

“What Kant Does *not* have to Say about Art: Is There Kantian Art Criticism?”¹

As is well known, Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgment focuses on the question how one may require universal agreement, from all subjects, in an aesthetic judgment – paradigmatically “This is beautiful” – when this judgment is based upon one’s own pleasure. Equally famously, Kant argues that we may justifiably require such agreement because aesthetic pleasure arises from a harmony of the cognitive faculties in response to an object’s purposive form, which state is attributable to all subjects, as it is required for the possibility of experience. In this paper, I shall not furnish another contribution to the discussion of the meaning of these claims, but wish, rather, to explore their implications – specifically with respect to the judgment of *art* and the role of art critics in discussion and evaluation of art. That is, *given* Kant’s view about taste: what are the qualifications for engaging in art criticism? do art critics make any privileged claim in, have any particular contribution to make to, debates concerning the value of artworks? I shall answer these questions with a qualified “yes”: the Kantian theory of taste does allow for some special role and privilege for the art critic, though not for the determinative role that critics in the artworld may claim to have.

These are, I should say upfront, somewhat strange questions to ask, since Kant does not discuss such issues much. Worse, it may seem that the reason why Kant does not discuss my questions is because they are, given his view of taste, to be answered, easily, in the negative. I shall begin, indeed, with two passages that suggest just this – and, in so doing, attempt to motivate my question: what could Kantian art criticism be?

I. The Case Against Kantian Art Criticism

Kant does refer to “critics” in the following passage:

if someone reads me his poem...that in the end I simply cannot find to my taste, then let him adduce Batteux or Lessing to prove that his poem is beautiful;...moreover, let certain passages that I happen to dislike conform quite well to rules of beauty (as laid down by these critics and universally recognized); I shall stop my ears, shall refuse to listen to reasons and arguments, and shall sooner assume that those rules of the critics are false, or at least do not apply in the present case, than allow my judgment to be determined by a priori bases of proof; for it is meant to be a judgment of taste, and not one of the understanding or reason. (V:284)

And, though Kant does not refer to critics explicitly in the following passage, it bears upon my questions as well, in a similar spirit:

[I]t is required of every judgment that is supposed to prove the taste of the subject that the subject judge for himself, without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others and first inform himself about their satisfaction... in the same object, and thus that he should pronounce his judgment not as imitation, but a priori....Hence a young poet does not let himself be dissuaded from his conviction that his poem is beautiful by the judgment of the public nor that of his friends, and, if he does give them a hearing, this is not

because he now judges it differently, but rather because, even if (at least in his view) the entire public has a false taste, he nevertheless (even against his judgment) finds cause to accommodate himself to the common delusion in his desire for approval. Only later, when his power of judgment has been made more acute by practice, does he depart from his previous judgment of his own free will, just as he does with those of his judgments that rest entirely on reason. Taste makes claim merely to autonomy. To make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one's own would be heteronomy. (V:282)

In these two passages, Kant in effect dismisses the conceptions of critical practice current in his period – namely, that critics propound rules of art or of taste. In the context of the first passage, Kant is criticizing his rationalist predecessors for believing that judgments of taste are based on concepts or principles. Here Kant appears to take “critics” to be those who claim to articulate a concept of beauty, adumbrate rules therefrom, apply them to particular cases, and thereby prove artistic merit, a view of art criticism widespread in the eighteenth century. But Kant denies throughout the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* that there *is* a concept of beauty – and thus, on his view, there can be no such art criticism.

By referring to Batteux and Lessing in this passage, and to “a priori” rules, Kant appears to be rejecting purported rules based on a theoretical analysis of art – say, concerning the nature of imitation or the character of artistic media – and the consequent view of critical practice. The chief mistake here, on Kant's view, is to conceive of beauty as objective, independent of subjective pleasurable response. *But* if one combines the

first passage with the second, one can see that Kant *also* rejects a conception of rules of taste -- and consequently of the task of critics -- based upon a conception of beauty defined precisely as pleasing for human beings: namely, that critics could formulate “rules” concerning which properties of objects tend to cause human beings pleasure. (This is a conception of criticism held by many in the British aesthetic tradition.²) Such critics would engage in inductive investigation of human emotional capacities as well as of artistic devices found successful in arousing response – and again critical judgments would express, and be privileged because they are based on, such knowledge.

These purported rules of taste, Kant suggests in the second passage, would be based on mere “groping” about among others’ opinions, and, as he argues elsewhere, could not, therefore, ground the normative claims in judgments of taste – that *everyone ought to* feel pleasure in this object.³ And indeed, as most theorists who attempt to articulate such rules or defend such a conception of art criticism admit, most such rules fail to be applicable in all cases – human beings are pleased by bright colors....except when we are not (when we find them “garish”). Such a rule could not ground the claim that this colored thing ought to be found pleasing – perhaps it is one of the exceptions. On Kant’s view, critics of this kind – like the Lessing-type critics, though for a different reason -- would not be making judgments of taste *at all*, but merely reporting others’ instances of pleasure. Their claims would not have any bearing upon judgments of taste proper and certainly would have no special role or privilege in debates about art.

Finally, though it is not the explicit focus in either of these passages, it appears that Kant’s position is incompatible with *another* common conception of art criticism in the eighteenth century, namely connoisseurship. (This conception might be attributed to

Hume, and is a common conception of art criticism in the eighteenth century, though often the focus of criticism among philosophers, particularly in the British tradition.) On such a view, art critics would be those who have the capabilities requisite for finely attuned perception of artworks – such as (to use Hume’s list) good sense, freedom from prejudice, knowledge concerning the artwork’s historical context, fine sensibility, and wide experience of art. Such connoisseur-critics would not necessarily formulate rules in order to prove that objects are beautiful. Rather, because they have the capabilities for appropriate perception of the objects, their *responses* could be taken to set the “standard” of taste. Thus on this view too, art critics would have a privileged role in debates concerning artistic value, indeed the most privileged role -- of establishing that value.⁴ The rest of us should defer to their judgments, as we can recognize (as a “matter of fact,” as Hume says) that these critics have superior capacities to our own.

Unlike critics on the two previous conceptions, this sort of art critic *could* be making legitimate judgments of taste, on Kant’s view: he could be claiming, on the basis of his pleasurable response to the object, that all others ought to take pleasure in representing that object. But there are other central aspects of the Kantian view that seem to preclude endorsing this conception of art critics.

First, the *prima facie* distinguishing characteristics of the connoisseur – superior practice and knowledge – are, it would seem, irrelevant to a Kantian judgment of taste or, more specifically, to the validity of the claim in such judgments. The connoisseur’s judgment of taste, if it is legitimate, is legitimate not because the connoisseur has those special characteristics, but rather because he engages in the harmony of the faculties, which is attributable to *all* human beings.

Further, that which would render the critic's judgment legitimate – the harmony of the faculties – could not command deference from the public, as it is not a demonstrable “matter of fact.” Kant holds that we are incapable of knowing whether or not we are engaging in the harmony of the faculties. The *only* sign that we have attained to the harmony of the faculties is our feeling of pleasure itself – and such pleasure does not reveal that it arises because of the harmony of the faculties.⁵ Because Kant claims that such pleasure is disinterested, we may be able to *rule out* some critical judgments as governed by interest, but not to determine that a critic's pleasure *does* derive from the harmony of the faculties. Thus, not only are the usually recognized characteristics of a critic apparently irrelevant to the legitimacy of his judgments, but also we do not have *other* criteria by which we could judge that someone's responses are (more) likely to be correct, worthy of deference.

In quotation 2 (above), Kant suggests that the young poet's judgment may become more acute through practice, and one might think, therefore, that he leaves room for recognizing art critics' judgments as superior because they are more practiced. But Kant does not there suggest that the young poet ought to see if others have had greater practice than he, and if so, ought to trust their judgments more than his own. Quite the contrary. For on Kant's view, it is not only that we cannot have good reason to defer to someone else concerning taste, but also that one simply *ought never to defer* in judgments of taste; one must judge autonomously.⁶ The individual subject ought to judge on the basis of his or her own pleasurable experience of the object, not to *imitate* the judgments of others, including, specifically, those of purported critics.

This conclusion, Kant suggests, also follows from the a priori ground of judgments of taste: if a judgment is to be based on a priori grounds, it cannot be based on empirical information about the actual opinions of others. And in the case of taste, empirical evidence about their actual pleasures is, it seems, all that others can offer us. That is, taste is both importantly similar to *and* different from geometrical judgments (which also must have a priori grounds on Kant's view). It would be inappropriate to base one's geometrical judgments only upon testimony. If I did so judge, my judgment would not be a legitimate a priori judgment that could lay claim to universal agreement (just as Kant claims about judgments of taste). But because geometrical conclusions are conceptually articulated – involve reasons and proofs -- what others tell us need *not* be empirical evidence of their own states of mind, their influence upon us *not* just “peer pressure.” Rather, we can come to agree with their judgments by our “own free will” (in Kant's terms), for they can offer us a priori reasons. In the case of taste, however, we have no such articulable a priori reasons. Thus if we do accede to others' judgments, it would seem that we are basing our judgments upon empirical evidence (that they claim to feel pleasure), *not because* the object accords with the harmony of the faculties. Rather – Kant suggests – we accede because we wish to be agreeable or appear sophisticated. And thus too it would no longer be even possible that *our* judgments of taste were legitimate. For a judgment of taste, on Kant's view, is legitimate precisely *because* one makes that claim autonomously, i.e., on the basis of a free harmony of the faculties shareable by all, and *not* because of empirical facts, here concerning others' opinions.

In sum: though art critics could make legitimate judgments of taste just as everyone else might, on the Kantian view, it is somewhat unclear whether there can be

any special function they might perform in debates concerning artistic value. Kant dismisses the suggestion that art critics articulate rules of art or taste. And his theory also appears to be incompatible with the suggestion that such critics' superior capacities might render their judgments more correct. Any guiding, privileged role of art critics seems to be ruled out: in matters of taste we cannot and should not defer to the judgments of others. These conclusions, I hope to have suggested, seem to follow from central tenets of Kant's theory of taste: that there are no rules of beauty and that judgments of taste must have an a priori ground.

II. On the other hand...

One might be tempted to leave things here – for one might think that the dismissal of expert critical privilege is consonant with the “democratic” spirit of Kant's aesthetics. Beauty and artistic value are or ought to be, one might think and one might think *Kant* thinks, accessible to all. Insofar as art critics claim some special, perhaps unproveable access to artistic value, they may be taken not to inform us, but rather to be exerting social power and peer pressure, and the like.⁷ We, in following such critical judgments, could be caving in to a “desire for approval” – and this is not, I think, an unfamiliar phenomenon.

And yet...if it were true that the Kantian view of taste precludes *any* role for critics, this would seem to count against it: it appears, *prima facie*, that criticism does guide people's judgments, and is embedded in much of the practice of art appreciation. We tend to think that knowledge and practice concerning art *are* relevant to the judgment of artistic merit. More broadly, we *discuss* art and take testimony concerning artistic

merit seriously. If the Kantian view can accommodate no such function for criticism, then it might not be reconcilable with the actual practice of aesthetic judgment – and thus would seem extraordinarily ideal, i.e., to describe an unrecognizable form of judgment, quite unlike those judgments and practices we *thought* the theory was meant to explain and justify. Such distance from our ordinary practices seems alien to Kant’s most general philosophical aims, namely to identify the a priori principles that underlie common practices of judgment, whether of scientific investigation, moral deliberation -- or debates concerning artistic merit.⁸

If we consider Kant’s aesthetic theory more broadly, moreover, it does appear consonant with this general aim – and to leave room for, perhaps even require, some sort of attention to the judgments of others. Kant argues (as I have discussed) that we cannot defer to others’ judgments without sacrificing the a priori ground of our own claims concerning the beautiful. But that very a priori is meant to ground a justified claim *on* others that they *ought to* find this object pleasing as well. It seems, then, incoherent to claim that judgments of such legitimate status – or at least judgments that may very well be legitimate -- *should be ignored* by others, who must, instead, make their own entirely independent judgments. Indeed, near the conclusion of the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,’ Kant returns to his central problem – the task of legitimizing the universal claims in judgments of taste – and claims that this task amounts to an explanation why it *is* legitimate to “*argue*” about matters of taste.⁹ Kant’s defense of the universal validity of judgments of taste means that there is a right answer concerning taste, and thus that disagreements matter, make claims that ought to be resolved.

Thus, I propose, Kant in fact aims to legitimize *some* sort of attentive response to the claims of others. One ought, I suggest therefore, to read Kant's claims in my two opening passages as somewhat polemical, aiming to mark off his view from those of his contemporaries. If the *only* options were the ones suggested by his contemporaries (proof from rules or deference to majority or connoisseur judgments), then in order to make a judgment of taste one ought to "stop one's ears" or resist the "desire for approval."¹⁰ But these are not, I think, the only options. Given disagreement with others – and given the presumption that there is a "right answer" concerning taste -- the "young poet" could be lead to doubt his judgment, to reexamine the object to see what he might have missed, to investigate whether his pleasure might have arisen from other sources than the harmony of the faculties, to engage in discussion with others to clarify the nature of his response.¹¹ So long as one does not take such discussion to demand either proof or deference, Kant's theory thus leaves open, indeed might be said to aim to establish, the possibility of aesthetic debate, i.e., of listening to, engaging with others' judgments – including those of more informed critics – without sacrificing one's ability to judge autonomously.

Kant's conception of judgment concerning artistic value suggests, moreover, that knowledge and practice *do* inform such judgment. For, on Kant's view, judgments of artistic merit are *not* pure judgments of taste, but are judgments of *dependent* beauty, and also incorporate further, perhaps independent values. Kant claims that in judging artworks we do not merely judge the object on the basis of pleasure, but also employ concepts -- of the kind of thing the object is "meant to be" – to render a complex

judgment – a judgment of taste together with a judgment of perfection.¹² Kant also claims that there are other values that contribute to artistic merit: originality and “spirit.”¹³ Artistic appreciation is, on Kant’s view, appreciation predominantly of “aesthetic ideas,” the thematic content of works of art. Such ideas are characterized by “spirit” – animating richness and profundity of meaning -- and are created by genius, which is also marked by exemplary originality.¹⁴

These components of artistic merit “bring back in” the relevance of empirical knowledge and practice to judgments of artistic merit. In making such judgments, one must (first) have concepts of artistic and other kinds, of what this object is “meant to be.”¹⁵ (One might add here as well judgments concerning artistic skill, for such skill is arguably the ability to produce “what the thing is meant to be.”¹⁶) The judgment of a representational painting, Kant suggests, must also employ concepts of what is represented therein.¹⁷ Judgments of artistic merit may then (though Kant does not say so) employ specific concepts of genre, medium, technique, iconography, representational conventions and content: not just ‘painting’, ‘woman’ and ‘angel’, but also ‘tempera painting on wood’, ‘altarpiece’, ‘the Annunciation.’

To judge of an art work’s exemplary originality, moreover, one must know art history, in order to compare the work to its predecessors and successors. For exemplary originality is an historical, relational property: the genius’ work is both *different from* the work of those who precede him (he is not merely an imitator) and *inspirational to* those who succeed him (exemplary).¹⁸ Finally, in order to appreciate aesthetic ideas – which comprise “inexplicable” connections among “partial representations” focused around a central concept – one must again employ concepts, both to identify the central theme

(Kant suggests death, love, fame, heaven, and hell as examples), but also to develop the metaphorical and allusive connections between this theme and other representations, which together comprise the aesthetic idea.¹⁹

The need for such complex empirical knowledge in appreciating artistic merit *prima facie* identifies a function for the art critic: to develop specialized knowledge of artistic intent and technique, to refine empirical concepts of genre (and so on), through “practice” and historical investigation more broadly. It appears, too, that such expertise would, as on the Humean view, be a determinable “matter of fact”²⁰: we can identify those who have greater knowledge of such matters by reference to empirical evidence, methods of investigation, training, etc.

Thus, on Kant’s own view it would appear not only that we should listen to testimony concerning matters of taste, but also that there might well be some sort of role – and privilege -- for the educated, knowledgeable critic in debate about artistic merit. But we must ask how precisely these claims are to be combined with the claims with which I began: what *kind* of role and privilege might the art critic have, if she is not formulating rules or providing proofs? *how* is this critical role and privilege not to impinge upon the judgmental autonomy of others? *how* does the empirical knowledge of artistic genre or human psychology play a role in judgments of taste, made on a priori grounds? I now attempt to sketch an answer to these questions.

III: Kantian Art Criticism

One might first propose that empirical conceptual judgment of an artwork (as what it is “meant to be,” as original and meaningful) and the judgment of taste

concerning it are, at least in principle, separate judgments that are then combined into a complex judgment of artistic merit.²¹ This conception of judgments of artistic merit lends itself to a relatively easy reconciliation of the two “sides” of the Kantian view, as I have sketched them.

For the art critic’s special knowledge would ground exclusively the first of these judgments: knowledge of historical context, genre, etc. would contribute to the formation of the probably quite complex concept of what this object is “meant to be” and to the discernment of whether the object is an adequate realization of that artistic purpose – i.e., would ground the judgment of perfection. Also on grounds of her empirical knowledge, the critic might establish that the artwork has certain values – of skill and exemplary originality, perhaps -- as in, say, recognizing Calder’s influential engineering innovation in creating moving sculptures. And the rest of us could follow the critic’s judgments here, just as we can learn from testimony concerning any item of empirical knowledge.²²

Such deference to critical claims would not, however, constitute any sort of deference to the critic concerning *taste*. For on this view, the critic – and/or the rest of us – would engage in a further, additional judgment of taste concerning the object’s “form” alone. With respect to this judgment, the critic would be in no special, privileged condition; we could still each judge autonomously, on a priori grounds, concerning whether or not the object is beautiful. Though the critic might formulate rules – governing genre or iconography --, they are not rules of *taste*; even if the object conforms to them, the further question whether the object is *beautiful* remains.²³ Indeed one of the core intuitions underlying Kant’s denial that there are rules of beauty is the view that

adequacy to genre constraints, specific contents of representation (and so on) are not singly or together sufficient for beauty.²⁴

On this conception, then, art critics would be something like the empirical scholars of religion Kant discusses in his philosophy of religion: such scholars empirically investigate religious documents, traditions, or rituals, to establish the character and meaning of actual religions. But just as “religion within the limits of reason alone” establishes the true rational, universally valid religion and therefore establishes on a priori grounds the religious *value* of the actual religions investigated by scholars, the aesthetic *value* of artworks would be established not by scholars, but on a priori grounds, by judgments of taste.²⁵

This view of judgments of artistic value does allot a function to art critics, and one that is consistent with Kant’s other claims concerning taste. It seems, too, to be accurate to the appreciation of art at least sometimes. For example, the recent discovery that many of Rembrandt’s paintings do not represent Jews, as had been thought,²⁶ was made by experts – and is, arguably, a judgment to which the rest of us should defer. This fact seems relevant to understanding the nature and value of those paintings -- they may no longer be appreciable as beautiful portrayals of the common humanity of us all, or of the “exotic Other” -- but it does not *by itself* establish anything (*prima facie*) concerning their beauty or overall artistic value.

Precisely by making the art critic’s expertise *so* irrelevant to judgments of taste, however, this view also seems problematic. For, first, this view entails not at all – contra

Kant's suggestion, and contra what we prima facie think – that critical knowledge might improve taste, or (more generally) inform the critic's judgments of taste.

Second, and relatedly, one might wonder whether and how (on this view) the empirical judgments – of genre, representational content, etc. – are *related* to the judgment of taste, why Kant includes them in an account of judgments of artistic beauty, or why one *need* pay attention to critical opinion, if one is concerned primarily with the question of beauty.²⁷

Kant sometimes suggests that the judgment of perfection is “presupposed by” the judgment of taste,²⁸ and this suggestion again seems likely to be true in some cases. A work that is meant, but fails, to be a sonnet may thereby be hopelessly flawed, so that one cannot then appreciate it as beautiful.²⁹ More broadly, some empirical knowledge often is a prerequisite for assessing a work's aesthetic value; to appreciate Greek poetry, for example, one must know Greek and its standard verse forms -- or be helped by recognizable experts, through translation and explanation.³⁰ But it also seems that much empirical information might be irrelevant to -- not a condition for -- appreciation of the work as beautiful. Even adequacy to genre or form constraints are a somewhat vexed “condition” for artistic merit, given the competing value of originality. Calder's mobiles might be judged as failed sculptures according to traditional form conceptions – as flimsy, failing to embody a full physical presence – but perhaps ought to be judged as both original and beautiful. Similarly, a Modigliani or Cezanne portrait might violate genre expectations (e.g., that a portrait should convey the distinctive character of the sitter), but be nonetheless breathtakingly original in style and use of color. In such cases,

one might be pressed either to revise one's genre-concept, or to formulate a new one – not to view adequacy to genre or form expectations as a “presupposition” for beauty.

Finally, on Kant's view, the artistic values of “aesthetic ideas” and originality appear *not* to be entirely independent of, but rather to follow from or to be versions of, the aesthetic value of beauty. On Kant's description, that is, aesthetic ideas are found valuable because they too arouse a harmony of the faculties.³¹ And Kant presents the demand of originality as following from the artist's aspiration to make a work of beauty, i.e., to produce the experience of non-rule-governed yet unified, pleasurable cognitive play in the audience.³² And of course Kant even claims that the genius' accomplishment – the expression of aesthetic ideas -- *is* beauty.³³

For these reasons, it would seem that on a Kantian view, there should be a closer relationship between judgments employing empirical knowledge and the judgment of taste within the judgment of artistic merit, a relationship I shall call (vaguely, I admit) “incorporation” of such empirical judgments into the judgment of taste. Let me sketch out how this might go. One might, for example, appreciate a Winslow Homer watercolor as beautiful *in* recognizing its use of shades of brownish grey to convey the ethereality of light as reflected in water, which in turn might comprise some of the “partial representations” in an aesthetic idea of the transience of human consciousness within the eternal order of nature. Knowledge of watercolor technique, standard subject matter, and color schemes might serve to draw attention to Homer's choice to employ the shades of grey, as both particularly challenging, skillful and original in watercolor and also symbolic of the fragile achievement of individuation in and of human visual consciousness – as might be suggested too by the small, off-center human figures

represented in the painting, and by Homer's use of the fragile medium of watercolor itself to represent the fleeting reflection of light on water.³⁴ Noticing aspects of the work under empirical conceptual descriptions, as salient in light of empirical knowledge of medium and tradition, is then *part of* the activity of aesthetic appreciation, of the harmony of imagination and understanding in representing the work.³⁵

Unlike my prior suggestion, this view of judgments of artistic merit would ground a claim that one's taste can improve given further "practice" and empirical knowledge of media, genre, etc. For these may allow one to notice and understand aspects of the object such that it is found beautiful – or to be in a better position to engage in the harmony of the faculties than those who are unfamiliar with such aspects of artworks.³⁶

In the sole passage in which he discusses a positive role of critics on his view, Kant suggests, similarly, that critics do bring their empirical knowledge to bear in their judgments of taste. Immediately after reiterating the point that there can be no rules of taste, and thus that critics cannot aim to formulate such rules, Kant writes that critics "can reason more plausibly than cooks," though "[t]hey cannot expect a determining ground for their judgment from proofs, but only from the reflection of the subject on his own state (of pleasure or displeasure)." There is nonetheless, he claims, a specific function for critics: criticism is the "art" of "bringing under rules the reciprocal relation of the understanding and the imagination to each other in the given representation." Criticism is like Kantian critique, then, in that it shows that the pleasure of taste derives from the harmony of the cognitive faculties. But it does so not by providing a philosophical account, but rather by "laying out in examples" the "reciprocal subjective purposiveness" of the faculties as elicited by particular "products of fine art." In so doing, Kant claims,

the critic applies “psychological... empirical rules, according to which taste actually proceeds [in] judging...its objects.” (V:285-6)³⁷

This passage is rather cryptic, but let me begin by discussing what Kant might mean by suggesting that the critic “brings under rules” the harmony of the faculties and employs “empirical psychological rules” in her judgments. These claims sound like a reversal of Kant’s strictures against critical elaboration of rules and in a way, I think that they are: Kant is here attempting to describe what is “happening,” on his own view, when critics look like they are propounding rules³⁸. A critic discussing the Homer watercolor might, that is, invoke rules of watercolor technique or the observation that faint grey can evoke feelings of wistfulness.

As I have discussed, none of these rules is truly a rule for beauty, on Kant’s view -- there may be plenty of watercolors using grey that are not beautiful; properties that often please in certain ways can fail to “work” in the context of a whole work or fail to have their usual effect (as when an otherwise wistful grey can convey deadly military seriousness, as in *Star Wars*).³⁹ Kant suggests that the critic is not, however, using these rules as purported premises for a proof of beauty. Rather, she “brings” the harmony of the faculties “under” these rules in the “*given* representation”, in *this* “example.” Thus, negatively put, Kant suggests that critics do not (or should not) mean to propound rules of beauty, proper – i.e., ones that apply in all cases – but only to call attention to such properties *as* relevant for, contributing to, the beauty of *this* work. However, and positively, by using such “quasi-rules” the critic can *communicate* her experience of the object: she appreciates the object as beautiful, by attending to these aspects as salient under these descriptions; owing to her knowledge of art or of human responsiveness, she

can *articulate* those aspects of the object, so as to convey her experience to others.⁴⁰

Thus the critic may be superior to ordinary judges not necessarily because she appreciates the work better, but because she can *describe* better what and how she is appreciating.

She shows to others that pleasure arises from the harmony of the faculties not theoretically, but by helping others to *experience* the harmony of the faculties with respect to this object.⁴¹

Thus, as Kant begins this passage, critics *may* “more plausibly reason” than cooks – for they have empirical knowledge and “rules” to draw upon in order to articulate the cognitively complex experience of an object as beautiful. But such employment of “rules” does not violate Kant’s view that there can be no rules of taste, for they are not here employed, truly, as rules. Nor, as I will now suggest, does such critical practice conflict with our other desideratum of a Kantian theory of criticism, namely Kant’s resistance to deference. For, as Kant continues in this passage, critics share the “fate” of cooks – it is pleasure that determines aesthetic judgment.

That is, the critic’s *own* judgment is based on her pleasure in the object and, therefore, her judgment is no longer quite warranted by the grounds for privilege of, and deference to, knowledgeable critics sketched above. For the critic on this view not only conveys some empirical facts, but also claims that one ought to attend to these properties of the object, under these descriptions, in relation to one another -- and that in doing so, one will appreciate the work as beautiful. The critic *selects* certain empirical aspects of the object under certain empirical descriptions from among the indefinitely many empirical facts that might be true of the object, to propose them as (as it were) “reasons” for finding the work beautiful. And she selects such empirical aspects for attention *as*

guided by taste, i.e., they “bring under rules” her pleasurable harmony of the faculties. For example, there are a number of different ways in which one might classify works – say, by size, subject matter, style, or medium – and, as I suggested above concerning Calder, Cezanne, and Modigliani, one’s aesthetic appreciation of a work may both be influenced by *and influence* one’s choice of genre category under which to consider the work.⁴² Insofar as the critic selects a particular description – and does so in light of her pleasure in the object – she is rendered less determinable as “expert” by the rest of us. Her experience and knowledge are not, alone, sufficient to warrant her selective choices – for these are guided by her taste – or again (and indeterminably for her and for the rest of us) by personal preference or interest. With respect to these claims, then, we cannot simply, justifiably defer.

Critics thus offer their descriptions of works to the public, offer “plausible reasons,” in order to convey their pleasurable experience of the work – and, crucially, do so as guided by that pleasurable experience. Correspondingly, critics merely put us in position -- by focusing our attention, making certain properties salient, indicating historical or other resonances of the work (and so on) -- to judge whether the work is indeed pleasurable or to engage, ourselves, in the harmony of the faculties. Like an interlocutor in a conversation about geometry, the critic may provide us with an orientation toward the object that allows us to make a judgment, ourselves, on a priori grounds --though unlike the geometrical interlocutor, she cannot provide us with any a priori reasons. Rather, she points to selected empirical characteristics of the object, attention to which will allow us to *have* the harmony of the faculties (the a priori ground for a judgment of taste). One does not simply copy or defer to the critic’s judgment, then,

but rather attempts to see the object from the critic's "point of view," through a similar exercise of cognitive attentiveness. And in doing so, it is always possible to fail to experience pleasure in representing the object, and thus reasonably, justifiably to deny the critical judgment. Our judgment, too, must be based upon pleasure.

Though we do retain judgmental autonomy in the face of such critical communication, then, critics can nonetheless be allowed a *certain* sort of privilege or guiding role in debates concerning artistic merit on this view. As I have argued, critics use "rules" to guide our attention to the work, and in so doing, critics not only may help us to represent certain "examples" as beautiful, but also themselves serve as examples, as "exemplary" judges of taste. I suggest, that is, that we may adapt Kant's suggestions concerning the relationship between the artistic genius and other subsequent artists, to describe the relationship between the critic and the rest of us. Kant claims that other artists should not *imitate* the genius, but may be inspired by the genius to create their own original works.⁴³ Likewise, Kant denies that any aesthetically judging subject should *imitate* another's judgment, but I suggest that we could *emulate* a Kantian critic.

For, first, the critic not only communicates her experience of this object, but also exhibits the *exercise* of aesthetic judging. In providing concrete, evocative description of a work, the critic also models aesthetic judging itself -- playful, informed, inventive, cognitive aliveness to the empirical particularities and resonances of this object. Even if we are not persuaded concerning this work, we, the uninformed and ill-practiced, may thereby become aware of the requirements of attention, imagination, and knowledge for appreciation of art.

The Kantian critic may also be exemplary, I suggest, because of the publicity of her critical communication, which renders it exemplary of two defining factors of a judgment of taste: universal communicability and universal subjective validity. In providing “plausible reasons” for her judgments, the critic attempts not simply to judge an object as beautiful or not, but to share her experience of the object and thereby exemplifies – aims at the ideal of -- the universal communicability of pleasure in beauty. Moreover, critics state their verdicts upon works outright, publicly take a position, and take themselves to engage in *debate*, not merely to report their personal preferences, but to judge the object in ways applicable to others, as addressed to others who should agree. Critical judgments thus exemplify the *status* of aesthetic judgments on a Kantian view – and in a way emulable by the rest of us. Precisely because aesthetic judgments are based on pleasure, we might be inclined to treat our responses to art as mere personal preferences – “I liked it, anyway.” To do so, however, is to deny the status of a judgment of taste or to deny oneself the capacity so to judge. The example of the critic – the critic as exemplary judge – refuses such a limitation of the status of aesthetic judgment. Such exemplification does not mean, again, that we should simply copy the critic – indeed in the case of critical debate, cannot mean this (whom should we copy?). Rather, the critic demonstrates for us what the enterprise of aesthetic judging is, that beauty, taste, and art are things about which, as Kant writes, it is reasonable to “argue.”

IV. Conclusion

I have suggested that despite its apparent dismissal of the possibility of art criticism, Kant’s account of taste leaves room for two somewhat different art critical

functions and privileges: the function of art historian, with the privilege of empirical expertise, and the function and privilege of exemplary judge. On both conceptions, we can allow that the critic is “worth listening to” about artworks because of her qualifications of practice and knowledge. But on neither conception can a critic prove to us that an object is beautiful or exact deference. Indeed, on either conception, it remains possible and coherent to say that an art critic is well informed, practiced, sensitive to works, etc. – and yet has bad taste.⁴⁴ Even critical consensus about the value of canonical works must be taken as subject to contestation: such consensus cannot provide sufficient evidence of the right kind to judge a work beautiful. It may derive instead, one might argue, from educational or class formation, political or economic interests, or the like. And, as we have seen in the centuries after Kant wrote, critical consensus has been subjected to precisely this sort of challenge.

This radical indecision concerning matters of taste, I suggest finally, is characteristic of the aims and conclusions of Kant’s account of taste in general. By contrast to Hume, Kant does *not* provide a *standard* of taste – i.e., an account whereby we could “decide” *which* objects “really are” beautiful, whose judgment, when, is the correct one. Kant never claims to do this, but only to establish *that* there may be objects rightly said to be beautiful, that it is *possible* that one – someone -- could make a judgment of taste justifiably. Thus Kant’s account leaves us in a position of indecision – and, as I have suggested, it may be one function of Kantian critics to uphold, in the face of such indecision, the possibility of being right, of engaging in debate that matters.

Notes

¹ I owe the formulation of the problem of this paper to conversations with James Shelley, and to reflection on some of Brent Kalar's recent papers on Kant's aesthetics. I am also grateful to Tim Costelloe, Anne Eaton, Kyla Ebels Duggan, Les Harris, Baron Reed and Brian Soucek for conversations about the topics of this paper, and to audiences at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Meeting in Philadelphia (December 2008), at the Auburn University Annual Philosophy Conference, Auburn, AL, and at the Philosophy Department, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for probing questions and comments.

² This is the form of criticism identified by Dugald Stewart as "philosophical criticism" (by contrast to the criticism of connoisseurship); though Stewart's writings postdate the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, Stewart's characterization seems apt for Scottish writers such as Gerard and Kames, with whose works Kant was acquainted. (Dugald Stewart, *Philosophical Essays*, Essay III, *Collected Works*, William Hamilton, ed., Farnborough, UK: Gregg, 1971.)

³ CJ §18 V:237, General Remark V:278.

⁴ One might doubt whether aesthetic value exhausts artistic value. I am (more or less) assimilating these two types of value here, in concert with eighteenth century discussion, though I will touch upon possible points of distinction in the following discussion of Kant's own view concerning art (without really discussing this issue, however).

⁵ CJ, §9.

⁶ In part, Kant means this claim to apply to human beings as a group: the principle of taste – the purposiveness of the object's form for our cognitive capacities – is a priori and "ideal." We cannot establish metaphysically – say through an assertion of God's intentional creation of nature – that objects are purposive or have been designed so as to suit our cognitive capabilities. Nor do we, again as a whole species, find out by induction which objects are beautiful – e.g., by finding out which are, objectively, suitable to and designed for ends. Rather we judge spontaneously, of ourselves, that they are beautiful. (V:350) So far beauty is no different from geometry on Kant's view: geometry too is a priori and based on "ideal" spatial intuition; thus human beings (one could say) judge "autonomously" concerning geometrical claims. But, as is clear in the young poet passage, Kant also means his claim concerning autonomy to apply to individuals vis a vis the opinions of others. If we based our aesthetic judgment on others' views, we would not be making a judgment of taste proper, but rather merely "imitating" them.

⁷ So indeed Kant's British predecessors argue, in favor of their own more egalitarian, natural bases for taste. Here I think primarily of Hogarth's and Stewart's expressed antipathy to connoisseurship, and explicitly political arguments in favor of natural, shared bases for taste. Hogarth and Stewart represent the two chronological poles of the British tradition in aesthetics, and their anti-elitist spirit is representative (if not shared without exception) by most of the theorists who write in this tradition between them. This skeptical view concerning the nature of criticism is, interestingly, expanded into a theory of the function of taste (and judgments thereof) by Bourdieu in his sociological reading and criticism of Kant's theory of taste itself.

⁸ Or at least of those judgments concerning objects of experience: Kant of course famously does not aim to legitimate practices of metaphysical speculation. Overall, here, I endorse the view of Kant's aims defended by Karl Ameriks, viz., that Kant presupposes the validity of "common sense" judgments – whether cognitive, moral, or aesthetic – and attempts to show that these may be justified by reference to a priori principles. I do not know if Ameriks would include critical practice here, however.

⁹ CJ §56 V:338. Kant opposes “streiten” (argue) and “disputieren” (dispute) here: it is possible to “argue” but not to “dispute” (i.e., decide “in accordance with determinate concepts as grounds of proofs”).

¹⁰ Richard Moran in a recent paper (“Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty,” unpublished paper given at the New York University conference on Modern Philosophy November 2007) also emphasizes the first passage I quote. He reads this passage too strongly, I think however, to mean that *no* claims made by others can be regarded. Though Kant does say that “I shall refuse to listen to reasons and arguments,” the context suggests that he means “reasons and arguments” in a rather specific way: to comprise universal principles of taste that can *prove* (deductively, as major premises in a syllogism) that an object is beautiful.

¹¹ One might well suspect that the young poet’s pleasure in his *own* poems might not be a universally shareable pleasure in the harmony of the cognitive faculties.

¹² I here follow scholarly consensus in understanding judgments of dependent beauty to be “impure” in the sense that they are more complex and involve empirical “components” – i.e., empirical concepts of kinds of things -- but are not therefore judgments of *lesser* beauty.

¹³ Kant also claims that we ultimately find works of art trivial or unsatisfying (even if beautiful), if they do not have some reference to moral ideas (CJ §52 V:326). Thus judgments of artistic merit may also employ a priori moral concepts, beyond a pure judgment of taste. I leave this aside in the text of the paper, however, since such concepts are in principle accessible to everyone, and knowledge of them would not therefore distinguish critics from others.

¹⁴ Kant is, in other words, *not* a formalist about artistic merit, despite the fact that many twentieth century formalists – e.g., Greenberg and Bell – are inspired by his aesthetic theory.

¹⁵ CJ §48, V:311.

¹⁶ Kant does claim that artistic production requires “mechanical” ability at CJ §43, V:303-4; § 47, V:310. In the latter passage, Kant somewhat misleadingly connects this “mechanical” element to “academic correctness” and to “form” (and thereby to the “power of judgment”), thus suggesting that an artist is skilled if and only if he cleaves to rather specific, institutionally set standards and also that such academic form is responsible for the beauty (i.e., form) of the product. This claim, however, cannot possibly be Kant’s considered opinion, as it appears to conflict with his claims concerning genius (which, as original, must sometimes break with institutionally set standards); the link between such “mechanical” skill and beauty is even more problematic since Kant holds that the mechanical is governed by rules, whereas in his discussion of art, as elsewhere, claims that beauty is not so governed.

¹⁷ CJ §16. V:229.

¹⁸ CJ, §46, V:308.

¹⁹ CJ, §49, V:314. In discussing aesthetic attributes – which are, I would argue, one kind of component of an aesthetic idea – Kant suggests that iconographical knowledge might be required for appreciation of artworks (to know, e.g., that this figure is Jupiter, and is associated with an eagle, and the like), though Kant does not explicitly draw this conclusion.

²⁰ There may well be disputes and unclarities concerning such empirical evidence, the concepts derived therefrom, and the expertise of critics who present them, but in principle such disputes should be no different from those in any other empirical area of study.

²¹ Such a view is suggested by Kant’s remarks in §16 to the effect that judgments of dependent beauty represent a “unification of taste with reason,” i.e., of the judgment of taste (or beauty) with the judgment of perfection (V:230-1), by his remarks concerning the relationship between genius or “spirit” and taste

“form” in art at CJ §48 V:312-3 (taste concerns the “mere form” of art and creating such form does not require “inspiration” or the “free swing of the mental powers” of genius), and (perhaps) by his claim that there is a “science” concerning the “truth” represented by art (§60 V:355), though no science of artistic beauty itself (though I am not sure what this “truth” of art is meant to be).

²² On Kant’s endorsement of testimony as a source of empirical knowledge, see Axel Gelfert, “Kant on Testimony,” *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (4) 2006, 627-652.

²³ One might also note that much of the art critical enterprise (as so far described) need not be understood as an elaboration of rules. To be sure, the critic would elaborate *concepts* of genre or form, which would indeed serve as “rules” governing what an object “is meant to be.” But many of the other avenues of investigation for the critic – articulating historical context in order to identify iconographic practices, thematic contents of aesthetic ideas, and originality – employ and aim to refine empirical concepts, but do not identify any *rules* per se for artistic merit, but just attempt to determine what is going on in this particular art work. Though the function of empirical knowledge thus appears to be much wider than formulating “rules” even on Kant’s own view, I leave aside these complications here.

²⁴ Originality and the expression of artistic ideas are, however, slightly harder to fit into this characterization, as I shall suggest below.

²⁵ This is the position (broadly speaking) defended both in *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone* and the *Conflict of the Faculties*.

²⁶ Benjamin Moser, review of the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam Rembrandt exhibit and catalogue, *New York Review of Books* April 14, 2008.

²⁷ In other words: what sorts of values (with what sorts of grounds or status) are the “extra” non-aesthetic values – originality, spirit, perfection, skill – that (on this view) contribute to overall artistic merit? Such issues (or similar ones) have been discussed primarily in the context of discussions about dependent beauty, i.e., concerning how to understand the relationship between the empirical conceptual judgment of the object and the judgment of taste concerning that object). I add here (similar, but not identical) questions concerning the relationship of the judgment of taste to other empirical conceptual judgments that contribute to judgments of artistic merit (concerning originality and “spirit”). Providing an account of such relationships is a larger task than I can undertake here. Instead, I am assuming that there are basically two ways to understand this relationship. On the one hand, as I have been discussing, one might propose that judgments of dependent beauty comprise two separate judgments added together (in some way). On the other hand, as I shall discuss in a moment, one might suggest instead that judgments of taste concerning artistic beauty somehow *incorporate* the judgment of perfection and judgments of originality, spirit, and the like, such that the one, single judgment (of taste, or of artistic merit) would include the other considerations.

²⁸ CJ §16 V: 230.

²⁹ This may be what Kant means in claiming that perfection is a “foundation” or “condition” for a work’s beauty (CJ §48 V:311-2).

³⁰ At CJ §44 V:305, Kant discusses the need to know dead languages and history (etc.) in order to *produce* art, but this point clearly presupposes the point I wish to make, namely: to appreciate such art, one requires such knowledge (whether or not one must appreciate such art in order to produce art of one’s own).

³¹ Kant does not (to my knowledge) make this claim in so many words; he does, however, claim that in representing (or creating) aesthetic ideas, the imagination is “purposive for the presentation of [a] given concept” and that there is an “unsought and unintentional subjective purposiveness in the free correspondence of the imagination to the lawfulness of the understanding [that] presupposes a proportion

and disposition of [the imagination] that cannot be produced by any following of rules” (CJ §49 V:317-8), which descriptions – as well as Kant’s frequent descriptions of this appreciation as “animating” to the mind or to these two cognitive powers – are strongly similar to his characterizations of the harmony of the faculties in appreciating beauty.

³² CJ §45-46, especially V: 307. One might also be tempted to say that the genius is celebrated for creating works original not just in any way, but in their *beauty*, which is what inspires others to follow his example.

³³ CJ §51 V:320.

³⁴ The role of (judgment concerning) genre- and form-membership in appreciating an artwork as beautiful will prove to be rather multi-faceted, I think – to include its function as a “condition”, for example, in “excusing” factors that might otherwise be taken to render the work non-beautiful, e.g., the boringness of the backside or the thinness of color are both “excused” in a work judged as a watercolor. So Kant may suggest by his example of the church in §16 V:230: this object would be beautiful, Kant writes, if it were not meant to be a church, which precludes certain decorations if it is to be “perfect” as a church. In this discussion, I am indebted to Kendall Walton’s classic “Categories of Art” *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), 334-367.

³⁵ On my view, such appreciation is also equivalent to appreciating the work’s “purposive form,” though I can’t argue for this claim here. I defend it (though not particularly applied to art) in “The Purposiveness of Form: A reading of Kant’s aesthetic formalism” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44:4 October 2006, 599-622 or (nearly equivalently) *Kant on Beauty and Biology*, Chapter Five.

³⁶ Such knowledge might also prevent arbitrary, purely subjective cognitive “play” with aspects of a work that in fact are inaccurately described – as, e.g., original (instead of cliched), as skilled (instead of clumsy), and so on. Thus, I take it that critical debate will comprise debate both about matters of fact (of the arthistorical sort) and about whether the aspects delineated by the critic, as so described, do render the work beautiful.

³⁷ This passage is too long to quote in the text of the paper, but it runs in full as follows:

“Thus although critics, as Hume says, can reason more plausibly than cooks, they still suffer the same fate as them. They cannot expect a determining ground for their judgment from proofs, but only from the reflection of the subject on his own state (of pleasure or displeasure), rejecting all precepts and rules.

However, what critics nonetheless can and should reason about, in a way that is useful for correcting and broadening our judgments of taste, is this: not the exposition of the determining ground of this sort of aesthetic judgments in a universally usable formula, which is impossible, but the investigation of the faculties of cognition and their functions in these judgments and laying out in examples the reciprocal subjective purposiveness, about which it has been shown above that its form in a given representation is the beauty of an object. Thus the critique of taste itself is only subjective, with regard to the representation by means of which an object is given to us: that is, it is the art or science of bringing under rules the reciprocal relation of the understanding and the imagination to each other in the given representation (without relation to an antecedent sensation or concept), and consequently their concord or discord, and of determining it with regard to its conditions. It is art if it shows this only in examples; it is science if it derives the possibility of such a judging from the nature of this faculty as a faculty of cognition in general. It is with the latter, as transcendental

critique, that we are here alone concerned. It should develop and justify the subjective principle of taste as an a priori principle of the power of judgment. Criticism, as an art, merely seeks to apply the physiological (here psychological) and hence empirical rules, according to which taste actually proceeds to the judging of its objects (without reflecting on its possibility), and criticizes the products of fine art just as the former criticizes the faculty of judging them itself.” (CJ §34 V:285-6)

³⁸ Specifically, either (as in the first phrase) of art (how “this representation” is constructed) or (as in the second phrase) of taste (how human beings respond to properties of works). Under the latter, Kant has in mind here, I am assuming, generalizations such as those proposed by his empiricist predecessors concerning the connections between certain properties of works and emotional responses, such as (say) visual compositional formats that promote a sense of balance, or certain musical rhythms that can arouse feelings of fear or suspense.

³⁹ Or, to take another example: parodies such as “Scary Movie” employ the same sort of music as is employed in thrillers – but it does not, in this case, arouse fear.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Shellikins (sp? conversation) suggested that this Kantian passage might be read to mean that “thicker” aesthetic properties might be rule-governed or more rule-governed than thinner or ultimate aesthetic properties or values, such as beauty or overall artistic merit. Thus it may be that certain properties (e.g., faint greys) standardly evoke certain responses (this seems particularly plausible to me concerning musical constructions), and that the critic can know this. But no such rule (even if it is more generally true than I suggest in the text) can establish that any work with such a property is, overall, beautiful or artistically good. I’m suggesting a rather weaker position in the text than this (i.e., that even such rules for “thicker” aesthetic properties are not going to be hard and fast rules), but I think that this stronger claim could still be consistent with Kant’s overarching position here.

⁴¹ I am here influenced by Arnold Isenberg’s “Critical Communication,” in Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism*. William Callaghan, Leigh Cauman, and Carl Hempel, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 156-71.

⁴² See again Kendall Walton, op. cit. on the influence of genre classification on aesthetic experience. Walton does not argue that the *choice* of “category” of art may also be determined by one’s appreciation of the work aesthetically (though this can be, I believe, consistent with his view). Kant also makes no such argument, but something like it might perhaps be drawn out of his comments concerning the concept of perfection: Kant argues, against the rationalists, that a thing must be judged to be perfect in accord with a specific concept (of a kind), not simpliciter. Kant simply makes this claim repeatedly in the CJ, but expresses his reason for it (I believe) in the following passage: “One thing can have several qualitative perfections,” (*Metaphysics of Morals*, VI:386) The Kantian idea here (as, in a way, also in Walton) is that different characteristics of an object may “count” as noticeable characteristics – or as “good” or “bad” qualities – depending on the kind under which it is judged. Thus, e.g., sharpness is a positive characteristic of (an object judged as) a knife, but not of a toy, while bright color might be a positive characteristic of a toy and indifferent for a knife (and so on). With respect to categories of art, in particular, I would suggest that the same may be said – a cliched phrase may be a positive characteristic in a farce, but a negative characteristic in a novel – but (in addition) as I suggest in the text, one might be pressed to create new genre concepts in order to accommodate one’s aesthetic experience of a work.

⁴³ CJ §47 V:309-310, §49 V:318. In these passage, Kant may mean to make a tripartite distinction between “Nachmachung”, “Nachahmung” and “Nachfolge” (completely direct copying, imitating in a broader way [as, e.g., in the “school” of a genius], and emulating [as do other geniuses]), though this is somewhat unclear. What is important for my purposes is that Kant allows that one may be “inspired” by another’s example, but nonetheless engage in the activity “freely,” oneself, instead of *merely* imitating another.

⁴⁴ Perhaps, as suggested by Alexander Gerard in his *Essay on Taste*, the critic has been “corrupted” or over-refined by extensive familiarity with artworks, for example.