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**Uninterested Pleasure and Aesthetic
Freedom: an Actual Interpretation of
Kant’s Aesthetics**

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1.

It may safely be said that Kant’s aesthetics has been considered as the aesthetics that is far away from everyday life. The reason probably consists in the fact that he analyses the ground of aesthetic experiences, i.e., of the beauty and the sublime of nature, from the transcendental point of view.¹ Many people accordingly say that his aesthetics is nearly meaningless these days. Since about the 20th century, we have been in the situation where the thing we can empirically prove of its certainty has become more important. This situation has been even more accelerated with the rapid development of scientific technology. Therefore, Kant’s aesthetics as well as philosophy in general seems to be getting obsolete.

Although Kant’s thought of aesthetics focuses on the scope of transcendental things, however, at least his aesthetics is never far from everyday life. Contrary to popular belief, the Kantian aesthetic experience is different from everyday life only in so far as it is connected with the latter.²

According to Kant, aesthetic experience is based not upon concept, but upon feeling. This experience is irrelevant to the function of the transcendental understanding (Verstand), i.e., to the categories of substance [Substanz] and attribute [Inhärenz], etc.: these categories have no part in aesthetic judgment.³

The interesting and important thing is that the feeling of the judgment of taste explained by Kant is a kind of peculiar one. It is not related with any interest, contrary to feeling in general. In a word, according to Kant’s analysis, the experience of the beauty of nature is grounded on the feeling unrelated to interest, i.e., on the uninterested pleasure.

How is it possible that we can get a pleasure without any interest? It is no wonder that someone has doubts about the possibility of uninterested pleasure. As a matter of fact, many people regard uninterested pleasure as an impossible thing. Though such a pleasure could be possible, according to their point of view, it can not be an actual one. This means that an uninterested pleasure could be possible at most within the domain of the so-called transcendental self [das transzendente Ich].

This paper does not aim to investigate whether uninterested pleasure could be actually possible or not. Now I will just try to examine and to explain an aesthetic freedom concealed in Kant’s concept of uninterested pleasure in terms of a flexible attitude to

everyday life and a role of the aesthetics of art. With this, I would like to make sure that an impartial point of view built on the Kantian aesthetic experience can be full of suggestions concerning the external thing of as well as the internal one of aesthetics.

2. Uninterested pleasure and being free from partiality

In the opening of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant calls the judgment of the beauty of nature the aesthetic judgment. Here he defines the aesthetic thing (das Ästhetische) as follows:

In case the representation of an object given to us is not related with the concept of understanding, but only with the feeling of pleasure, it is called the aesthetic.⁴

According to him, an aesthetic judgment is the one that is rooted in the pleasant or unpleasant feeling of the subject. He furthermore declares that the judgment of the beauty of nature entirely consists in such a feeling, being set free from any determination of understanding. He calls it the pure aesthetic judgment.⁵ This judgment is exactly what he designates the judgment of taste.

According to his analysis, the first element of this judgment lies in the fact that it is founded on uninterested pleasure. We can usually get a pleasure only when we are interested in something or someone, etc. In this point, it is not easy for us to accept that a feeling is grounded on uninterested pleasure. In order to recognize what Kant's concept of uninterested pleasure is like and to grasp what sense it involves, therefore, we need first of all to scrutinize the concept of the interest that he defines in the *Critique of Judgment*.

He defines interest as follows:

It is called a pleasure related with the representation of the presence of an object. Therefore, such a pleasure always has something to do with the power of desire. Here the power of desire signifies the ground of determining the pleasure in this way or something related with such a ground.⁶

In this quotation, I will focus on the fact that interest is related with the representation [Vorstellung] of the presence of an object. When we are interested in any object, we generally desire of its presence, and if so, the object is represented as the one that could bring pleasure or pleasant feeling into us. An interest in the presence of any object is consequently connected with "the conceptual representation" [begriffliche Vorstellung] of the pleasant feeling that the object brings into us.⁷ In other words, when we are interested in any object, we basically anticipate and think about the pleasant feeling which the object we are interested in gives us.⁸

However, in case we have an aesthetic experience of the beauty of nature, according to Kant, the pleasure which the experience carries has nothing to do with any conceptual thought: such an aesthetic experience has no connection with any consideration that is concomitant with the power of desire.

Thus, on the basis of Kant's thought, we can say that the experience of the beauty of nature is free from the conceptual thought carried by the power of desire and that such an experience has nothing to do with any determined practical principles. In case an aesthetic experience of nature is related with any determined regulations of practical principles, therefore, it can not be the experience of the beauty of nature. Because the

aesthetic experience depended upon practical principles is unavoidably related with an interest.

On the other hand, there can be a pleasure, grounded on an interest, but not related with conceptual thought. In this case, it is likely that the interest in an object or in its presence is inclined toward materiality of the object more directly. So, we can say that this kind of interest would rather be an instinctive interest. Kant names the pleasure related with this kind of interest the delightfulness (*das Angenehme*)⁹. It may be not so much human being's pleasure as animal's pleasure. In rational being, e.g., in human being, in fact, this kind of pleasure can be rarely possible. On the contrary, in animal, the interest that carries a conceptual thought can not be possible.

The important is that the Kantian experience of the beauty of nature has nothing to do with the interest based on conceptual thought as well as with the interest addicted to materiality.¹⁰ Concentrating upon this fact, as a result of this, we could maintain that such an experience reveals a flexible attitude to everyday life: this experience could keep us being free from the determined regulation of practical principles and at the same time being free from the superficiality addicted into materiality.

I would call this "being free from" an aesthetic freedom. Of course, it is true that this freedom seems to be quite negative; thus, it might be counted as one of the factors that can not play a decisive role in life. Focusing upon the fact that the practical principle how much moralistic it may be is inclined to be partial, nevertheless, the freedom contained in the Kantian concept of uninterested pleasure can not be passed over. Besides, we are now in the era in which the so-called multi-cultural values are widely accepted!

3. Aesthetic experience and cultivation

Kant's concept of the judgment of taste reveals a peculiar aesthetic freedom hiding in that judgment. It is likely that the judgment involves a state of being free from any rigorous regulation of practical principles as well as from any materiality: the judgment implies a flexible attitude to everyday life and furthermore the so-called cultivation of human being

On the other hand, his analysis on the judgment of taste, according to which the judgment is subjective, and yet is universal, can cause us to regard the experience as a kind of paradoxical one. That is why the justification of his analysis has frequently been doubted. This paradoxical aspect can be also found out in his thought about the relationship of beauty and morality.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, he several times refers to the relationship of beauty and morality. For example, he insists that the judgment of taste can be actually realized only when it is connected with the moral one.¹¹ Besides, he says, the fact that someone is interested in the beauty of nature tells us that his soul is pure and clear.¹²

On the other hand, as everybody knows, he asserts that the judgment of beauty is definitely different from any other judgments. According to him, it differs from a practical judgment as well as a sensual empirical one.¹³ This means that the autonomy which is never reduced to sensibility or utility or morality, etc. is immanent in the judgment of beauty.

Besides, it is said that he consistently disregards the sensual aspect of human being and does inquire into the judgment of taste from the same point of view. The fact that the

judgment is based upon uninterested pleasure is occasionally regarded as one of the cases which reveal that kind of his view.

Some people criticize that Kant's uninterested pleasure is not actual and that his thought of it shows an overturned hedonism.¹⁴ On the contrary, other people criticize that his concept of uninterested pleasure turns the experience of beauty into an experience departed from morality and so causes beauty and morality to have nothing to do with each other. In sum, these critical positions probably insist that with the inquiry into aesthetic experiences, Kant still holds the dualism in which e.g., the rational thing is entirely separated the sensual one.

However, as above mentioned, his concept of uninterested pleasure contains the attitude of life that neither signifies irrelevance with sensuality, nor break with morality and utility. Therefore, we can say, it implies a kind of flexibility of the attitude to everyday life. In other words, we can infer from his concept of uninterested pleasure that the experience of the beauty of nature requests us to take an attitude neither addicted into materiality, nor overpowered by practical principles.

Of course, Kant does not treat such an attitude thematically. Being restricted within the realm of aesthetic experience, however, his analysis tells us that the experience of the beauty of nature allows us to have an aesthetic freedom and that, on the basis of such a freedom, we can take a well-balanced attitude to life, e.g., a kind of cultivation.

4. Technological era and a role of aesthetics of art

Nowadays, as everybody knows, the role of scientific technology in life is getting more important. It seems that the same goes for aesthetics. Soon or later, all of the properties of aesthetic experience might be completely interpreted and understood by scientific technology. Because someone goes so far as to say that the so-called singularity comes true about in a few decades.¹⁵ If the time that technology takes step to come true the singularity is coming on us, it might be possible that there is nothing in the aesthetics of art that is not reduced to the elements of scientific technology.

On the other hand, other people still say as follows: it is not easy to imagine that everything in life can be resolved into the elements of scientific technology. They will probably insist that at least in the field of art or its aesthetics, there is something that is not completely reduced to or regulated by technology, although the role of technology becomes even more important. On the top of that, they say, it might be that the more powerful scientific technology is getting, they advocate, the more important any aspects of aesthetics unregulated by it could be.

In my opinion, however, this contradiction concerning the relation between technology and aesthetics of art might be a false one.¹⁶ And the two opposite positions accordingly could be compatible with each other. The essential point I would set forth concerning this issue is that the Kantian aesthetic freedom hiding in the concept of uninterested pleasure can be full of suggestions. Such an aesthetic freedom suggests, e.g., that the role of the contemporary aesthetics of art is not to be reduced to only one of both opposite positions.¹⁷

Looking into Kant's analysis on the judgment of taste very carefully, we can find out that the judgment of taste involves its own negativity. Before anything else, this judgment absolutely needs an object (a thing of nature) and its representation.¹⁸ It can not be

possible without objective element. It is not true that this judgment can be possible without object. Through the judgment, however, it does not come to that any objective property of a thing of nature is theoretically determined. Instead, the judgment has to include the process through which the objective prescription of a thing of nature is negated. In sum, for the judgment of taste, the objective element should be given to us and at the same time it is to be negated. Only in so far as it does so, namely it includes two contrary elements at once, it can be possible.

This negativity of the judgment of taste is also identified in the concept of uninterested pleasure. Namely, according to Kant's analysis, the uninterested pleasure of the judgment of taste connotes that the objective element is indispensable for such a pleasure, and yet it is to be negated. If a thing of nature is not given to us, it is so obvious that the uninterested pleasure is also impossible. In line with this, if the objective prescription of the thing (including the desire of the presence of the object) is not negated, the uninterested pleasure is still impossible. This point can be obviously identified in the fact that the judgment of taste is not related with the concept of understanding.¹⁹ I would say that this negativity constitutes another aspect of the aesthetic freedom contained in Kant's concept of uninterested pleasure. This can be called the aesthetic freedom as negativity.

While the first aspect of the aesthetic freedom is related with the power of desire, the second one is related with the objective determination of understanding. I would call the former the practical aesthetic freedom and the latter the theoretical one. The important thing is that from the second freedom we could get a significant hint regarding a role of the aesthetics of art in the contemporary situation where scientific technology becomes to play a greater role. The contemporary aesthetics of art must not be irrelevant to and at once subordinated to scientific technology. This point is exactly what the second element of the aesthetic freedom contained in Kant's concept of the uninterested pleasure suggests. That is to say, the contemporary aesthetics of art should pay sharp attention to the rapid change of technology as well as to the aspect that is not reduced to scientific technological elements. Only in so far as it does that, it can be in accordance with the demand of the day.

5. Closing words

Kant's analysis on the judgment of taste might be in a word summarized as follows: the aesthetic experience of the beauty of nature including the beauty of art can be universally communicated without concept.²⁰ He regards the so-called uninterested pleasure as the first element of such an experience. For us, I would say, the important thing is that such a pleasure suggests us what a role of the contemporary aesthetics of art as well as an attitude to life should be like.

The present time, we can easily find out that some people try to turn all things of life into the determined principles or into something like them, and that on the other hand other people want to regard the more sensual thing as the most important one in life. In a word, the attitude to everyday life seems to be getting more extreme. In this related matter, Kant's concept of uninterested pleasure suggests us a well-balanced attitude. This is my first point.

The second point is related with a role of the aesthetics of art. All things in the domain of the aesthetics of art can not be resolved into scientific technological elements, in my opinion, at least in so far as we have to live as the biological being. In other words, the

more arts or artworld is getting affected and determined by scientific technology, the more important the aesthetic element that is never turned into the latter could be. In this point, therefore, I would say that we need also listen to Kant, namely to his analysis on the experience of the beauty. Because his concept of uninterested pleasure tells us, though it is implicit, that in respect to the role of the contemporary aesthetics of art, we must not take only one of two opposite poles, but keep our balance.

Of course, we must not forget that Kant's analysis of aesthetic experience does not tell us how we can make ourselves balanced and harmonious in accordance with a concrete method. The same goes for a role of the aesthetics of art. So, if this point is overlooked, the implicit thing is unfortunately regarded as the explicit one.

¹ As generally known, Kant considers the basic element of experience as the form of judgment, i.e., the form of 'X is Y'. For him, therefore, the analysis and explanation on the judgment of beauty means that the experience of beauty is analyzed and explained.

² See, A. Kern, "Ästhetischer und philosophischer Gemeinsinn", in: *Falsche Gegensätze*, Frankfurt am Main, 2002. 81-111.

³ Kant defines the taste as the ability with which everyone can judge something to be beautiful. (I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*[KU], Frankfurt am Main, 2002. B. 4) And the beauty that Kant analyses and explains is basically not the beauty of artwork, but the beauty of nature. Namely, for him, the judgment of taste signifies the judgment of the beauty of nature.

⁴ See, KU, B. 5.

⁵ Cf. KU, B. 39.

⁶ See, KU, B 5.

⁷ Ch. Fricke, *Kants Theorie des reinen Geschmacksurteils*, Berlin, 1999. 17.

⁸ Of course, here the conceptual representation is not so much the theoretical as the practical. Therefore, that is related with the good [das Gute]. And the latter could be divided into two cases. On the one hand, it means the good as utility or usefulness. The other hand, it means the good as morality. Therefore, the conceptual representation involves not only the former, but also the latter. And both of them are always related with the concept of purpose [Zweck]. See, KU, § 4.

⁹ See, KU, § 3-5.

¹⁰ Kant calls this experience the experience preformed in the so-called simple reflection. KU, B, 5, 38.

¹¹ See, KU, § 41, 42.

¹² See, KU, B. 166.

¹³ See, KU, § 7.

¹⁴ Th. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main, 2002. 23, 25.

¹⁵ See, R. Kurzweil, *the singularity is near: when humans transcend biology*, Penguin, 2006.

¹⁶ Some philosophers tried to make clear that the opposite positions developed in the western history of aesthetics might be the so-called false ones. See, A. Kern and R. Sonderegger(ed.), *Falsche Gegensätze*, Frankfurt am Main, 2002.

¹⁷ It is my understanding that the flexibility of the Kantian aesthetic experience can be identified in various places of the *Critique of Judgment*. One of the most representative cases lies in the antinomy of the aesthetic judgment. Thierry de Duve applied it into the situation of contemporary art in a great way. According to him, Kant's solution of this antinomy allow us to accept that these days, not only the art depended on the concept, but also the unrelated with it, both of them could be possible without contradiction. See, Th. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, The MIT Press, 1999. 302-323.

¹⁸ In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant consistently insists that there is no aesthetic judgment of taste without the representation of an object.

¹⁹ See, KU, B. 4.

²⁰ Even though Kant focuses on the beauty of nature, he insists that the beauty of art also can be universal. See, KU, § 45.