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Immanuel Kant's Philosophy of Aesthetics: The Logic of Taste and the Architecture of Reflective Judgment

A Critical Examination of the Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Teleology of Art

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Abstract: This study presents a rigorous critical exploration of Immanuel Kant's philosophy of aesthetics as formulated primarily in his third critique, the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790), alongside his pre-critical treatise Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1764). The paper investigates the architectonic function of the aesthetic judgment as an indispensable mediating bridge between the sensible domain of theoretical understanding (nature) and the supersensible domain of practical reason (morality). Through a systematic analysis of the four reflective moments of taste—Quality (disinterestedness), Quantity (subjective universality), Relation (purposiveness without a purpose), and Modality (exemplary necessity)—the research elucidates how Kant establishes aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline. Additionally, the paper examines the dialectic between the beautiful and the sublime (mathematical and dynamic), delineates the ontology of fine art and aesthetic ideas, and critically assesses the transcendental role of the *sensus communis* in grounding cultural and cosmopolitan intersubjectivity.

Keywords: *Immanuel Kant; Aesthetic Judgment; Critique of the Power of Judgment; The Beautiful; The Sublime; Purposiveness Without Purpose; Sensus Communis; Genius.*

1. Introduction

Aesthetics constitutes one of the most vital, nuanced branches of philosophical inquiry. It emerged as an autonomous academic discipline during the second half of the eighteenth century, largely under the impetus of the German rationalist philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). Baumgarten formally coined the term aesthetics (derived from the Greek αἴσθησις, *aisthesis*, meaning sensible perception) to designate a philosophical science centered on the logic of feeling, imagination, and artistic sensibility—a cognitive realm distinct from theoretical science and abstract discursive rationality. From this historical inflection point onward, aesthetics carved out its own legitimate domain, operating independently of both theoretical-speculative knowledge and moral-prescriptive action.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) decisively solidified and revolutionized this philosophical orientation. Kant demonstrated that aesthetic experience is reducible neither to theoretical cognitive activity (which determines the *a priori* conditions of empirical knowledge in mathematics and natural sciences) nor to practical-moral activity (which governs ethical conduct through the autonomy of the rational will). Instead, Kant posited that aesthetic judgment emanates from a distinctive feeling of pleasure grounded in the harmonious, 'free play' (*freies Spiel*) between the human cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding (Kant, 1790/2000).

Having exhaustively mapped the conditions of pure theoretical cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and formulated the categorical imperative of moral duty in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant dedicated the culmination of his critical philosophy to investigating the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime. Recognizing that the sphere of taste presented deep conceptual paradoxes, Kant sought to establish an *a priori* logic of taste that possessed the same critical rigor as his science of nature and metaphysics of morals. This endeavor raises foundational philosophical questions: To what extent did Kant succeed in deploying aesthetic judgment as an architectonic bridge reconciling the phenomenal realm of nature with the noumenal realm of freedom? How are the *a priori* principles of taste systematically derived? And what constitutes the precise epistemic and subjective architecture of Kant's four reflective moments of aesthetic judgment?

2. The Architectonic Bridge: From Transcendental Aesthetic to the Critique of Judgment

Immanuel Kant stands as the preeminent figure in modern aesthetics, a stature anchored primarily in his third major critique, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*,

1790), preceded by his pre-critical psychological treatise *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) (Kant, 1764/2011, 1790/2000). The publication of the third Critique in 1790 provided the definitive foundation for philosophical aesthetics, elevating the analysis of taste from empirical psychology to transcendental critique.

To trace this conceptual evolution, one must examine Kant's earlier usage of the term in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In the opening division of the first Critique, titled the 'Transcendental Aesthetic,' Kant utilized aesthetics in its etymological Greek sense, designating the science of the a priori principles of sensibility (Kant, 1781/1998). In that context, his concern was strictly epistemological rather than evaluative: the transcendental aesthetic isolated the pure forms of sensible intuition—space and time—which condition all possible human empirical experience. At that juncture, Kant explicitly rejected Baumgarten's ambition to construct a rational science of the beautiful, maintaining that rules of taste were merely empirical and psychological.

However, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant fundamentally reassigned and broadened the scope of aesthetics. Confronting the deep chasm separating theoretical understanding (the deterministic laws governing phenomenal nature) from practical reason (the unconditional demands of moral freedom), Kant identified the imperative for an architectonic synthesis. He discovered that the power of judgment (*Urteilkraft*)—specifically in its reflective capacity—serves as the mediating link between nature and freedom, uniting the sensible and supersensible realms (Kant, 1790/2000).

"I am now occupied with the critique of taste, and I am discovering in its field a new type of a priori principles, different from those I previously demonstrated."

— Immanuel Kant, Correspondence with Reinhold (1787)

Consequently, Kant established a tripartite division of the higher cognitive faculties of the human mind: (1) the faculty of cognition (governed by the understanding in theoretical science), (2) the faculty of desire (governed by reason in morality), and (3) the intermediary faculty of the feeling of pleasure and displeasure (governed by judgment in aesthetics and teleology) (Kant, 1790/2000). Within this systematic triad, reflective aesthetic judgment occupies the essential middle ground between the true and the good.

3. Analytic of the Beautiful: The Four Moments of the Judgment of Taste

Kant initiates the Analytic of the Beautiful by defining the aesthetic judgment of taste as fundamentally non-cognitive and subjective. When an individual pronounces an object to be

beautiful, the mental representation is not referred via concepts to the object for empirical cognition; rather, it is referred via the imagination directly to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure (Kant, 1790/2000). To establish the systematic conditions under which a judgment of taste claims validity, Kant organized his critique into four distinct 'moments' patterned after the logical functions of judgment: Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Modality.

3.1 The First Moment: According to Quality (Disinterested Satisfaction)

The first moment directly challenges British empiricism (e.g., Burke, Hume, Locke), which reduced aesthetic pleasure to sensory gratification or physiological stimulation. Kant rigorously distinguishes the satisfaction that defines the beautiful from both the agreeable (*das Angenehme*) and the good (*das Gute*) (Kant, 1790/2000):

- The Agreeable: That which pleases the senses directly in sensation (e.g., the taste of wine, pleasant bodily warmth). It is inextricably bound to an 'interest'—namely, the physical appetite for the existence and consumption of the object. Here, the maxim holds that 'everyone has their own taste.'
- The Good: That which pleases by means of pure practical concepts, whether as a useful means to an external end or as an intrinsic moral good. The good carries an absolute interest, demanding the actual realization and existence of the moral action (Kant, 1785/1998, 1790/2000).
- The Beautiful: Aesthetic satisfaction is purely contemplative, reflective, and completely disinterested (*interesselos*). It remains entirely indifferent to the actual existence, possession, or physical consumption of the object. Aesthetic delight rests solely in the formal contemplation of the representation itself. Thus, taste is the faculty of judging an object through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction entirely devoid of all interest; the object of such delight is called beautiful (Kant, 1790/2000).

3.2 The Second Moment: According to Quantity (Subjective Universality)

The second moment opposes the Continental rationalist tradition of Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten, which reduced beauty to a confused intellectual perception of perfection through concepts. Kant defines the beautiful, under the category of Quantity, as that which pleases universally without a concept (*allgemein ohne Begriff*) (Kant, 1790/2000).

Because the judgment of taste is free from personal interest and idiosyncratic private inclinations, the judging subject feels justified in demanding identical assent from all other observers. When declaring an object beautiful, the speaker does not express a mere personal

preference ('it is beautiful to me'), but speaks as if beauty were an intrinsic property of the object itself, expecting universal agreement. However, because this universality is not grounded in logical concepts or empirical proofs, it represents an aesthetic, subjective universality based on the free, harmonious play of the universal cognitive faculties: imagination and understanding (Kant, 1790/2000).

3.3 The Third Moment: According to Relation (Purposiveness Without Purpose)

Under the category of Relation, Kant investigates the teleological dimension of beauty. He asserts that aesthetic satisfaction arises from the perception of purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) in an object, entirely detached from any determinate objective purpose (*Zweck*), whether utilitarian or perfectionist (Kant, 1790/2000). A beautiful object (such as a wildflower or a Grecian urn) presents a harmonious, self-contained formal unity as though it were consciously crafted for human cognitive faculties, yet it serves no specific external function.

Consequently, Kant formulates the celebrated aesthetic principle of 'purposiveness without purpose' (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*). On this foundational basis, Kant establishes a crucial distinction between two orders of beauty:

1. Free Beauty (*Pulchritudo vaga*): Self-subsisting beauty that presupposes no antecedent concept of what the object is intended to be (e.g., flowers, birds, seashells, abstract ornamental arabesques, and music without text). Judgments regarding free beauty constitute pure judgments of taste (Kant, 1790/2000).

2. Dependent or Adherent Beauty (*Pulchritudo adhaerens*): Beauty that presupposes a definite concept of purpose, function, or perfection governing what the object ought to be (e.g., the beauty of a human being, a cathedral, or a warhorse). Judgments on dependent beauty are applied or hybrid judgments, as aesthetic delight is constrained by conceptual and teleological criteria (Kant, 1790/2000).

3.4 The Fourth Moment: According to Modality (Exemplary Necessity and the *Sensus Communis*)

Under Modality, Kant defines the beautiful as that which is recognized without a concept as the object of a necessary satisfaction. Unlike theoretical necessity (governed by deterministic laws of the understanding) or practical necessity (governed by categorical moral imperatives), aesthetic necessity is exemplary (*exemplarisch*) (Kant, 1790/2000). It treats a singular subjective judgment as an exemplary instance of a universal rule that commands general assent.

Kant grounds this exemplary necessity in the transcendental postulate of a *sensus communis* (a shared common sense). The *sensus communis* is not an external empirical consensus or common opinion, but the subjective effect resulting from the universally communicable attunement of human cognitive faculties. It provides the necessary subjective condition that enables human beings to communicate aesthetic feelings and form cohesive cultural communities (Kant, 1790/2000).

Table 1: Systematic Architecture of Kant's Four Moments of Aesthetic Judgment

Moment	Determining Principle	Transcendental Definition of the Beautiful
1. Quality	Disinterested Satisfaction (Interesselosigkeit)	The beautiful is that which pleases purely in formal contemplation, completely independent of interest, utility, or sensuous appetite.
2. Quantity	Subjective Universality (Subjektive Allgemeinheit)	The beautiful is that which pleases universally without requiring a concept or discursive logical proof.
3. Relation	Purposiveness Without Purpose (Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck)	Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without the representation of an external purpose.
4. Modality	Exemplary Necessity (Exemplarische Notwendigkeit)	The beautiful is that which, without a concept, is recognized as the object of a necessary satisfaction grounded in a shared <i>sensus communis</i> .

4. Analytic of the Sublime: Metaphysical Magnitude and Moral Transcendence

In the Analytic of the Sublime, Kant presents a profound metaphysical counterpoint to the beautiful. Drawing upon and transcending the aesthetic treatises of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Edmund Burke (1757/1990), Kant asserts that the sublime (*das Erhabene*) is not merely an intensified degree of beauty, but a qualitatively distinct mode of aesthetic consciousness (Kant, 1790/2000).

4.1 Dialectical Comparison: The Beautiful Versus the Sublime

Kant structures the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime through a rigorous comparative framework:

- **Structural Similarities:** Both the beautiful and the sublime please in themselves, both presuppose reflective rather than determinate judgments, and neither relies on sensory gratification or conceptual proofs (Kant, 1790/2000).
- **Fundamental Differences:** While the beautiful in nature concerns the bounded, harmonious form of the object (involving limitation and Quality), the sublime is evoked by formless, boundless objects (involving infinity and Quantity). Furthermore, while the beautiful induces a direct feeling of life and restful contemplation through the harmony of imagination and understanding, the sublime evokes an indirect, dynamic pleasure that emerges from an initial inhibition of vital forces (awe, terror, overwhelm) followed immediately by a powerful compensatory discharge of rational elevation (Kant, 1790/2000).

Crucially, Kant asserts that true sublimity cannot reside in external natural objects themselves, but exclusively within the human mind and its capacity for supersensible rational ideas.

4.2 The Mathematically Sublime

The mathematically sublime arises when the mind confronts absolute, uncontainable vastness—that which is great beyond all comparison (e.g., the boundless expanse of the ocean or the infinite starry sky). In contemplating absolute magnitude, sensory apprehension can proceed indefinitely, but the faculty of imagination reaches its absolute limit in aesthetic comprehension. Confronted with the failure of sensible imagination to grasp the infinite, human reason intervenes with the supersensible idea of absolute totality. This failure of sensible intuition, paired with the triumph of rational ideas, reveals the transcendent superiority of human reason over the physical universe (Kant, 1790/2000).

4.3 The Dynamically Sublime

The dynamically sublime pertains to nature contemplated in aesthetic reflection as a formidable physical power that inspires fear, yet over which humanity retains an unshakeable sense of moral superiority. Examples include tempestuous storms, erupting volcanoes, towering precipices, and hurricane winds—overwhelming forces against which physical resistance is utterly futile (Kant, 1790/2000).

In experiencing the dynamically sublime, nature's terrifying omnipotence forces human beings to recognize their physical vulnerability as natural organisms. Simultaneously, however, this confrontation awakens an awareness of our supersensible moral vocation and rational autonomy, which remains inviolable and completely independent of physical nature. Thus, the dynamically sublime elevates our moral resolve, demonstrating that the human spirit transcends external physical dominion (Kant, 1790/2000).

5. The Philosophy of Fine Art and the Metaphysics of Genius

In the second major division of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, Kant articulates a comprehensive theory of fine art (*schöne Kunst*) and artistic production. Fine art represents a purposive human creation that, in contemplation, appears as free, natural, and unforced as if it were an authentic product of nature itself, despite originating from human intentionality (Kant, 1790/2000).

5.1 Ontological Demarcations of Art

Kant demarcates fine art from adjacent domains through rigorous conceptual distinctions:

1. Art vs. Nature: Art is distinguished from nature as doing (*facere*) is distinguished from acting/making (*agere*), or as an intentional work (*opus*) differs from an involuntary natural effect (*effectus*). The construction of a honeycomb by bees is a product of biological instinct rather than art; true art requires deliberate rational agency and creative freedom (Kant, 1790/2000).

2. Art vs. Science: Art is distinguished from science as practical skill or dexterity (*facultas*) is distinguished from theoretical cognition (*doctrina*). Science operates through explicit laws, proofs, and teachable algorithms (e.g., Newtonian physics). In contrast, fine art cannot be learned by mechanistic instruction: one can master everything Newton demonstrated, but no rule-book can teach an artist how to compose an epic like Homer or a symphony like Mozart (Kant, 1790/2000).

3. Fine Art vs. Craft (Handicraft): Fine art (*freie Kunst*) is intrinsically free, pleasurable in itself, and functions as elevated play. In contrast, craft or mechanical art (*Lohnkunst*) is mercenary, burdensome in its execution, and pursued primarily for external utility or financial compensation (Kant, 1790/2000).

5.2 The Nature of Genius and Aesthetic Ideas

For Kant, fine art is necessarily the product of genius (Genie)—defined as the innate mental disposition (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art (Kant, 1790/2000). Kant identifies four indispensable attributes of artistic genius:

- Originality: The capacity to generate creations for which no determinate conceptual rule can be prescribed, avoiding mere imitation (Kant, 1790/2000).
- Exemplarity: The production of original artworks that serve as authoritative models and standards of taste for subsequent generations.
- Inexplicability / Unconscious Creation: The genius cannot scientifically explain or teach how their creative ideas originate or materialize.
- Domain Specificity: Nature endows rules to fine art through genius, never to theoretical science; genius is non-transferable and perishes with the individual artist (Kant, 1790/2000).

Genius manifests primarily through the production of 'aesthetic ideas' (ästhetische Ideen)—representations of the creative imagination that stimulate rich, unbounded thought without any determinate concept or linguistic expression being fully adequate to exhaust them (Kant, 1790/2000).

5.3 Classification of the Fine Arts

Kant categorizes the fine arts according to an analogy with human communication through speech, gesture, and tone (Kant, 1790/2000):

1. Arts of Speech (Verbal Arts): Poetry (Dichtkunst) and Rhetoric. Kant crowns poetry at the absolute pinnacle of all artistic forms because it expands the mind, liberates the imagination, and gives sensible form to transcendent aesthetic ideas. Rhetoric, conversely, is viewed critically due to its manipulative potential to deceive the understanding.

2. Formative Arts (Visual/Plastic Arts): Expressions of aesthetic ideas in spatial configuration. This encompasses the plastic arts of sensory reality (Sculpture and Architecture) and the arts of sensory appearance (Painting and Landscape Gardening).

3. Arts of the Play of Sensations: Music and the Art of Color. While poetry ranks highest rationally, Kant acknowledges that music moves human emotions most immediately and dynamically, though it leaves comparatively less enduring material for long-term rational reflection (Kant, 1790/2000).

6. Conclusion and Critical Evaluation

Immanuel Kant's philosophy of aesthetics marks a watershed moment in Western thought. By systematically establishing the a priori grounds and subjective universality of the judgment of taste, Kant emancipated aesthetics from empirical psychology, rationalist perfectionism, and moralistic reductionism, establishing it as an autonomous, rigorous philosophical domain (Kant, 1790/2000).

The third Critique successfully realized its architectonic mission: aesthetic reflective judgment serves as the indispensable bridge spanning the ontological gulf between phenomenal nature (the domain of theoretical understanding) and noumenal freedom (the domain of practical reason). Through the shared communicability of taste (*sensus communis*) and the sublime awareness of our moral vocation, Kant demonstrated that aesthetic contemplation symbolizes moral goodness ('the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good') and fosters cosmopolitan human solidarity (Kant, 1790/2000).

Despite its monumental influence on German Idealism, Romanticism, and contemporary critical theory, Kant's aesthetic framework has attracted notable critiques. Critics argue that his formalist emphasis on pure disinterestedness tends to detach art from its vital historical, political, and socio-economic contexts, while his reliance on rigid psychological faculties occasionally prioritizes systemic symmetry over empirical art history. Nevertheless, the Critique of the Power of Judgment remains the quintessential cornerstone of modern aesthetics, continuing to illuminate the enduring nexus linking human perception, artistic creativity, and the transcendental freedom of the spirit.

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