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The Early Reception of the Third Critique

Although a developmental approach that studies the emergence of Kant's views on pleasure and taste out of the traditional empirical psychology is neither new nor, in principle, in need of a special motivation, in this chapter, I draw attention to a perhaps not well-known fact about the reception of the KU in the first few years after its publication. This, I suggest, indicates an additional reason for pursuing the details of how Kant's views developed out of the Wolff–Baumgarten tradition. It is the fact that Kant's opponents – philosophers who had responded very critically to the first two *Critiques* – received the KU with approval.

This benevolent reception, at first glance, is surprising because Kant saw his own accomplishment as nothing less than revolutionary. Only the replacement of traditional analyses of taste – roughly, in either an empiricist or a rationalist version – by a 'transcendental' investigation, he claimed, could rescue the pleasure of taste from collapsing into the delight in the agreeable or the good. "And so," he concluded dramatically, "all beauty in the world would be denied" (5: 346f.). Similarly dramatic claims are familiar from the other two *Critiques*.[1] In these cases, however, 'the tradition' had responded, in the form of reviews and other publications, swiftly and very critically. Not so in 1790. The KU was not regarded by the early readers as the radical break with traditional views that Kant and later commentators saw in it – nothing like the "aesthetic revolution" the young Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, in his pre-Romantic phase, expected the KU to inaugurate.[2] In the reviews that appeared during the first five years after the *Critique*'s publication,[3] Kant's notion of beauty was

[1] In 1781, for instance, he announced that the critical philosophy might attain, "even before the end of the present [century] what many centuries could not accomplish . . . namely, to bring human reason to full satisfaction in that which has always, but until now vainly, occupied its lust for knowledge" (A 856).

[2] Schlegel (1797: 187). This essay was written in 1795 but published only in 1797.

[3] They are listed in Klemme's edition of the KU: Klemme (2006: 564f.).

often understood as virtually equivalent with the traditional notion of 'unity in variety'; his insistence that judgments of taste cannot be derived from rules, though apparently directed against a dominant view at the time, was not perceived as such; and the connection between taste and morality Kant proposed seemed in line with widespread opinion. The tone of these reviews was usually reverential; the reviewers celebrated an admirable achievement of the by now sixty-six-year-old philosopher who had written an "outstanding, deeply thought out, and masterful work."[4]

We can get a first impression of the difference in attitude towards the KU from some remarks Johann August Eberhard made in 1791 – not in a review of Kant's just published work but in a response to criticisms of his own, long-standing efforts in aesthetics. In 1788, Eberhard had started his famous attempt to rehabilitate the Leibniz–Wolff tradition against Kant's criticism in the KrV, which provoked a lengthy reply from Kant that he published in 1790 together with the KU; the reply, in turn, stimulated further responses from Eberhard and his allies in the following years.[5] On both sides, it was a heated exchange. The same year, 1790, also saw the third, "improved" edition of Eberhard's handbook of aesthetics (*Theorie der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*), a compendium of the Wolff–Baumgarten tradition in this field that aimed at deriving (or at least make plausible) principles of art from basic philosophical claims and, in particular, the claim that we ascribe beauty to an object when we confusedly perceive the object's perfection. The reviewer of the Kant-friendly *Allgemeine Litteratur Zeitung* sharply reproached Eberhard for having neglected the opportunity in the new edition to correct the old doctrines in light of Kant's criticisms of the Wolff–Baumgarten views, especially with respect to the "indeterminate and ambiguous" concept of perfection.[6] The interesting point here is that – even though Eberhard was obviously hurt by the review – he refused to engage in an attack on the KU and instead granted Kant's "subjective" point of view as a legitimate option that he did not criticize ("*ich tadle nicht*") and instead just emphasized his right to prefer the "objective" approach of Baumgarten's school in which the effect of beauty is correlated with features of the object as its causes. The reason he gave is pragmatic: only the objective approach can be made useful for critics and artists. In this respect, he pointed out, the traditional doctrine had proven overwhelmingly successful in giving "the German art critics the advantage over the critics of all other educated nations . . .. This

[4] Schulze (1793: 398). [5] Cf. Beiser (1987: 217–25) for a brief overview.
[6] Anonymous (1790: 778): Eberhard just plays "the old game" with this concept.

certainly speaks in favor of the correctness and fruitfulness of these [Baumgartian] concepts."[7]

What looked like an offer of peaceful coexistence from Eberhard was reflected in the early reviews of the KU. The most substantial of the early reviews were authored by Kant's old enemy, the Lockean Johann Georg Feder, co-author of the famous Garve–Feder review of the KrV, and by the Humean Gottlob Ernst Schulze.[8] They made it clear that much of what Kant said sounded familiar to them. Thus, Feder noted that Kant's view on beauty and sublimity "finds my complete approval" and he suggested that it was not in these (apparently familiar) results but rather "in the derivation, elaboration and application" of them "where ... [Kant's] original genius shows itself."[9] Schulze recommended that somebody should carefully compare the KU with "Baumgarten's, Sulzer's, and Mendelssohn's analyses of the beautiful" because "the agreements of the latter with the former ... are not as small as some may believe."[10] A contemporaneous essay by an anonymous author indeed performed such a comparison and concluded that Kant's theory could be, more or less, translated into Baumgarten's.[11] Even a decade after the publication of KU, August Wilhelm Schlegel in his lectures on *Schöne Literatur und Kunst* presented a (quite critical) summary of Kant's "analysis of the form of so-called judgments of taste" and found that the "positive message" turned "out to be nothing other than: beauty is the form of objects that agrees with the needs of the understanding; which [message] has, properly speaking, not more content than the [traditional] definition: beauty is unity in the manifold."[12] Finally, the results Kant arrived at with respect to the relation of taste to morality also would have seemed familiar to readers in 1790 – the results, though not the reasoning that led to them. These results seemed to be commonplaces. Compare, for instance, the conclusion of § 59 of the KU that "taste as it were makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap" and that it teaches us "to find a free satisfaction in the objects of the senses even without any sensible charm" (5: 354), with Johann Georg Sulzer's entry in his encyclopedic *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (1771–74): "How can we begin to apply the human being's inborn inclination to sensibility in order to ennoble his way of sensing [*Sinnesart*] and to use it, in particular cases, as a means to stimulate him

[7] Eberhard (1791: 150f.). [8] See Beiser (1987: chs. 6 and 9) for these classifications.
[9] Feder (1791: 189, 1790: 1140). [10] Schulze (1793: 424). [11] Anonymous (1792).
[12] Schlegel (1989: 231).

irresistibly to his [moral] duty?"[13] Taken by itself, what I call (in Chapter 9) the aesthetic transition from taste to morality is not further remarkable in the eighteenth-century discussion.[14]

Even though much of what Kant said sounded familiar to the early reviewers of the KU, there were complaints, similar to Eberhard's point, that the theory did not seem to be useful for art critics or artists (which Kant had emphasized himself, e.g., 5: 170) or that Kant's claims about a priori principles of our higher faculties were doubtful on the basis of previously rehearsed objections.[15] To later readers, however, Kant's view that there cannot be principles of taste – that is, basic propositions under "which one could subsume the concept of an object and then by means of an inference conclude that it is beautiful" (5: 285) – has often seemed one of the most obvious ways in which he parted with eighteenth-century traditions. Indeed, the German rationalists had the ambition to 'explain' the pleasure of taste by deriving it from principles of what was called 'empirical psychology.' In 1771, Moses Mendelssohn, for instance, found it regrettable that a "great observer of nature" like Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), was not able to explain his acute observations about beauty and sublimity "from the nature of the soul," because he was unaware of the German philosophers' theories about the human mind.[16] In his aesthetics textbook mentioned earlier, Eberhard, for instance, claimed that all such rules had to be derived from the "final and highest aim" of artworks, which is to give us pleasure. Since pleasure is always the sensible perception of perfection – a principle from the empirical psychology part of rationalist metaphysics – the rules must be instructions of how to represent such perfection in a sensible way. Therefore: "Beautiful works are here regarded as means and hence as effective causes of pleasure."[17] When Eberhard and others labelled Kant's approach as 'subjective', it seems therefore that they did not mean to criticize his focus on the effect of beauty but his claim that we can investigate the causes of the effect only empirically and not derive them from a priori principles.[18]

[13] Sulzer (1774: 622f.; s.v. "Künste; schöne Künste").
[14] For further similarities between Sulzer's views and Kant's, see Rueger (2008a).
[15] Cf. Schulze (1793: 426): "has the critical system, by deriving certain properties of our cognition from the essential arrangement of our mind, really proceeded to the utmost limits of all philosophy?"
[16] Mendelssohn (1771: 400). For the program of explaining the pleasure of taste in Baumgarten and his followers, see Beiser (2009: 133–38).
[17] Eberhard (1786: 7f. and 16).
[18] Beiser (2009: 138) has suggested that what the Baumgarten school meant by 'a priori rules' were rules derived "from higher psychological principles, which determine the place of aesthetic experience within our mental economy." Kant's insistence that there cannot be rules of taste that are derived "from some source entirely outside experience" would then be directed at a straw man

In any case, the contrast between Kant and the eighteenth-century efforts concerning rules of taste did not appear to contemporary readers as stark as it seems in hindsight. First of all, whatever difficulties contemporary readers may have had with grasping the 'transcendental point of view,' it could occur to them that Kant was not competing with efforts to find rules of taste, properly understood, that is, rules that can be found inductively from examples of great art. Art critics, he wrote, through the application of such empirical rules, criticize "the products of fine art just as the former [the transcendental critique] criticizes the faculty of judging them itself" (5: 286). Thus, the KU, officially at least, left the eighteenth-century practice of judging works of art untouched.[19] Second, although the necessity of rules of taste for judging and for producing art was generally accepted, it was also evident to many theorists that these rules could not function as 'principles of taste' in Kant's sense because their correct application to particular cases depended on – taste. Thus, the Swiss *Kunstrichter* Johann Jacob Breitinger admitted in his seminal treatise on poetics (1740):

> It is ... impossible to teach and present good taste through rules that constitute a complete system of fine art because its judgments refer to particular occasions [*Stellen*], which have to be judged according to the [poet's] particular intentions and according to the qualities [*Beschaffenheit*] of particular things.[20]

The poet C. F. Gellert echoed this sentiment, adding that not even the possession of genius can compensate for the shortcoming of the rules:

> The usefulness of the rules is very limited, even when we have genius. They are general and imperfect. They instruct us what we have to do in general but not how much and how little in each case. The application [of the rules] is determined by our insight, by our taste.[21]

rather than at philosophers such as Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, or Eberhard. Although I am not sure the proposed interpretation adequately captures what Baumgarten meant by 'a priori,' it would contribute to explain the relatively tolerant reception of the KU.

[19] I say 'officially' because privately Kant did express the hope that the transcendental critique of taste could lead to practical consequences in art criticism. Cf. the letter to the musician Johann Friedrich Reichardt (15 October 1790) in which he related that "it would please me if a connoisseur truly conversant with the products of the faculty of taste could give a more concrete and explicit account of the characteristics of that faculty, so difficult to fathom, that I have tried to outline" (11: 228). For a systematic and pioneering exploration of the possibility of art criticism within Kant's framework, see Tuna (2016).

[20] Breitinger (1740: 430).

[21] Gellert (1774: 171). Cf. also Sulzer: Works of the fine arts are those whose "mere presentation requires genius and taste, because it cannot be accomplished according to determinate rules" (1774: 626; s.v. "Kunst; künstlich"; cf. 1771: 462; s.v. "Geschmack").

At some level, these were Kant's points: what he called 'mechanical' rules were required in art (cf. 5: 304; 310) – for judging and producing it – but they could not account for a more basic capacity, namely, taste. This more basic ability to discern beauty, in a way that can make a justified claim to universal agreement, he tried to subject to a transcendental (as opposed to an empirical) investigation, that is, he aimed at deriving "the possibility of such a judging [in taste] from the nature of this faculty as a faculty of cognition in general" (5: 286). This sort of investigation, in analogy with the first *Critique*, was supposed to answer the question: *Assuming* that judgments of taste, with their pretension to universal validity, are actual, how are they possible? If we can understand their possibility, through connecting them with our cognitive faculties, then the assumption can be lifted and we can *assert* that we indeed have the capacity to make such judgments and their claims are, in principle, justified.

In light of the comparatively tolerant reception of the KU by the reviewers, it is somewhat ironic that early followers of Kant, such as Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel, also saw a problem with this 'subjectivity' of Kant's theory but took it – against Kant's own pronouncements – as an unnecessary limitation, a blind spot in Kant's view that could be overcome through the efforts of a younger generation of philosophers. Kant's "revolution in the philosophical world," wrote Schiller in early 1793, "has toppled the current system of aesthetics (if it indeed deserves this name)." But although Kant did not see this, his philosophy actually provides the "firm fundament [*Grundsteine*] for erecting a [new] system of aesthetics."[22] In this envisaged system, Schiller planned to give the connection of beauty and morality its proper due, which Kant could not do because he understood the experience of beauty as "a mere subjective play of the imagination that can have no other than empirical rules."[23] Instead, Schiller wanted to show that "the original laws of reason also have to be the laws of taste."[24] The rationalists' ambition – as characterized or mischaracterized by Kant – would thus be realized on a supposedly Kantian basis in a system of "objective" rules.[25]

My diagnosis of the reasons for the early benevolent reception of the KU has left out some circumstances that presumably also played a role, in particular, the fact that Kant's reputation and stature in German philosophy in 1790 may have motivated a certain reverence on the reviewers' part or

[22] Letter to the Duke of Augustenburg, 9 February 1793 (Schiller 1992: 184).
[23] Letter to the Duke of Augustenburg, 9 February 1793 (Schiller 1992: 186).
[24] Letter to the Duke of Augustenburg, 9 February 1793 (Schiller 1992: 185).
[25] See the analysis of this project, started but not completed in Schiller's *Kallias Briefe*, in Beiser (2005: ch. 2).

that the KU was just too difficult to understand, as Karl Leonhard Reinhold, one of Kant's most prominent followers, admitted privately so as to excuse the three-year delay of his review; he just could not grasp what Kant was trying to say in the Introduction and the aesthetic part of the work.[26] But if my diagnosis is roughly correct, it would, of course, still not be justified to infer from the early reviews that the KU indeed did not contain much that was new. What is in need of explanation, however, is the striking fact that the reviewers found, despite Kant's protestations, so much agreement with views in the rationalist tradition. The search for such an explanation motivates a developmental approach, that is, an investigation into the transformation of tenets familiar in 'empirical psychology' into a framework that denied the empirical aspects, an inquiry Kant labelled 'transcendental.' This transformation was the culmination of Kant's old plan to write a 'critique of taste,' for which he had copious materials in his notes and lectures from the 1770s, and historians have long noticed that much of these materials were absorbed, more or less unchanged, into the new KU. My focus in the following chapters, as I explained in my Introduction, will be on the notion of pleasure and its varieties, a topic standardly discussed under the heading of empirical psychology.

During the eighteenth century, there were numerous attempts at defining or explaining pleasure in German philosophy and although the Leibniz–Wolff school's connection of pleasure with the perception of perfection was clearly dominant, after the middle of the century modifications of this view were explored and anti-Wolffian proposals – which insisted that pleasure had nothing to do with perfection but consisted in the satisfaction of desires – were explored. I discuss these positions in some detail because they appear, at least at first glance, similar to Kant's later efforts. In particular, what Kant presented as a "transcendental definition" of pleasure in the KU, and which he motivated with the conjecture that pleasure has "an affinity with the pure faculty of cognition a priori" (5: 177n; 20: 230n), was a widely accepted definition – though, of course, without the label 'transcendental.' In Chapter 2, I start the investigation into the development of Kant's theory of pleasure by exploring what he meant when he claimed that the introduction of the power of judgment in the system of faculties of the mind 'completes' this system. Similarities of his list of faculties with the Wolff–Baumgarten views will be shown, as well as the differences, which became important to the final version of the system in the KU.

A developmental approach of the kind I am pursuing is, in large parts, unavoidably speculative and conjectural. In the case of the KU, this

[26] See Fabbianelli (2004: lxxxiii).

uncertainty includes the chronology of the work's preparation. Although we can reconstruct the transformation of concepts and doctrines in the notes and lectures from the 1770s onwards, it is not possible, on the basis of these materials, to determine precisely what precipitated Kant's change of mind about the a priori grounds of the pleasure of taste between 1781, when he denied such grounds in KrV, and 1787, when he announced the discovery of such grounds in a famous letter to Reinhold.[27] Nor do we know exactly why Kant assigned much more significance to feeling in the moral-philosophical works from the KpV onwards – a significance that is reflected in the role of the pleasure of taste in the aesthetic transition from nature to freedom in the KU. For both developments, I offer conjectural grounds that differ considerably from other proposals in the literature.[28] These grounds, I suggest, are to be found in contemporaneous changes in Kant's moral philosophy. First, throughout the 1770s and up to 1781 Kant seemed reluctant to seriously consider the pleasure of taste to be universally valid. The main obstacle here, I suggest in Chapter 5, was that he perceived a universally valid feeling as a threat to his project of a "pure" moral philosophy, which was to be based on reason but not on any kind of feeling. The obstacle was removed in 1784 when he discovered that the moral law, without being based on moral feeling, provides its own incentive in the form of the "self-wrought" feeling of respect for the law. Thus, once morality became fully autonomous in this sense, a 'critique of taste' as a critique of a faculty with its own a priori principle became possible. Second, to understand and appreciate the role that the pleasure of taste is assigned in the transition project, I argue in Chapter 9, one has to take into account a development in Kant's moral philosophy after 1785. In 1786/7 he realized that the deduction of the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork* (1785) was unsuccessful; the effects of this insight were visible in the second *Critique* (1788)[29] as well as in later works, in which the receptivity to moral feeling took on a systematically more important role. The 'affinity' of such feeling with the pleasure of taste, which Kant emphasizes in the KU, explains the role of aesthetic feeling in the 'transition' from nature to freedom.

[27] See (A 21fn.) and the letter to Reinhold (10: 513–15).

[28] For alternative reconstructions, see Zammito (1992); Guyer (2005: ch. 7); and Frierson (2018). The most recent study of the development of Kant's views on taste (Clewis (2023)) contains rich material about his "early aesthetics" (from the 1760s through the 1770s) but does not focus on the transition to the KU.

[29] This view of the relation of the GMS and the KpV, though widely shared, is, of course, controversial. See Chapter 9.