film or worshipping God when attending a cathedral service. I argue that to see these perspectives – a purely aesthetic and disinterested one, and one that attends to the purpose of the event under consideration – as distinct is artificial (Fenner, 1996). There are, to be sure, more criticisms of disinterestedness available, but the point of this essay is not to argue the merits of the tradition but rather to try to show that Kant was its most nuanced and detailed advocate, and that after Kant, the tradition declines in popularity, with Stolnitz as perhaps the last great banner-carrier of that tradition.

While it might be natural to think that a greater focus on disinterestedness would result in a lesser focus on the subject, as disinterest was meant to release the subject from capture by personal concerns connected to consideration of objects as tools of one sort or another, strangely the opposite came to pass. The disinterestedness tradition, with the notable exception of Schopenhauer, moved from a more objectivist origin with Shaftesbury to increasingly psychological characterizations as it made its way through Hutcheson, Addison, and Alison. Indeed, Bullough's contribution to the conversation was published in the *British Journal of Psychology*. As the British Taste Theory tradition advances, they realize successively that disinterest is itself a perspectival tool, and as a means of manipulating perspective, it was indeed a matter that lent itself to empirical inspection, both as a tool per se and in the way that it functioned to achieve its end. While the end to be achieved was increased access to the “unbiased” – what many regarded and still regard as “objective” – it was never really, contra Shaftesbury and Schopenhauer, access to the “objective” in the Kantian sense of the word. That is, we commonly use the word “objective” in two ways, to denote a focus on the object and its features (the Kantian way)

and to denote as absence of bias or partiality. What disinterest meant always to achieve was the latter, an absence of the invasion of the particular personal preferences of the one doing the judging. With a clear distinction between these two different denotative senses of “objective,” the conflation of the one with the other was avoidable, and so we were able to see that movement toward the absence of personal particularity did not need to entail that our focus was locationally fixed on the object and its properties. This then allowed for the more psychological character of the conversation to grow.

No one can accuse Kant of being a psychologist in philosopher’s clothing. His theories – whether metaphysical or value focused – speak very clearly against that. Kant’s exploration of the subjective was never amenable to reduction to empirical inspection or formation. But with that in mind, Kant’s exploration of aesthetic judgment certainly had elements that might properly be called psychological. The incorporation of affect, and free play between the imagination and the understanding, perhaps could be further unpacked by empirical study.

For Kant, however, the normativity of correct aesthetic judgment that he sought could not be found through empirical inquiry, despite the fact that the British Taste Theory tradition, and perhaps even Hume himself, seemed headed in that trajectory. The normativity he sought could only be grounded, in his eyes, on truths that were universal to all subjectivity as subjectivity. And so disinterest, for Kant, was not a mere tool to acquire “objectivity” in the “unbiased” sense (as it was certainly not to acquire “objectivity” in the more metaphysical sense); disinterest was a way to sort out one’s subjectivity, to place one’s attentive focus on exactly those elements of one’s focus that are normatively relevant and ultimately normatively justificatory when rendering a Judgment of Taste. To repeat myself, Kant moved from the lesser “what” questions to the deeper “how” questions. And while the jury may still be out on whether Kant was successful in his aesthetic realist endeavors – that in aesthetic judgments there is something to be right or wrong about – there is no question that he took the foci on both subjectivity and on disinterestedness to new heights of philosophical sophistication.

## Kant's Enduring Influence

It is difficult to imagine where we might be in aesthetic and art theoretic conversations without Kant. One might argue that we would be in the same place we are, because aesthetics and art theory – properly and as a matter of fact – follow the world of art, artists, art appreciators and art critics and not the other way around. As Modern Art evolved – ushered in by artists like Picasso, Duchamp, Stravinsky, Wright, and Eisenstein – one could argue (as I will indirectly below) that a subjective turn in the theory that co-evolved with the art was inevitable. Alternatively, one might argue that if Kant had not drawn us further down the path of a subjective focus, another philosopher or set of philosophers, following Hume, may have or perhaps would have. But the fact is that it was Kant who more than anyone established the path that focused on the *nature* of subjectivity as an enduring and fairly pervasive aspect of aesthetic conversation.

Contemporary theories of aesthetic and artistic value have largely focused on the experience of the work of art.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary theories that speak to what makes an object or event a work of art have largely incorporated aspects that might well be described as sociological (Danto, 1964 and 1981; Dickie, 1974; Levinson, 1979). But the focus on subjectivity is not only to be found within the trajectories of these time honored conversations; subjectivity may be seen to have driven the advent and pursuit of what conversations we actually are having.

- What is the nature of aesthetic experience? This question is essentially about subjectivity, and it has been the focus of so much 20<sup>th</sup> century conversation, from Stolnitz as we saw above to George Santayana (1961), John Dewey (1934), and Monroe Beardsley (1969, 1981, and 1982).
- What is the nature of taste? How do we construct accounts of the value of aesthetic objects and/or art objects – theories or accounts dealing with specific instances of comparison of judgments – in the face of irreconcilable differences between the taste of judges? Theorists who advocate for aesthetic antirealism may do so precisely on these grounds.
- Do works of art have singular meanings or are they interpretable in a plurality of ways? Where do we focus to establish the correct meaning or meanings of works? Is there such a thing as the correct meaning or meanings of works? These sorts of questions have 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A good example: Goldman, 1995.

century answers that span the full breadth of possibilities, but one should not lose sight of the strength and popularity of the highly subjective facts taken by folks like Jacques Derrida or Stanley Fish (1982).

- What is the relationship between works of art and ethics? This conversation has picked up a great deal of attention over the last few decades (Eaton, 1992, 1997, and 2001; Carroll, 1996 and 2000; Gaut, 2007; Levinson, 1998; and Devereaux, 2004) and it has largely focused on the impact of works of art on the moral characters of those who attend to them. Such a focus on audiences and appreciators is resonant again with a subjective turn.
- Is the function of an object that happens to be a work of art relevant to its nature or its value as a work of art? While at odds with the disinterestedness tradition of which I claim Kant was the apex voice, the role of an artwork's function, I believe, is also indicative of a focus on the subject since functions necessarily involve reference to one putting the object to use. Marcel Duchamp's readymades are theoretically arresting precisely in view of the fact that they were (perhaps "were," perhaps "are") everyday functional objects. Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural artworks, if architectural works (including in Wright's case furniture) can be works of art, are only architectural artworks – and not sculptures – in view of the fact that they are functional. Tolstoy, Marx, and Mao all viewed art that is worthy to be worthy in view of its didactic, religious, or political function (as did Plato, but I can hardly claim that he was under the influence of the subjective turn that Kant influenced).
- What is the role of imagination in the construction of, or evaluation of, the aesthetic or art object? On at least one account of aesthetic value (Goldman, 1995), the construction of the world which is suggested by, but not fully furnished by, the aesthetic or art object necessarily involves a subjective imaginative contribution.
- What is the role of identification in the construction of, or evaluation of, the experience of an aesthetic or art object? Attenders to aesthetic objects and works of art on many occasions experience an identification with that object or work. These identifications can be personal – say, one identifies with the protagonist in a narrative work or with a certain place, time, or experience – or they can be with an idea or an emotion. Identifications can happen with an aspect of gender, sex, race, age, ability, capacity, ethnicity, nationality, religion, class, culture, politics, and the list may go on and on. Are such identifications – or associations – relevant to the description of the experience as an aesthetic or art



experience? Or relevant to the evaluation of either that experience or even of the object on which the experience is focused?

- Finally, I might go so far as to claim that the very focus on disinterestedness as an end in itself, or a necessary component of, the proper aesthetic evaluation of an object or event is itself an indication of the subjective turn. To turn to an epistemic mechanism to manage an axiological matter – to turn to the adoption of a perspective in order to adjudicate value – is in itself indicative of a greater focus on the subjective. And that seems certainly the case with Kant's treatment and embedding of disinterest within his overall view of Judgments of Taste.

Again, perhaps all of this – all of these conversations, all of these theories – would have happened without the influence of Kant's Third Critique. But our reality is not that. Our reality includes the Third Critique and to speculate on the counterfactual, while perhaps academically engaging, may result in the temptation not to give Kant the credit he is due for the construction of his views on aesthetics, views that by all indications have had so great an influence as to allow us to claim that they sent us on new paths.

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