

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**AESTHETICS IN HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVES-KANT REVISITED**

Kant and Aesthetic Skepticism

*Guido Antônio de Almeida, Professor,
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro,
Brazil.*

Traditionally, art has been related to *aesthetic* experience, i.e., experience based not on objective concepts but on feelings and subjective assessments. There is an obvious reason for this: application of predicates belonging specifically to works of art, such as “being beautiful” and, for that matter, as “being a work of art” at all, does not rest on objective rules - in contradistinction to predicates belonging to objects of nature, the concepts of which contain in themselves objective rules for their application (marks or identification criteria). In fact, it does not seem possible to lay down any rule for recognizing objects as works of art and for assessing their quality. Hence, it seems reasonable to think that deciding whether something is a work of art and assessing its value is a matter of *feeling*, not of objective rules.

Relating art to aesthetic experience has an obvious advantage: it provides art with a specific domain, irreducible to theoretical or practical knowledge. But it has also an obvious handicap: since feeling is a subjective matter, relating art to aesthetics seems to be in contradiction with the fact that assessment of works of art is taken to be *normative*, that is, valid in principle for everyone capable of judging works of art on the basis of feeling. Indeed, the possibility of art *criticism* seems to be endangered by the supposition that it depends on *aesthetic* judgments insofar as these are ultimately a matter of *feeling* alone.

Kant has devised an ingenious theory, based on his concept of “reflecting judgments”, in order to make sense of the idea that one can make judgments on the beautiful on the basis of one’s own *taste* (and, thus, ultimately on the basis of one’s own

feelings of pleasure or displeasure), and nonetheless rightfully claim universal validity for them.

However, contemporary art seems to have turned its back on the beautiful and on aesthetic experience altogether. As a consequence, it also seems that Kant's Aesthetics has suffered the same fate that befell, according to some of his critics, his epistemology, *viz.*, that it has been rendered obsolete by contemporary art in the same way that his epistemology was allegedly superseded by non-Euclidian geometry and post-Newtonian physics.

I think that this kind of objection is completely misguided, but I do not intend to prove it, since that would require an ample knowledge of contemporary art, which I do not own have in a limited way. Instead I want to argue in this paper for a more modest claim, *viz.*, that refusal of the basic tenets of Kant's aesthetic theory may be a more complicated thing than it seems at first sight and, indeed, if possible at all, only at a very high price, maybe one we cannot or do not wish to afford.

To my mind, the basic tenets of Kant's theory are only two. The *first* one is encapsulated in the concept of "aesthetic reflecting judgments". I take it to be the idea that aesthetic experience is of a *judgmental* nature and that aesthetic judgments, though *based on feeling*, have *universal validity* insofar as feeling is here connected with reflection (and not with the satisfaction of our desires). The *second* tenet is the idea that there are only two basic feelings, those corresponding to the beautiful, based directly on the feeling of pleasure, and those corresponding to the sublime, whose connection with the feeling of pleasure is mediated by a previous feeling of displeasure.

I hold then that the price for rejecting these basic tenets is not only aesthetic skepticism (concerning our capacity to make normative judgments about the beautiful and the sublime), but also skepticism of a more global nature about the possibility of knowledge (in the case of aesthetic judgments on the beautiful) and about the possibility of moral judgments (in the case of aesthetic judgments on the sublime}.

Now, the idea that aesthetic judgments may have universal validity makes sense only if we se presume that the feeling of pleasure they are based on depends on a *subjective, but universal* condition, that is to say, on a condition that we may *a priori* know to be satisfied by all individuals capable of judging and having feelings.

Given Kant's starting point (the fact that we distinguish aesthetic judgments on the beautiful from aesthetic judgments on the agreeable insofar as we claim universal

validity for the former while disclaiming it for the latter), this universal subjective condition of aesthetical judgments must be connected with our *cognitions*, and not with our desires.

Why? Because if we connected them with the satisfaction of our desires, our judgments on the beautiful would be undistinguishable from our judgments on the agreeable (which contradicts the initial hypothesis) and, therefore, would lack universal validity.

As a consequence, since the universal subjective condition of aesthetic experience must be connected with our cognitions, rather than with our desires, the foremost task of Kant's theory must be that of establishing what constitutes the subjective condition of our cognitions and then showing how this epistemic condition is related to aesthetic feeling.

Now, since our cognitions are, according to Kant, of a *discursive* nature (i.e., depend on subsumption of objects given in intuition under objective concepts, since we are finite beings who do not perceive objects by just thinking them and, consequently, depend on the fact that objects are given to us in sense intuition), it is a relatively easy matter to state both the universal objective and the universal subjective condition of knowledge.

The objective condition of knowledge is simply the possibility of subsuming objects (given in sense intuition) to concepts (produced by the understanding), or conversely the possibility of relating concepts produced by our understanding to sense-intuitions.

Considering now that the occurrence of sense intuitions and the production of concepts are due to specifically distinct mental activities, the subjective condition is then just the agreement of these activities. They are: the activity of the imagination (to which Kant ascribes sense intuitions insofar they involve the representation of form) and of the activity of the understanding (because, in order to have concepts, which are general representations, we must produce them by reflecting on the common marks of objects given in intuition).

Of course, whenever an objective condition of knowledge (which is the subsumption of an object under a concept) is satisfied, the subjective condition (which is the agreement of our cognitive faculties, imagination and understanding) will also be satisfied. When that occurs, the outcome of the accordance of our cognitive faculties is a judgment in which an object (given in intuition and apprehended by the imagination) is

subsumed under a concept (produced by the understanding). It is this kind of judgment that Kant names now a "determining judgment".

However, since concepts must first be produced, so that we can subsume a given object under it, we have to accept the possibility that the subjective condition of cognition can be satisfied *before* and even *independently* of the production of a concept, therefore, without the intervention of any concept (or, at least, without the intervention of any positively determined concept).¹

This hypothetical concurrence of the imagination with the understanding without the intervention of any determinate concept may also be described as a judgment. Indeed, in this case we are still at grips with subsuming a given form, not under a concept, of course, but under the reflexive activity of the understanding. It is this judgment that Kant names then "reflecting judgment".

A reflecting judgment may exist as an act implicitly contained in a determining judgment (since satisfying the objective condition of knowledge presupposes satisfying its subjective condition). But it may also exist separately, if we admit that the understanding may judge that a given form is liable of being thought under an indeterminate concept. In this case, however (this is Kant's central thesis), only through *feeling* can we become aware of the suitability of this form for an indeterminate concept, that is, that the understanding is not able to determine in any positive way.

To be sure, pleasure with form is not to be explained by the sole fact that it is a suitable object for reflection. This happens in any cognitive activity and need not be accompanied by pleasure. Pleasure in reflecting on a form arises in two related ways: firstly, because the form is apprehended as if it were made possible by a concept, i.e., as purposive, although we are not able to formulate the concept according to which it has been produced. Secondly, because the impossibility of indicating the concept which seems to make possible the apprehended form occasions a reflective activity in which the imagination and the understanding stimulate each other and which can be pursued for its own sake, i.e., as a playful activity (or to use Kant's own words: as "a free play of the imagination and the understanding").

According to this analysis, pleasure has a twofold relation to reflection. On the one hand, pleasure is *occasioned* by reflection, and insofar depends on a universal condition, which one may take to be satisfied by any individual capable of judging. On the other hand, pleasure is not only the effect of reflection, but also *the way we become*

aware of this activity as a successful one, i.e, as a successful subsumption of the imagination under the understanding.

Up to this point, Kant's explanation (of how our aesthetic judgments can be at the same time subjective and nonetheless normative for all individuals capable of judging) seems to stand on firm ground. However, due to his starting point (which is, as you remember, the distinction of reflecting aesthetic judgments on the beautiful and sensuous aesthetic judgments on the agreeable), two fundamental objections can be raised against it. The first one is that Kant presupposes what his theory must prove, since it accepts as a fact (either of linguistic usage or common sense) the necessity of distinguishing judgments on the beautiful, because they are subjective but universally valid, and judgments on the agreeable, because they are also subjective but not universally valid. The second one is the objection that his theory is limited to aesthetic judgments based on the feeling of pleasure and thereby seems to ignore the fact that there may be much more in art and in aesthetic experience in general than just feelings of pleasure and displeasure².

I think that the best way to handle the first objection is by conceding it and showing that this concession doesn't really do any damage to the theory. To be sure, there is no compelling reason to accept the initial distinction, besides the claim that it is a matter of linguistic usage or the common-sense, pre-philosophical way of using the predicates "beautiful" and "agreeable".

The argument depends, therefore, on our readiness to accept its initial premise, and should be best understood as a hypothetical argument of the form: "If judgments on the beautiful differ from judgments on the agreeable in the indicated manner, then judgments on the beautiful must be taken as depending on a subjective, but universal condition, which is the free play of the imagination and the understanding". Of course, the persuasive force of the argument is considerably diminished if cast in this form, since it cannot preclude alternative ways of understanding judgments on the beautiful, based on rejection of Kant's premise.

However, it should not go unnoticed that all alternatives involve some kind of reductionism, since rejection of the common understanding must lead either to a reduction of judgments on the beautiful to subjective judgments on the agreeable, or to a reduction to objective judgments (on what is good or true).

Whatever may be the reduction, it will involve too some skepticism about the possibility of judging at the same time *aesthetically* and in a *universally valid* way. If we assimilate the beautiful to the agreeable, we must doubt the possibility of judging in a *universally valid* way about the beautiful, since the beautiful will not be specifically distinct from the agreeable. If we assimilate the beautiful to an objective representation of what is true (is the case) or is good (should be the case), we must doubt the possibility of judging *aesthetically* on the beautiful. In both cases, we shall be doubting or denying the possibility of aesthetical judgments on the beautiful such as defined on the basis of our pre-philosophical understanding of the concept, i.e., as being used in judgments based on feeling and yet universally valid.

At first sight, aesthetical skepticism appears to be an acceptable alternative. However, what seems possible at first sight may in the end prove to be much more problematic than it looked and, all things considered, even impossible.

Indeed, although the premise of Kant's argument has to be introduced as a hypothesis, it is possible to establish regressively, by conceptual analysis, the conditions of possibility of that which was hypothetically introduced. Now, if we have an independent reason for asserting this condition, we may assert also that the hypothetical premise from which it derived by analysis has also been regressively established and can be now categorically asserted.

Now, analysis revealed that the condition of possibility of judgments on the beautiful (namely, the correspondence or harmony of the imagination and the understanding in the reflexive activity preceding formation of concepts) is a subjective condition of cognition in general³. That is why it is not possible to doubt the possibility of judgments of taste, such as described by Kant, without doubting the possibility of knowledge in general. To my mind, this is the gist of what Kant calls the "deduction" of judgments of taste, since this "deduction" amounts to arguing that the condition of judgment of taste is the condition of reflecting judgment in general, which is on its turn the subjective condition of knowledge in general.⁴

The first fundamental objection to Kantian Aesthetics can be disposed of now in a more straightforward way. The objection was that Kant's argument is hypothetical, since it depends on the previous acceptance of the idea that judgments on the beautiful are specifically distinct from judgments on the agreeable, hence does not prove categorically the possibility of universally valid aesthetic judgments. The reply to the objection is then

simply the claim that, although the distinction between judgments on the beautiful and judgments on the agreeable was introduced hypothetically, analysis showed that the possibility of universally valid judgments on the beautiful depends exclusively on the satisfaction of the subjective condition of knowledge in general, therefore cannot be categorically rejected unless one is prepared to reject the possibility of knowledge altogether. Thus, one can say that, although the *ratio cognoscendi* of this possibility is the initial, hypothetically introduced distinction between judgments on the beautiful and judgments on the agreeable, analysis of this notion shows that their *ratio essendi* (the reason why universally valid aesthetic judgments are really possible) is the fact they depend on the subjective possibility of knowledge, which cannot be doubted unless we are prepared to embrace not only aesthetic, but also epistemological skepticism.

Let us tackle now the second fundamental objection to Kantian Aesthetics, which is, as you remember, that it has a limited scope, since it ignores the fact that there may be much more in aesthetic experience than just feelings of pleasure and displeasure.

To be sure, there is an enormous variety of feelings, many of which may be relevant to aesthetics and the appreciation of art. This, however, does not entail that feelings of pleasure and displeasure are just a specific kind of feeling among many other kinds, different from pleasure and displeasure. In point of fact, it can be argued that pleasure and displeasure are basic ingredients of any specific kind of feeling, and that the enormous variety of feelings originate from their connections with [i] extrinsic elements, different from feeling itself, namely cognitions (or representations of objects) and desires (or representations having a motivating force), and [ii] intrinsic, but accidental factors, such as degree or intensity of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. So, e.g., the specific feeling of *fear* can be defined as a feeling of displeasure with the anticipation of danger, connected with the desire to avoid it by fleeing or fighting, and varying from slight apprehension to panic and terror.⁵

If this is correct, as I think it is, pleasure and displeasure must be taken as essential elements of all feelings, and also as the only thing that depends exclusively on the capacity of feeling by itself, since all other elements of feeling depend on our cognitions and desires. Thus, the most that can be conceded to the objection above is the admission that *there may be more* than pleasure or displeasure in the appreciation of a work of art, but there is *never less* than that.

However, all things considered, even this concession may be excessively generous. Indeed, aesthetic pleasure and displeasure are connected with reflection, and reflection can originate a second-order feeling of pleasure or displeasure, i.e., a feeling of pleasure that is occasioned by reflecting on a previous feeling (originated also by reflection).

This can be easily seen in the practical and especially in the *moral* sphere. Thus, we can be displeased by our own delight in another person's misfortune or, conversely, pleased by the fact of having a sympathetic nature and a natural aversion to seeing other people suffering. The most interesting instance, however, in the present context, is Kant's description of the feeling of respect for moral law is, since it involves the very concept we are dealing with, namely, that concept of sublimity. Moral law, explains Kant, causes displeasure insofar as it restricts the possibility of fulfilling all our desires, but in doing so it awakens at the same a positive feeling of respect for it. By the same token, the consequent "humiliation" of our natural self-love by the moral law is surmounted by the elevation (*Erhebung*) of our moral self, that is, by the awareness that moral law gives sublimity (*Erhabenheit*) to our moral self, i.e., a value that is incomparably greater than any pleasure that might result from the satisfaction of our selfish desires.⁶

But the important thing for us is that something analogous can occur in *aesthetical* experience. Indeed, since aesthetical experience is occasioned by reflection, and reflection on given feelings can occasion second-order feelings, one cannot preclude the possibility that reflection on a given aesthetical experience may also occasion a second-order aesthetical experience.

Now this is precisely the case of the feeling connected with experience of what Kant calls the sublime. Indeed, this feeling can be explained as a feeling of pleasure resulting from the awareness that a previous feeling of displeasure was occasioned by our being conscious of something that surpasses this initial displeasure and makes possible, so to speak, to sublimate it.

Kant shows this by considering the attempts to find an intuitive representation of that which we usually call "sublime". Taken in its usual meaning, the predicate "sublime" applies to something that surpasses everything else in size and greatness or strength and force. Thus, the vastness of the sea or the starry sky above us are usually described as sublime, and sublime too is for us the violence of nature in volcanic

eruptions or in a tempestuous ocean. Kant observes, at first, that a representation of something great and powerful is already pleasing in itself, insofar as it "expands" our faculty of cognition. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that nothing in nature can properly be considered absolutely great, since for all given magnitude something greater can be conceived. The idea of the sublime is, therefore, an indeterminate concept of reason, for which it is on principle impossible to find anything in sense intuition that might be congruent with it.

That is why every attempt of the imagination to offer an intuitive representation of the sublime inevitably fails and is accompanied by a feeling of displeasure. However, this feeling of displeasure can only arise if the imagination is solicited by reason to present the sublime in sense intuition. Now, the fact that we are in possession of reason confers on us a value that surpasses the greatness of any sense object, insofar as we are able not only to *think* what is absolutely great, but also to *accomplish* it through our moral will as that which is "absolutely" good (or good "without restriction"). That is the reason why the feeling of displeasure that originates when we reflect on the incapacity of the imagination to offer a representation of the absolutely great is necessarily accompanied by a feeling of pleasure with the awareness of the "vocation" of reason, so says Kant, to think the absolutely great and of our "disposition" or "receptivity" to moral ideas.

If Kant's analysis is correct, as I think it is, he has proved at least the possibility of pleasure resulting from reflection on a previous feeling of displeasure also occasioned by reflection. Insofar, he has secured room within aesthetical experience for a second category besides the category of the beautiful. Taking this together, now, with Kant's account of first-order pleasure (in the beautiful), we can say that he has successfully shown that there are only two possibilities of engaging in aesthetic reflection: either we engage in *reflection on what reflectively pleases us* (because it simply pleases us, i.e., is "beautiful"), or we engage in *reflection on what reflectively displeases us* (because its displeasing us somehow pleases us, i.e., is "sublime", or rather helps us to sublimate our initial displeasure by making us aware of something in us which is incomparably great).

Of course, the beautiful and the sublime do not exhaust the totality of particular aesthetical feelings and concepts, but they do comprise them all under them, since all particular aesthetical feelings and concepts have to be thought as variations of these two basic categories, which arise by adding to them either intrinsic but accidental aspects (such as difference in degree, as e.g. the difference between what we call *pretty*,

beautiful, gorgeous) or extrinsic aspects (as e.g. in the concepts of what is *gracious, fine, elegant* etc.).

Is doubt about the possibility of reflecting aesthetic judgments on the sublime admissible? Apparently Kant did not think so, since he did not append a "deduction" to his "exposition" of judgments on the sublime. He was probably right in this matter, for, although there seem to be two ways of casting doubt on it, both are difficult to be carried out. The first one is by doubting the possibility of *aesthetical* judgments on the sublime. However, since the possibility of reflecting aesthetic judgments has already been established as well as the possibility of what we called "second-order feelings", this issue is closed for us.⁷ The other way is by doubting the possibility of whatever judgments on the sublime, by alleging that we have no standard by which we could pass judgment on this kind of thing. However, since there is a moral standard for sublimity, it seems that skepticism about the possibility of judgments on the sublime is only possible at the price of skepticism about morality, at least in the sense in the sense of something that is good without limitation insofar as it limits the possibility of choosing whatever is good in the sense of being agreeable or useful for one's own private purposes.

A final remark before ending: by defending these sweeping claims about the importance of Kant's theory I do not intend, of course, to hold the view that it is the only possible account of aesthetic experience. That would be a foolish claim, since nobody can exclude beforehand the possibility of equally satisfactory alternatives or even more satisfactory ones. What I sustain is the more modest view that any alternative must be compatible with a Kantian view on the matter, and this precisely because refusing it demands such a high price, which is skepticism not only about aesthetics, but also about knowledge and morality.

Addendum:

Kant's argument in the Exposition of the concept of universally valid judgments of taste is hypothetical, since it depends on acceptance of a premise, which in fact has to be proven, namely, that aesthetic judgments on the beautiful are irreducible to aesthetic judgments on the agreeable. However, the argument establishes regressively, by conceptual analysis, the condition on which aesthetic judgments on the beautiful must rest if they are to be taken as irreducible to aesthetic judgments on the agreeable. This

condition was, as seen, the awareness through feeling of the "subsumption of the (activity of the) imagination under the (activity of the) understanding" in a "reflecting judgment".

Now, subsumption of the imagination under the understanding is the subjective condition of knowledge in general and cannot be refused without assuming epistemological skepticism. Likewise, it is not possible to deny the possibility of satisfying the subjective condition of knowledge in "reflecting judgments", since this is a previous condition for the production of objective concepts. Hence, denying this possibility also implies epistemological skepticism.

Finally, it is equally impossible to deny the possibility of being aware through feeling of the subsumption of imagination under the understanding, since, in the absence of concepts, only feeling can make us aware of the relation between the imagination and the understanding. Therefore, unless we assume epistemological skepticism, we cannot deny the possibility of aesthetical reflecting judgments such as premised by Kant in his argument.

Of course, Kant's argument is thereby supported by another hypothetical argument, the hypothesis being now the claim that knowledge is possible. Thus, Kant's argument, fully spelled out, is of the form: if discursive knowledge is really possible, then aesthetic reflecting judgments (on the beautiful) are also really possible.

Therefore, in order to replace Kant's argument by a non-hypothetical argument, we should have to rely on a refutation of skepticism. Kant's Deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding (insofar as it is intended to prove the necessary conformity of all our sense-intuitions to concepts of object in general) and the Deduction of the principle of formal and subjective finality in the third Critique (insofar as it is intended to prove the possibility of finding for every form of nature a suitable empirical concept) may be regarded as a proof of the possibility of empirical knowledge. The first premise of these Deductions is the principle of the unity of apperception: "The 'I think' must be able to accompany all my representations", which is introduced not hypothetically, but categorically.

¹ Not, however, without possession of some indeterminate concept, since the understanding cannot think what is given in intuition without possessing at least a point of view for the production of concepts (such as the relational concepts, mentioned by Kant in the chapter on the *Amphiboly*, in the first *Critique*) and formal concepts of an object in general (namely, the categories, through which the understanding thinks the form of objects that can be given in sense intuition).

² This is A. Danto's standard objection, more recently repeated in: "Les significations incarnées comme Idées esthétiques", *JAAC*, no. 1 2007 (fev/mar), p. 19 and 27.

³ Of course, what entails epistemological skepticism when judgments of taste are reduced to other kinds of judgment (subjective judgments, if reduction is to the agreeable, or objective judgments, if reduced to cognitive or practical judgments) is the refusal of the supposition that imagination and understanding can relate to each other before or independently from the production of determinate concepts.

⁴ See addendum at the end of this paper on the hypothetical form of Kant's argument and on what is needed in order to give it a categorical form.

⁵ Cf. A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion, Will*, or E. Tugendhat, *Bewusstsein und Selbstbewusstsein*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978. Kant's definition of pleasure also makes the same point, although in a more opaque way. "Pleasure is the representation of the agreement of an objection or an action with the subjectives

condition of life, i.e., with the faculty of the causality of a representation with respect to the reality of its object (or with respect to the determination of the powers of the subject to action in order to produce the object" (*CPrR*, V, p. 10:144 n., M. Gregor's translation). Kant's definition of pleasure *CFJ* can be more easily paraphrased as the awareness of the state we find ourselves in relative to what we desire or know to be the case and that motivates us to stay in this state or to abandon it.

⁶ "The lowering of pretensions to moral self-esteem – that is, humiliation on the sensible side – is an elevation [*Erhebung*] of the moral – that is, practical - esteem for the law itself on the intellectual side; in a word, it is respect for the law, and so also a feeling that is positive in its intellectual cause, which is known a priori" (*CPrR*, Ak. 5:79).

⁷ Of course, any issue in philosophy can be reopened, but then we would have to go over again the same argument presented above.