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978-0-521-86589-0 - Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the Critique of Judgment

Rachel Zuckert

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

In the introductions to his third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgment*,¹ Kant claims that this work completes his critical project, for here he articulates and defends the principle of purposiveness without a purpose as the a priori, transcendental principle of judgment, the third and last main cognitive faculty to be treated in the critical philosophy. This principle is a necessary, transcendental principle of judgment, Kant argues, because it governs, justifies, and makes possible our aspirations to empirical knowledge, from its most basic form – our ability to formulate any empirical concepts – to its most sophisticated form – a complete, systematic science of empirical laws. This principle is, Kant claims moreover, “exhibited” paradigmatically in two forms of judgment: teleological judgment concerning organic behavior, and aesthetic judgment of natural beauty.² In teleological judgment, we judge organisms to be “natural purposes”; we

¹ In concert with the scholarly consensus, I draw on the first, unpublished introduction (referred to as FI) as well as the second, published introduction to the *CJ*. Partly inspired by Paul Guyer’s and Eric Matthews’ new translation of the *Critique*. It has become common to refer to this work as the “Critique of the *Power* of Judgment” in order to reflect accurately Kant’s “*Urteilkraft*.” Though I employ this translation in quotations in the text (unless otherwise noted), I use the old-fashioned title to avoid some awkwardness in English – “judgment” can mean power of judgment – and to retain the connotations of discernment in the English term “judgment.”

² I shall use the term “aesthetic” (qualifying judgment, experience, pleasure, etc.) to refer to judgments of taste, and the experience, pleasure, etc. of the *beautiful*. This

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judge that they function purposively. In aesthetic judging, we find objects to be purposive “for cognition,” or to be characterized by “purposive form.” The main text of the *CJ* comprises, correspondingly, two subsidiary Critiques, the Critique of Teleological Judgment (CTJ) and the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment (CAJ), devoted to these two forms of judgment.

As in the other *Critiques*, then, the argument of the third *Critique* comprises a justification of an a priori principle, as one that does and must govern activity of one of our fundamental cognitive capacities. But the principle with which the *CJ* is concerned is rather different, Kant claims, from the principles of the understanding and of reason treated in his two preceding *Critiques*. The other two kinds of transcendental principles ground “doctrines” or bodies of knowledge: the principles of the *Critique of Pure Reason* ground a doctrine of physics articulated in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, and the principle of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, viz., the moral law, is applied and specified in the doctrine articulated in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. By contrast, the principle of purposiveness is solely a principle for critique and does not ground a doctrine: this principle can be justified as a transcendental, a priori principle necessary for the possibility of judging, but it neither constitutes a priori knowledge itself, nor grounds a body of such knowledge. Indeed, Kant claims that, unlike the objective principles of cognition and of morality, this principle is a merely subjective principle, one needed and employed by subjects, but not properly applicable to objects; we may judge objects, Kant argues, only *as if* they are purposive.

Kant holds, likewise, that the two forms of judging that exhibit the principle of purposiveness, teleological and aesthetic judgment, do not comprise or ground any doctrine concerning objects. Kant argues that biologists not only do, but must, employ the concept of a natural purpose in their investigations of organisms. But this concept is a merely regulative concept, which is itself “inexplicable,” and does not truly explain organic functioning. Thus, by contrast to the way in which the principles of the *CPR* ground and license the “metaphysical” laws of nature of the *MFNS*, the principle of purposiveness does not license claims that there are teleological laws governing (organic) nature.

Aesthetic judgments do, Kant argues, have a priori validity: these judgments make justified claims to universality and necessity. Hence Kant

usage departs from Kant’s use of the term “aesthetic judgment” to include judgments of the agreeable, and of the sublime, as well as judgments of taste.

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identifies the CAJ, specifically his deduction of the universal validity of judgments of taste, as the core of the *CJ* project. Indeed, Kant claims that the principle of purposiveness is the principle not only of judgment, but also of pleasure, as is revealed specifically and paradigmatically in aesthetic pleasure. The validity of aesthetic judgments is, however, merely subjective: when one judges that an object is beautiful, one claims, justifiably, that *all* other *subjects* ought to judge the object likewise, with pleasure, without making any objective claims concerning that object. These judgments neither constitute nor ground a doctrine of beauty or a science of aesthetics: though they make justified universal claims, they are neither grounded upon rules or concepts of the object, nor can they ground any such rules.

The ambiguous, necessary, yet subjective – or “as if” – character of the principle of purposiveness, and thus of Kant’s project in the *CJ*, may explain, in part, the anomalous reception of this work. The *CJ* has prompted discussion, dissent, and emulation in the history and philosophy of biology, in scholarship on Kant’s philosophy of science or epistemology, and – most of all – in aesthetics. The CAJ is the focus of ever-increasing scholarship, and has been influential on further work in aesthetics, in providing a sharp formulation of a central problem – the justification of the subjectively universal claims of aesthetic judgments – and prompting further articulations of such key concepts as disinterested pleasure or beautiful form. Many thinkers, from Goethe to Cavell and Lyotard, have found the *CJ* appealing and provocative in its suggested visions of nature as organized or living, and of human subjectivity as fundamentally communicative or creative. But the *CJ* remains the least studied among Kant’s critical works. Unlike Kant’s other *Critiques*, this work has often been treated by scholars not as a unified work nor as central to Kant’s critical project, but rather piecemeal, as an aesthetics or philosophy of biology or a discussion of empirical knowledge. Nor, more broadly, has the *CJ* spawned new philosophical works on this combination of topics (beauty, biology, and empirical knowledge) or neo-Kantian “doctrine” concerning purposiveness.³

It has been argued, more strongly, that the *CJ* is a fundamentally dis-unified work, a collection of discussions treating distinct questions: whether judgments involving pleasure can justifiably require others’ agreement

³ Perhaps the closest approximation is Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, a theory of aesthetic experience as grounded upon our cognitive and practical engagement with the world as organic beings.

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(the CAJ); whether or how we can attain a complete empirical science (the introductions); why and to what degree teleological explanation of organisms is justified (the CTJ).⁴ Kant's attempt to unify these discussions by reference to the principle of purposiveness has been considered unsatisfactory, moreover, because it merely exploits the vagueness and ambiguity of this principle. Kant appears to employ this principle to mean, variously, the "as if" designedness by God, pleasureableness, suitability to cognitive purposes, and teleological causation, as is convenient in a particular context. Thus many scholars who attempt to connect Kant's concerns in the *CJ* in some way do so independently of the principle of purposiveness: this principle is employed in teleological judgments of organisms, to be sure, but it is not *the* principle of reflective judgment, nor do its vague, ambiguous meanings help to construe Kant's account of aesthetics.⁵

These are real problems: Kant's principle of purposiveness is more ambiguous than Kant's other a priori principles, Kant's questions in this work less easily identifiable as core philosophical questions, let alone a single such question, than are those addressed in the other two *Critiques* ("What can I know?" and "What ought I to do?"). And the *CJ*, as Kant himself notes, is a work of tortuousness of expression extreme even for a Kantian text.

In this book, I shall attempt to justify Kant's claims concerning the intention of this work and its integrity, by proposing a novel interpretation

⁴ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jens Kulenkampff, *Kants Logik des ästhetischen Urteils* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978); Peter McLaughlin, *Kant's Critique of Teleology in Biological Explanation: Antinomy and Teleology* (Lewistown, NY: Mellen, 1990). The independence of these concerns is, more broadly, the operative assumption in the many treatments of the CAJ or CTJ that take little cognizance of the other, as well as the independent treatments of Kant's discussions of empirical knowledge in the introductions. See also John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Konrad Marc-Wogau, *Vier Studien zu Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Uppsala: Lundequistka Bokhandeln, 1938) for treatments of the *CJ* as a disunified work, on historical and philosophical grounds (respectively).

⁵ E.g., Henry Allison identifies not purposiveness, but the "heautonomy" of judgment, as the unifying concept of the *CJ*; correspondingly, he does not much discuss the CTJ. (*Kant's Theory of Taste* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001].) Similarly, Guyer suggests that all forms of judgment discussed in the *CJ* may be understood to be guided by regulative principles of systematicity, and downplays the role of the principle of purposiveness in all forms other than teleological judgments of organisms. ("Kant's Principles of Reflecting Judgment," in Paul Guyer, ed., *Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003], 1–61.)

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of Kant's principle of purposiveness and thereby of the *CJ* as a whole. I shall argue that the work may, then, be understood precisely as presenting a sustained argument that this principle is the a priori, transcendental principle of judgment, a subjective yet necessary condition for the possibility of empirical knowledge.⁶ This principle is a necessary, transcendental principle of judging, I argue, because it makes our comprehension of order among natural diversity possible, for it is the form of the "unity of the diverse" as such, or "the lawfulness of the contingent." The nature and functioning of this principle, as a principle of order among diversity, and of subjective abilities to discern such order, I argue, is developed in Kant's two subsidiary Critiques. We attribute purposiveness to organisms in order to describe their unity of diversity, i.e., the organized interrelation of diverse parts in organic functioning; and in aesthetic judging we represent an object as unified precisely with respect to its diverse, sensible, contingent aspects. This principle is, however, a merely subjective and regulative principle because, first, given Kant's theory of objective judgment, it cannot be applied justifiably to objects (whether organisms, beautiful objects, or natural objects in general), and therefore comprises and grounds no knowledge claim about them. Second, this principle is subjective in a positive sense: it serves as a structure of the subject's *practice* of judging. That is, in order to explain how the subject can represent a unity of diversity, the subject must be understood as judging *purposively* without a purpose, or, I shall argue, as engaged in a future-directed anticipation of an indeterminate, non-conceptually ordered whole.

As I shall suggest, this reading not only allows one to understand the *CJ* as a unified project, but can also illuminate otherwise puzzling claims in

⁶ My approach is in concert with the increasing scholarly interest in a unificatory interpretive approach to the *CJ*, in particular with Cristel Fricke, *Kants Theorie des reinen Geschmacksurteils* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), Clark Zumbach, *The Transcendent Science: Kant's Conception of Biological Methodology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1984), Robert Pippin, "The Significance of Taste: Kant, Aesthetic, and Reflective Judgment," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996), 549–69, and recent articles by Hannah Ginsborg, especially "Aesthetic and Biological Purposiveness," in Andrews Reath, Barbara Herman, and Christine Korsgaard, eds., *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 329–60. In this excellent article, Ginsborg emphasizes (as I shall) that purposiveness as the principle of both aesthetic and teleological judgment should be understood as the lawfulness of the contingent. None of these scholars, however, endorses the particular interpretation of purposiveness that I shall propose. Despite this interest, moreover, there has not been to date any monograph treating the whole of the *CJ* as a unified argument.

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Kant's central discussions in this work. For example, by placing Kant's treatment of biology in the context of an investigation of subjective judging activities concerning the diverse as such, this interpretation can identify what precisely, on Kant's view, prompts and requires us to describe organisms in teleological terms (their unity of diversity). By drawing greater attention to Kant's discussion of biological purposiveness, we may also gain a richer understanding of the nature and function of this principle in Kant's accounts of aesthetic experience and of empirical knowledge. In both cases, Kant might seem to claim – and is often read to claim – that we find objects purposive because they are, vaguely, in some way suitable to us. Kant's accounts of these forms of judging consequently appear rather abstract, unmoored from the character of objects and not substantively governed by the principle of purposiveness. By contrast, I shall suggest, both forms of judging ought to be understood as engaged with objects (respectively, the beautiful object, and the system of empirical concepts) that are represented as teleologically structured, and are so represented by an irreducibly teleological activity of judging.

In proposing this interpretation, I mean to justify Kant's own claims concerning this work, and its principle, but I do not mean thereby to argue away the merely critical, problematic, or even philosophically marginal character of the *CJ*. As is suggested by his paradoxical phrase describing the principle of purposiveness – the “lawfulness of the contingent” – Kant's central philosophical problem in the *CJ* is one that stands at the limits of Kantian philosophy: in the *CJ*, Kant attempts to explain how we may come to comprehend the empirically given, the particular, the contingent as such – i.e., precisely that which is marginal to, or lies beyond, the universal forms, concepts, or laws with which Kantian (and much other) philosophy is concerned.⁷ As I shall argue, Kant's response to this question represents, too, a problematic, transitional moment within his critical project: in characterizing the subject as purposive without a purpose, Kant introduces a new conception of temporal, teleological subjectivity as a necessary ground for empirical knowledge, which points beyond his critical framework.

This interpretation may, then, explain the tortuousness of this text, and it can also indicate the historical significance of this work within the

⁷ This question is also identified as the central concern of the *CJ* (as the culmination of a rationalist tradition) by Alfred Bäumler in *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Ästhetik und Logik des 18 Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), though not as addressed by the principle of purposiveness.

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German philosophical tradition – not indeed as doctrinal, but as a pivotal moment in that tradition. For the *CJ* may be understood to comprise both a transformation of one of the core philosophical concepts in that tradition, that of teleology, and, thereby, a transitional link between the pre-Kantian rationalist metaphysics of perfection and the post-Kantian metaphysics of the subject.

Kant's identification of purposiveness as the lawfulness of the contingent, or the form of unity of diversity, links Kant's project in the *CJ*, first, to the German rationalist tradition. The constellation of topics Kant treats in the *CJ* – the order of nature as a whole in its contingent character, the normative standards that govern empirical concepts, the ontological unity of organisms, and the nature of sensibility in aesthetic experience – are all, on the rationalist view, cases of superior, paradigmatic order or unity, i.e., “perfection,” and are explained to be such because of God's purposes.⁸

The rationalists hold that teleology – in the form of rational choice in accord with purposes – is necessary in order to explain the existence and specific nature of the contingent, to explain why these possible things exist or are actual rather than others. For choice concerns contingent (possible but not necessary) options, and provides a *reason* why one of these options is actual – not only because it was chosen, but also because it is good: the rational agent chooses in accord with purposes, because something is good. On the rationalist view, the most decisive rational agent is God, whose choice explains the contingent character of the world as a whole: this world is as it is, in its contingent character, because God chose it, and God so chose because this is the best of all possible worlds. Such purposive choice, moreover, not only provides a rational explanation for (i.e., “lawfulness” of) the contingent, but also engenders a unity of diversity in the world: this *is* the best of all possible worlds because it contains the most reality, or is the harmony of the greatest multiplicity (diversity); in Wolffian terms, it is perfect.

⁸ The view I sketch here is broadly Leibnizean, though there are differences among the German rationalists, signally between Wolff and Leibniz, and scholarly interpretive debates concerning them, which I cannot treat here. I wish to note, however, that the concept of perfection I discuss is a specifically Wolffian concept. For Leibniz, (a) perfection is the highest degree of reality of a property, e.g., omniscience (the highest degree of knowledge). The Wolffians preserve this concept of perfection, but take perfection more centrally to be the rational harmony among a multiplicity. These two concepts are related, however, for a harmony of a multiplicity would have a high degree of reality: it combines many realities, viz., the multiplicity that is harmonized.

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For the rationalists, perfection (as harmony of multiplicity) functions, moreover, as an ontological standard concerning the unity of individual things, and an epistemic standard for our representations in ways that echo Kant's concerns in the *CJ*. A true individual, a truly unified object, is one in which all of the parts serve the whole, for reasons, by design. The rationalists famously identify the soul (or monad) as the true ontological individual, but organisms are also favored examples of objects that are truly unified (harmonies of multiplicity), as opposed to mere aggregates. God's ordering of the world grounds epistemic norms as well. It licenses investigation of nature guided by teleological concepts, indeed suggests that contingent things are most satisfactorily so explained. Thus, for example, Leibniz argues that in investigating nature, we may assume that nature takes the most efficient, most comprehensible course. Perfection also characterizes the best form of knowledge, to which we aspire, viz., God's knowledge of a thing, a fully articulated, rationally interconnected cognition of the object or of nature as a whole, in all its contingent (as well as necessary) aspects. Finally, for the rationalists, our representation of the beautiful is a sensible version of such ideal rational knowledge, a sensible representation of an object as an interconnected, unified whole in its sensible character.

As is well known, in the *CPR* Kant sharply opposes all but one of these rationalist doctrines. Our knowledge, Kant argues, should not be understood as an approximation to God's knowledge, but as different in kind: we are not intuitive intellects (as God is thought to be), but discursive intellects, who must receive information sensibly, and who organize and comprehend such information by "reflection," by forming and then using discursive concepts or universal, relatively abstract rules. Therefore, the rationalist standard of perfect knowledge – knowledge of objects through fully individualized concepts, in which all of the properties of the object are derivable from that concept – is an illegitimate standard for human knowledge. In claiming that truly unified objects *are* fully determinate, rationally interconnected, individual wholes, Kant argues moreover, the rationalists illegitimately render our "mere" forms of reflection, our logical forms of organizing empirical concepts, as a substantive, metaphysical concept of a thing.⁹

⁹ I have eschewed textual citation here in the introduction in order to give an uncluttered overview of my interpretation. The claim to which this note is appended, however, may be less familiar than the preceding claims: it characterizes one of Kant's arguments in the less frequently studied Amphiboly chapter. On the

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On Kant's view, then, the rationalists propound an in principle unreachable goal for human cognition, and a corresponding, illegitimate ontology, for they fail to recognize the distinctive character of human cognition, specifically the distinct characters and roles of our receptive sensibility and discursive understanding. Correspondingly, Kant famously argues, the rationalists "intellectualize" sensibility, taking it (wrongly) to be merely "confused," proto-rational representation. A fortiori, then, the rationalists are wrong to understand our apprehension of beauty as a sensibly perfect representation, for this understanding rests both on the (wrong) conception of our rational cognition as similar to God's knowledge (perfect), and on the (also wrong) conception of sensible representation as confused rational representation. Indeed, the rationalist concept of perfection is itself, Kant argues, too vague, alone, to guide our judgments: we require a concept – of a kind of object or of the moral good – in order to judge that something is perfect, viz., is a good instance of that kind, has the multiplicity of properties that satisfy those conceptually specified requirements. The concept of perfection may not, then, serve as an a priori first principle, whether of ontology or for epistemology.

Kant argues too that the rationalists make illegitimate assumptions concerning our abilities to know God's intentions. The principle of teleological ordering of nature may, Kant allows, guide our investigation of nature as a "regulative principle." (This is the one respect in which Kant concurs in the *CPR* with the rationalist view sketched above, and it plays, too, a large role in the *CJ*.) But we may not claim to know that nature is teleologically ordered, by God's choice. What we can know a priori is that nature or the sum of all objects presented in space and time is governed by the formal laws that render space and time and the objects therein unified. Because Kant takes these laws to ground a mechanistic physics, the nature that we can and do know may, more specifically, be said to be Newtonian in character. The rest is a matter of empirical cognition, of contingent fact.

In the *CJ*, however, Kant seems to recognize that this conception of nature – and of our cognition of it – leaves out salient aspects of our experience that testify to a greater order than that established by mechanical laws; such laws give us no ground to expect, as Kant emphasizes, that nature be beautiful or contain organisms. These more highly unified and articulated experiences or entities might promise, too, that we

Amphiboly, see Béatrice Longuenesse's fine *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, tr. Charles T. Wolf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

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may aspire to greater knowledge of natural order and that we may conceive of nature in the consoling terms of the rationalists, as a world pervasively rational and meaningful, organized in accord with purposes.

Consistently with his philosophical commitments, however, in the *CJ* Kant does not endorse a metaphysical claim that there *are* purposes in nature, much less that these are *God's* purposes – a critical limitation expressed in Kant's conclusions concerning the merely subjective status of the principle of purposiveness, to which I alluded above. We do not know, and cannot objectively claim anything concerning, the purposes of nature. Likewise, Kant identifies purposiveness not as an ontological characteristic of objects or nature, but as an epistemic principle that governs the unity of representations or judgments.

Kant's reformulation of rationalist teleology as the subjective, epistemic principle of purposiveness not only reflects his critical commitments, but also has substantive, transformative effects on the concept of teleology itself. On Kant's account, purposiveness is a principle by which human subjects render comprehensible that which is not immediately comprehensible to us – viz., whatever intelligibility there might be in the empirically given world beyond that which derives from our a priori concepts. Thus, first, Kant places emphasis not on the purpose of the object, i.e., the good it serves, the reason why it exists or why a rational agent created it, but, rather, on the *kind* of order a purpose constitutes among parts or properties of an object, i.e., an order of diversity and of contingency. As a result, on Kant's view, we may and do represent such order in cases where we cannot identify any purpose for the object, i.e., in aesthetic and teleological judging, wherein we represent objects as complex unities of diversity, even though we do not identify a good (purpose) that the ordered parts are meant to serve.

Correspondingly, Kant takes this purposive ordering not to be engendered by an agent acting according to a prior reason (God acting in accord with the good), but to be represented by a subject's purposive activity of judging without a purpose, i.e., by the subject who *aims* at an unspecified end. Thus Kant both transforms the concept of teleology and narrows its (proper) extension: Kant's concept of purposiveness without a purpose is teleology not in the sense of *serving* a previously identified good, but of aiming *towards* an indeterminate future end, and this new form of teleology characterizes only and specifically human, judging subjects. Such purposiveness does not characterize the non-human natural world, for material nature cannot, on Kant's view, be understood so to "strive" for the future, towards an indeterminate end. Nor does this purposiveness characterize