

A Kantian Analytic of the Ugly

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ABSTRACT: Kant’s theory of taste, as expounded in the *Critique of Judgment*, deals exhaustively with judgments of beauty. Rarely does Kant mention ugliness. This omission has led to a debate among commentators about how judgments of ugliness should be explained in a Kantian framework. I argue that the judgment of ugliness originates in the disharmonious play between the faculties of imagination and understanding. Such disharmony occurs when the understanding finds that it cannot in principle form any concept suitable to a representation as it is presented by the imagination.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* provides a seminal and seemingly exhaustive discussion of judgments of taste.¹ Curiously, however, it barely mentions ugliness. When and how do we deem objects ugly? What kind of judgments are we making when we do? Kant’s interpreters are left to piece together their own “analytic of the ugly” based on what Kant says about the beautiful. It is a point of controversy whether pure judgments of ugliness—corresponding to judgments of the beautiful—are even possible in Kant’s aesthetics. In this paper I argue that they are possible. I hold that pure judgments of the ugly are rooted in the disharmonious free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding. These judgments differ from judgments of beauty in that they are contra-purposive rather than purposive.

¹ I would like to thank Carolyn Korsmeyer, Richard Cohen, and James Lawler of the University at Buffalo for their guidance and encouragement.

Kant can be frustratingly evasive on this point, but his writings tend to confirm my view. In the *Critique of Judgment* itself Kant mentions ugliness (*Hässlichkeit*) in a single brief passage, noting that the only kind of ugliness that cannot be made beautiful in art is the disgusting (5:312).² Any other type of ugliness—moral or physical—might be rendered beautiful in its depiction. This point alone neither confirms nor disconfirms purely formal ugliness. It seems clear that the disgusting cannot become an object of taste because it presents a psychological block to reflection; otherwise, Kant’s examples are of moral ugliness: “the furies, diseases, devastation of war.” Pure ugliness of form goes unmentioned.

Should we conclude that there is no negative twin of pure beauty? Those answering this question in the affirmative might look for support to Kant’s footnote at the opening of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, where he states: “The definition of taste on which I am basing this [analysis] is that it is the ability to judge the beautiful” (5:203). There is no mention here of ugliness or negative judgment. One might feel justified in assuming that all pure judgments of taste are positive.

A closer look at the text would prove this assumption to be a mistake. At the conclusion of his discussion of the quality of beauty, Kant defines taste again, this time as “the ability to judge an object or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*. The object of such a liking is called *beautiful*” (5:211). What, then, should we call the object of such a pure *disliking*? In order to maintain that aesthetic disliking is not a sign of ugliness, one

² References to Kant are given in standard Akademie pagination. I opt for Werner Pluhar’s translation of the *Critique of Judgment* and *Critique of Pure Reason*, retaining his bracketed emendations. These works are cited parenthetically: Immanuel Kant and Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1987). Immanuel Kant, Werner S. Pluhar, and Patricia Kitcher, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1996).

would have to insist that disliking follows from the perception of all non-beautiful objects, not just positively ugly ones. The interpretation holding everything non-beautiful to be disliked is inconsistent with normal aesthetic experience, which shows that many objects are in fact aesthetically neutral. It is also at odds with Kant's views on real opposition and the reality of negative magnitudes, as I shall explain in detail later in this paper. The simplest explanation is that disliking in the judgment of taste is rooted in pure ugliness.

Kant's other writings confirm this point. In a fragment from around 1770, Kant writes that, as with other conflicting pairs, beauty and ugliness are a "counterbalance" to one another. What is neither beautiful nor ugly is "ordinary."³ This comment suggests parity between beauty and ugliness, implying that they both differ from the aesthetically neutral. Kant's lectures on metaphysics confirm and deepen this view. Later in the 1770s, anticipating his mature position, Kant is recorded as saying:

The community among human beings constitutes a communal sense...The beautiful and the ugly can be distinguished by human beings only so far as they are in a community.

Thus whomever something pleases according to a communal and universally valid sense, he has taste. Taste is therefore a faculty for judging through satisfaction or dissatisfaction, according to the communal and universally valid sense.⁴

³ Immanuel Kant and Paul Guyer, *Notes and fragments* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 15:296.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, Karl Ameriks, and Steve Naragon, *Lectures on Metaphysics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 28:249.

The communal origin of taste will be re-stated and re-imagined in the third *Critique* as the “common sense” presupposed in all judgments of taste. The early version of this “common sense” determines judgments of ugliness as well as beauty. There is no reason to think that Kant abandons his early beliefs about ugliness. He is still teaching in his lectures of 1794-95 that “that which pleases through mere intuition is beautiful, that which leaves me indifferent in intuition, although it can please or not please, is not-beautiful; that which displeases me in intuition is ugly.”⁵

Additional examples abound. Together, they reinforce the idea that ugliness is a force counter to beauty, but alike to it. The overall picture emerging from Kant’s scattered comments suggests that he envisions ugliness as a complement to beauty, sharing a common origin in the capacity to make judgments of taste.

2. THE UGLY IN NATURE AND THE UGLY IN ART

To move forward we must disentangle the different kinds of ugliness. There are two ways for nature to be ugly and three ways for art to be ugly.

Nature can be ugly either in its appearance or in its harmful effects on humanity. The latter is what Kant has in mind when he speaks of the ugliness of disease. The former is the case when a natural object is judged to be ugly because of the way it looks or sounds. To many, spiders and bats are ugly. Natural objects ugly in their appearance potentially fall into two subgroups: objects of sensuous disliking and objects of formal ugliness. It is the possibility of the

⁵ Ibid., 29:1010.

latter that is at stake. Things that are “morally” ugly in nature are certainly not the objects of pure judgments of ugliness (at least not for that reason).

When it comes to art, things are a little more complicated. An artwork can be ugly in itself or, if representational, it can be of something ugly. Kant has this second case in mind when he remarks that anything ugly can be made beautiful in art except for the disgusting (5:312). This should not be taken to imply that ugliness is not possible in art or that all ugliness in art is at the same time beautiful. Kant merely asserts that art representing something ugly—morally ugly, in his examples—can be rendered beautifully. This is surely true. Consider Gericault’s disaster painting *The Raft of the Medusa* or Beethoven’s “Funeral March” from the *Eroica* Symphony. Both artworks are about human tragedies—the ugly in Kant’s sense—but they rank among the most formally beautiful examples of their kind.

It is also possible, however, for an artwork itself to be formally ugly. A work can be ungainly, awkward, or dissonant. Ugliness of design can be used as a tool to represent something ugly, but this need not be the case. There are ugly paintings of beautiful people. In modern art, the formally ugly was elevated to a positive aesthetic concept. Many of Willem de Kooning’s canvasses, for example, strike me as expressively ugly, as do the operas of Alban Berg. It is this second type, formal ugliness, with which we are here primarily concerned.

A third category of ugliness is art that fails by being meretricious, illusory or kitschy. While the recognition of this kind of ugliness is implicit in Hegel’s aesthetics, it was first explicitly theorized, as far as I can tell, later in the nineteenth century.⁶ We might call a work

⁶ Bernard Bosanquet presented such an argument to the Aristotelian Society in 1889: “I suggest, then, that if you perceive or paint (it is the same thing in theory) vice or madness as vice or madness, this true and forceful characterization of their at least apparent ugliness may give them, though apparently ugly, a place in beauty. If you painted vice as virtue, or madness as sanity, the falsehood would create distortion in your details, which would betray your confusion of view,

‘ugly’ if it does not satisfy whatever critical or moral criteria we demand of art. This is the artistic equivalent of war and the furies. This last kind of ugliness, with its implicit comparisons, cognitive involvement, and subtle contextualization, is too conceptual to count in a pure judgment of taste. If there is a pure judgment of ugliness, it will have to be about the formally ugly, whether in art or in nature.

3. ARE PURE JUDGMENTS OF UGLINESS POSSIBLE?

We can now turn to the guiding question: are pure judgments of ugliness possible in the Kantian system? Some commentators maintain they are not. These include Garrett Thomson,⁷ David Shier,⁸ and Paul Guyer.⁹ Others believe that pure judgments of ugliness are viable, or even a

and the fraud would give real ugliness to the whole work, which would present a simulated appearance of common beauty.” Bosanquet, Bernard, "The Aesthetic Theory of Ugliness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1(1889-1890): p. 42.

⁷ Thomson, Garrett, "Kant's Problems with Ugliness," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992): 107-15.

⁸ Shier, David, "Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly," *The British journal of aesthetics* 38 (1998): p. 412.

⁹ Guyer, Paul, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

requirement of the theory. Those who argue this position include Theodore A. Gracyk,¹⁰ Christian Wenzel,¹¹ Henry E. Allison,¹² Sean McConnell,¹³ and Alix Cohen.¹⁴

On the side of those who deny that Kant makes room for pure judgments of ugliness (that is, judgments based merely on form) one might think either that Kant cannot allow for any ugliness in the world or that he can allow for ugliness that corresponds to judgments of pleasure or utility, but not of taste. The former claim is deployed as a *reductio ad absurdum* against Kant's aesthetics in general: Kant does not allow for ugliness; but clearly, some things are ugly. Kant is somewhere mistaken.

David Shier argues in that way in his aptly named paper, "Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly." Shier interprets the description in the third *Critique* of the free play of the imagination and understanding, presumably the basis of every judgment of taste, as always and invariably culminating in pleasure. Pleasure is the hallmark of beauty and is incompatible with a judgment of ugliness, which is assumed to involve displeasure. Shier concludes that, for Kant, there can be no ugliness in judgments of taste:

Since harmonious free play is always pleasurable, and since all judgments of taste are accompanied by harmonious free play, it follows that every judgment of taste must be

¹⁰ Theodore A. Gracyk, "Sublimity, Ugliness, and Formlessness in Kant's Aesthetic Theory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45 (1986): 49-56.

¹¹ Christian Wenzel, "Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39 (1999): 416-22.

¹² Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste : A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹³ Sean McConnell, "How Kant Might Explain Ugliness," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 205-28.

¹⁴ Alix Cohen, "Kant on the Possibility of Ugliness," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 199-209.

accompanied by the feeling of pleasure in the subject. But any judgment of taste in which the subject's feeling is that of pleasure is, by definition, an affirmative judgment of taste. Therefore, within Kant's aesthetics, and contrary to the obvious fact of the matter, negative judgments of taste about free beauty are quite impossible.¹⁵

Shier's account has two potential vulnerabilities. First, one might argue that negative judgments of taste (or some equivalent, if the term 'taste' is reserved for positive judgments) are indeed possible. Second, even if pure judgments of ugliness are impossible, this does not necessarily contradict the obvious fact that we find things ugly. The negative judgments may well be limited to sensuous repugnance (corresponding negatively to a sensuous liking of an object, which has nothing to do with pure taste) and, alternatively, a moral repulsion (again, not a judgment of taste). Kant's few examples of actual ugliness—including war, the furies and disease—illustrate the second category well (5:312).

Similarly, Garrett Thomson argues in his 1992 paper, "Kant's Problems with Ugliness," that any instance of ugliness would contradict and unravel the Kantian system as a whole. Rather than ruling out such a judgment *a priori*, as Shier does, he argues for the incompatibility of ugliness with Kant's conception of morality. This claim is based on the interpretation that Kant's aesthetics is meant to bridge the first and second *Critiques* by allowing noumenal freedom and goodness to manifest in the phenomenal world despite its regulation by the categories, which would seem to preclude the experience of freedom. The two sides, noumena and phenomena, threaten to diverge completely, leaving morality banished entirely from the world of human experience. In Thomson's words, "Kant thinks he must show that noumenal ends can have a

¹⁵ Shier, p. 418.

phenomenal realization, or that noumenal ideas can be given phenomenal translation.”¹⁶

Thomson goes on to say that Kant describes this “translation” as the world’s necessary conformity to the teleological demands of judgment. But, Thomson asserts, ugliness would contravene such conformity through its apparent contra-purposiveness, which means that “insofar as the world or any part of it does not accord with judgment’s principle, then that part of the world ought to be judged ugly and morality cannot be phenomenalized there. In short, ugliness precludes morality.”¹⁷ For Kantian ethics, in Thomson’s view, all of nature must be the phenomenalization of morality.

Paul Guyer’s response to Thomson settles the question. Guyer points out that aesthetic judgments differ from determinate teleological judgments and only the latter have direct bearing on the possibility of nature as a system that expresses an inner moral impulse. Additionally, Guyer argues, isolated cases of ugliness may well fit within a grander teleological system.¹⁸ These remarks are undoubtedly right.

Guyer’s own work on the topic is formidable. Chapter Six of his 2005 study *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*, “Kant on the Purity of the Ugly,” contains Guyer’s chief contribution to the debate. Guyer’s thesis is that “Kant cannot hold that judgments of ugliness are pure aesthetic judgments...he must instead understand the undeniable experience of ugliness as an impure aesthetic experience.”¹⁹ In other words, Guyer’s conclusion resembles that of Shier, yet Guyer recognizes that ugliness can originate in other sources besides pure judgments of taste. Guyer also insists that for Kant there can only be harmony between the faculties of imagination

¹⁶ Thomson, p. 111.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁸ Guyer, Paul, "Thomson's Problems with Kant: A Comment On 'Kant's Problems with Ugliness'," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992): p. 318.

¹⁹ Guyer, *Values of Beauty*, p. 143.

and understanding. Where then this the disharmony presumed necessary for pure judgments of ugliness? It is ruled out *a priori*:

A state of sheer disharmony between [imagination and understanding] is not consistent with the transcendental unity of apperception...So harmony without a concept or harmony with a concept, but no simple absence of harmony: this, in a nutshell, is why Kant cannot allow a purely aesthetic origin for ugliness.²⁰

The unity of our experience and the objects in it, in other words, requires the synthesis of those objects at the very least by the categories of the understanding, and for this the faculties must already cooperate. This objection may initially seem persuasive. If aesthetic judgments simply reveal the purposiveness that is fundamental to all judgments as the possibility of cognition in general, then it seems that nowhere in experience should that purposiveness be countered with nonpurposiveness. Cognition of such an object would simply not be possible, and how could an impossible object be predicated as ugly, even in a reflective judgment?

One might attempt to refute this view in one of two ways. It might be said that disharmony of the faculties and/or nonpurposiveness of an object are in fact compatible with cognition in general. An explanation would have to be given as to how both harmony and disharmony could coexist in different judgments made about the same object at the same time. This is the approach I shall take. Alternately, one might claim that ugliness can be pure without originating in disharmony. An account would be given of how the *harmonious* free play of the faculties can result in a feeling of ugliness rather than beauty.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 146-147.

In a 2008 paper entitled “How Kant Might Explain Ugliness,” Sean McConnell attempts the second course. Initially, he gestures toward the first option and argues that Guyer is wrong in thinking that the disharmonious free play of the faculties would interrupt the unity of experience. McConnell points out that understanding has two roles, a transcendental role (the application of the pure categories under the headings quantity, quality, relation, and modality) and also an empirical role (the application of empirically derived concepts to objects of experience already unified by the categories). The disharmony, he suggests, might arise only in the latter, leaving the former clear to synthesize experience.

Nevertheless, McConnell does not believe that such disharmony is possible in a judgment of taste. He asserts that “the faculties simply need to be harmonized for the free play to happen in the first place (the ‘harmonious’ epithet is necessarily bound up with the free play), and of course free play is absolutely essential to a judgment of taste.”²¹ I do not see, however, that McConnell succeeds in proving this point. If the harmonious free play results in a sense of purposiveness, why can’t disharmonious free play resist purposiveness? McConnell fails to provide an argument to rule out this possibility beyond saying that such a situation “would be a nightmare for the empirical imagination that detects finality and rules.”²² Would not such a nightmare, if compatible with experience, explain the sensation of ugliness?

In his positive account McConnell holds that aesthetic feeling operates on a “continuum.”²³ The greater the degree of unification by rules of the understanding, the higher the experience will register on the aesthetic scale. When the understanding—without the aid of determinate concepts—is fully successful in unifying a presentation, it will be called ‘beautiful’.

²¹ McConnell, p. 214.

²² Ibid., p. 215.

²³ Ibid., p. 218.

If the understanding only manages a loose or vague unity of the object, it will be less pleasurable. The bottom of the scale is the ugly.

This view should be rejected because it fails to explain how displeasure can result from simply taking pleasure away. The feeling of ugliness is itself a positive phenomenon, even though it is based on a negative judgment (a fact explained by Kant's theory of negative magnitudes). I do not find it plausible that the harmonious free play of the imagination and understanding might culminate in positive ugliness by not harmonizing enough. True discord is needed. In a continuum of harmony, the zero point is the non-beautiful, not the ugly.

I shall now turn to the contribution of Alix Cohen, whose position in the debate, at least in its conclusions, is closest to mine. In her 2013 paper "Kant on the Possibility of Ugliness," she maintains that the judgment of ugliness retains all the characteristics from the moments of taste "that make it 'pure' while replacing the characteristics that make it beautiful with ones that make it ugly."²⁴ She also convincingly deflects Guyer's objection (that there cannot be both harmony and disharmony) by holding that the faculties are capable of "multitasking,"²⁵ an objection I (at least in part) endorse. Her contribution is limited, however, by her misleading claim that aesthetic harmony is not "of a kind" with cognitive harmony,²⁶ and by an underdeveloped account of the harmony of the faculties in general.

First let's turn to what Cohen gets right. We know the characteristics of the judgment of beauty according to the four moments of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*: its quality is disinterested pleasure, its quantity is universal validity, its relation is purposiveness without a purpose, and its modality is necessary liking. Cohen believes we should switch out only the parts of these

²⁴ Cohen, p. 199.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.206.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

definitions that make the judgment positive or pleasurable (pleasure, purposiveness, and liking), plugging in characteristics that will make it negative or displeasurable. Everything that maintains its status as a judgment of taste as such (disinterestedness, universality, and necessity, along with some reference to purpose) should remain intact. The result is the pure judgment of ugliness: its quality is disinterested displeasure, its quantity is universal validity, its relation is contra-purposiveness without a purpose, and its modality is a necessary disliking.

Cohen also responds astutely to Guyer's claim that a disharmonious free play of the faculties—or “foul play,” as Cohen terms it²⁷—is precluded by the demand that the faculties must be in harmony to allow for cognition in general, and therefore for a judgment of any kind. She points out that the faculties can do more than one thing at a time because they are not fixed entities but rather functions, meaning that harmony and disharmony can co-occur:

[T]he same faculties can simultaneously be in harmony in one respect and disharmony (or lack of harmony) in another. If so, it is more appropriate to describe mental faculties as dynamic functions rather than static entities, and thus as capable of multitasking when the task involves different functions. For instance, while I cannot have two simultaneous phone conversations, I can email and phone at the same time; I can even send a nasty email to someone while being nice on the phone to someone else.²⁸

Harmony and disharmony result from two different acts; harmony is not an “excess” beyond cognitive determination. The mind “multi-tasks” and produces two states that have opposing

²⁷ Ibid., p. 203.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 206.

features yet do not interfere with one another. Guyer must be slipping into the error of thinking of the faculties as substantial entities instead of powers realized only in their application.

But there are ways in which Cohen's remarks may be misleading. When she writes that the faculties can multi-task when they are performing "distinct functions," she suggests that the contemporaneous activities have to be of a fundamentally different nature from each other: sending an email is not the same thing as talking on the phone, and one cannot easily have two phone conversations at the same time. In other words, the concurrent functions must be different in kind. But if a person on the phone were like the faculty of the understanding in this respect, she would be able to carry on many phone conversations at once. After all, the mind performs many determinate judgments simultaneously, culminating in the complex totality of cognitive experience. It seems Cohen's view betrays a remnant of the faculty-as-entity prejudice that she discerns and criticizes in Guyer. These doubts are confirmed when Cohen continues with the passage just quoted:

This analogy suggests that contrary to the traditional interpretation of the harmony between the imagination and understanding as essentially cognitive in nature, there is no compelling reason to believe that the harmony required by cognition is necessarily of a kind with the harmony entailed by the experience of the beautiful. As a result, imagination and understanding can be in harmonious 'un-free' play cognitively through the determinant use of judgment and yet in disharmonious free play aesthetically through the reflective use of judgment.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid.

The conclusion of this line of thought is that there are two fundamentally different kinds of harmony, aesthetic harmony and cognitive harmony. Cohen is here reasoning from a disanalogy in her illustration.³⁰ She seems to think that if there were only one kind of harmony Guyer's objection would stick.

But aesthetic harmony is much the same thing as cognitive harmony, just without the usual result—without the determination of a concept. Placing them in separate categories threatens losing sight of the kinship between cognition and aesthetic appreciation. A more accurate interpretation of ugliness will require an account of the harmony of the faculties in general, and especially how harmony relates to purposiveness.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE PURE JUDGMENT OF UGLINESS

Kant's aesthetics should be understood as being compatible with pure judgments of ugliness. Some judgments of taste involve the disharmonious free play of the imagination and understanding. I do not believe that this presents insurmountable difficulties to cognition, morality, or anything else. My strategy in this section will be to support the viability of the pure judgment of ugliness by locating it within Kant's system of thought and displaying its components, much as Kant did for its positive twin in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. If this endeavor is carried out satisfactorily, and no insurmountable objections remain, pure ugliness should be accepted because of the meaningful role it plays in Kant's philosophy and because he favors the idea in his own writings.

³⁰ Ibid.

I shall organize my argument along three lines. First, Kant's theory of real opposition—articulated early on but important for understanding his entire body of work—suggests that ugliness will be equal and opposite to beauty. I use it to generate four criteria for any Kantian interpretation of ugliness. Second, the judgment of ugliness diverges from beauty in that an ugly representation thwarts the cooperation of the faculties of imagination and understanding, resulting in disharmony between those faculties. Third, the displeasure of the ugly relates to its contra-purposiveness, a cessation of the teleological attunement of cognition.

(a) Ugliness and Beauty in Real Opposition

Beauty and ugliness stand in a relation of real opposition. Kant developed his theory of real opposition in the early 1760s to explain the controversial notion of force in early modern physics. Leibniz had argued in the late seventeenth century that opposition between colliding bodies was merely a physical expression of hidden logical contradiction, preferring to resolve all kinds of opposition to a single metaphysical plane. This interpretation was disputed by followers of Descartes, who maintained a strict separation between the mental and physical: opposition between physical bodies, they believed, is a result of irreducible physical force. At stake was the autonomy of the physical world. Descartes, while simultaneously insisting on the independence of the mind, portrayed physical substance as the lawfully ordered, real domain of spatial extension. For Leibniz, physical nature is also subject to laws, but these laws derive from

conceptual understanding. They are not immanent to nature as physical extension. Leibniz rejected real opposition in favor of logical opposition; Cartesians demanded both.³¹

In his 1763 essay “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy,” Kant sides with the Cartesians.³² He has not yet worked out the distinction between the faculties of intuition and understanding reflected in the separation of the transcendental aesthetic from the transcendental logic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, predicated as it is upon the identification of time and space as the forms of intuition; nor has he hit upon his mature theory of the contribution of the categories to the experience of nature. He has, however, already come to the view that sensible nature has its own principles, contributing independently to reality and resisting reduction to concepts of the understanding.

It is here the theory of negative magnitudes comes in. Kant wishes to build a model of the relation of positivity to negativity in general that can account for the existence of force in and between physical bodies that, while operating in multiple directions in real space, remains consistent with a general equilibrium of power. Kant believes, as did Leibniz and Descartes, that such an overall equilibrium of force is required by God’s nature.

Kant holds that negativity as such only arises between two entities that are opposites in that they are able to cancel each other’s effects. Nothing is intrinsically negative; it is only in

³¹ The best interpretation of Kant’s reaction to the *vis viva* controversy, as it is called, is Henry Michael Southgate, “Kant’s Critique of Leibniz’s Rejection of Real Opposition,” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 3, (2013): 91-134. For a clear account of the original dispute, go to Carolyn Iltis, “Leibniz and the Vis Viva Controversy,” *Isis* 62 (1971): 21-35. For a discussion of Leibniz’ metaphysics of force, see George Gale, “The Concept of ‘Force’ and Its Role in the Genesis of Leibniz’ Dynamical Viewpoint,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 45-67.

³² Immanuel Kant, David Walford, and Ralf Meerbote. *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2:165-2:204. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

their opposition to each other that either of the entities in relation can be called negative. Two objects or forces, positive and negative, meet each other as actually competing powers.

The generalization of real opposition beyond the question of physical force allows Kant to apply the concept to psychological phenomena, including the experience of beauty and ugliness. All real opposition stems from a single “fundamental rule[:] A real repugnancy only occurs where there are two things, as *positive grounds*, and where one of them cancels the consequence of the other” (2:215). Kant explicitly asserts that “aversion can be called a negative desire, hate a negative love, *ugliness a negative beauty*, blame a negative praise,” adding that “evils of deprivation presuppose that there are positive grounds which cancel the good for which there really exists another ground. Such evils of deprivation are negative goods” (2:182, italics mine).

It has already been noticed by Kant commentators that his position in the 1763 essay precludes the idea that ugliness results from the subtraction of whatever makes a thing look beautiful. Christian Wenzel, for example, catalogues the places where Kant claims that ugliness has positive grounds, including the essay on negative magnitudes. Wenzel concludes from his list that “these passages show that we should expect Kant to have believed there were *a priori* grounds for negative judgments of taste.”³³

But does this point, developed in Kant’s pre-critical period, hold for the later *Critique of Judgment*? I believe so. We know that the theory of real opposition is maintained by Kant in his mature period because he repeats it in his argument against Leibniz in the first *Critique*, in the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection. The Amphiboly might even best be

³³ Wenzel, Christian, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 130.

understood as building on and presupposing his earlier view, as is argued by commentator Henry Michael Southgate.³⁴ At A273/B 328-329, for example, Kant states:

For real opposition always obtains where $A-B=0$, i.e., where one reality, combined in one subject with another, cancels out the effects of the latter, which is unceasingly placed before our eyes by all hindrances and countereffects in nature, which, since they rest on forces, must be called *realitates phaenomena*.

It is clear without special comment that the principle of real opposition is preserved intact. In addition, specific stances Kant develops later on demonstrate coherence with the principle of real opposition; I take Kant's conception of evil in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* to be an example.

To remain consistent with this important position, Kantians should have a few requirements for the judgment of ugliness. First, ugliness falls in line with all the other "ills" and "evils" treated in that it has real grounds and positive consequences. This observation already precludes those interpretations of "negative" judgments of taste that rely on the idea that taking away whatever conditions culminate in beauty is enough to bring about ugliness. Ugliness has its own distinct conditions.

The second requirement is more obscure but just as important. It requires that one and the same object can be understood as providing the conditions for the production of the judgment of beauty and for the production of the judgment of ugliness at the same time. Real opposites can exert their force simultaneously on the same entity, thereby allowing their

³⁴ Southgate, p. 93.

consequences to cancel each other. If a person is praiseworthy and blameworthy to an equal degree, she ends up being neither one on balance. If an ocean current pushes a boat one way and the wind the other way, the boat makes no progress at all (2: 212-213). Similarly, a painting might be beautiful in one respect but marred by ugliness in another, cancelling the effect of the beauty—but also, at least in part, cancelling the overall effect of the ugliness. It may be debated whether this account seems psychologically true—it does not strike me as clearly false, at least—but it is certainly implied by Kant's theory.

The third requirement relates closely to the second. When real opposites do act simultaneously, the effects of each are cancelled to the degree that its opposite exerts force. Ugliness must be conceived so that it is really capable of cancelling the effects of beauty. Ugliness therefore cannot be limited, say, to moral ugliness, which can always be depicted in a formally beautiful manner. Formal beauty will be counteracted by formal ugliness.

Following from this idea is a fourth requirement: in order to cancel each other to the degree they are present, real opposites must be susceptible to measurement in degrees. As Kant scholar Melissa Zinkin has underlined, real opposites are intensive magnitudes, meaning that changes in force will be seamless, not incremental.³⁵ Something can be more or less ugly (or beautiful), and the strength of this force waxes and wanes as a unity irresolvable to individual parts. Whatever the conditions of the judgment of taste, they produce an effect that varies in intensity. Ugliness does not have an on/off switch—there or not there—but rather a spectrum of intensity—more or less, greater and lesser. Any interpretation of Kant's theory of taste must fit with these four criteria.

³⁵ Melissa Zinkin, "Kant on Negative Magnitudes," *Kant-Studien* 103 (2012): 397-414.

(b) Disharmony in “The Key to the Judgment of Taste”

The pure judgment of formal ugliness involves the disharmonious play of the faculties of imagination and understanding. The best point of entry to an examination of the relation of the faculties in the judgment of taste in general is §9 of the *Critique of Judgment*.

The guiding theme of §9 is expressed nicely in its long title: “Investigation of the Question Whether in a Judgment of Taste the Feeling of Pleasure Precedes the Judging of the Object or the Judging Precedes the Pleasure” (5:216). The central questions are how pleasure and the judgment of form are related and how a pleasurable experience might hold across subjects universally. Kant dismisses the notion that the pleasure might ground the judgment. Such a situation would be “self-contradictory” and indistinguishable from the agreeable in any case (5:216-217). One can never be sure that any individual immediately responds emotionally or sensibly in the exact same way as another, even given identical sense stimulus. Consequently, the judgment—an act of quasi-cognitive synthesis already a step removed from individual idiosyncrasy—comes first and the pleasure follows from it. The bulk of §9 goes toward describing how this process works.

Having denied that the judgment of taste might be grounded on pleasure as its cause, Kant immediately makes what looks at first like a surprising leap: “Hence it must be the universal communicability of the mental state, in the given presentation, which underlies the judgment of taste as its subjective condition, and the pleasure in the object must be its consequence” (5:217). Kant has established just that the pleasure follows from the judgment;

why does he now introduce universal communicability as if it is obviously connected to judgment and the production of pleasure?

The argument is in fact somewhat elliptical, relying on the subsequent explanation of the harmony of the faculties. After pointing out that of all the ways for a person to entertain a representation only cognition is communicable because it is the only mode of representation demanding conceptual attunement to objectivity, Kant continues:

If, then, we are to think that judgment about this universal communicability of the presentation has a merely subjective determining basis, i.e., one that does not involve a concept of the object, then this basis can be nothing other than the mental state that we find in the relation between the presentational powers [imagination and understanding] insofar as they refer a given presentation to *cognition in general*. (5:217)

Kant here designates the mental act in which the faculties join together and produce the aesthetic judgment by combining a representation with the indeterminate predicate “beautiful.” The faculties are then said to be in “free play.”

The imagination and understanding are in a state of free play “because no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition” (5:217). The play is “free” in the sense that it is unlimited by any determinations, preventing a complete concept from forming: concepts comprise just such determinations, and the meanings of those determinations are taken to correspond to attributes of substances. The play of the faculties constitutes a reflective judgment—the common procedure that isolates universal attributes in empirical concept formation—without the associated determination of attributes linking the given object to others

in a universal concept.³⁶ The understanding is presented with a representation by the imagination in such a way that there are signs that it is of a kind of thing that can be understood. The understanding then searches for the attributes that make it count as an instance of a kind, but, because there is nothing to compare it to, even ideally, no common marks can be abstracted. The resulting state is free play, which establishes the harmony of the faculties. Inasmuch as the condition of reflection for conceptualization is met, the result is subjectively universal and complies with the demands of cognition in general—that is, cognition as such, not just my cognition. Kant tells us that the sensation of the play of the faculties is the pleasure of beauty, and, by the same token, the pleasure is the awareness of the harmonious free play.

What parallel process, then, will result in the displeasure of ugliness? This will happen when the imagination presents the understanding with a representation in a way consistent with it being some kind of thing, but the understanding sees in it no signs of understandability, nothing that makes it seem as if it is any kind of thing at all. There is no suggestion whatsoever that the appearance is in accordance with a rule. No concept should be made of it. If the imagination insists on the presentation as it is synthesized, yet the understanding can never accept it as the right kind of presentation, the faculties will clash (Alix Cohen’s “foul play”³⁷). In the Dohna-Wundlacken Logic of 1792, Kant refers to the resultant relation between the faculties as “counterplay” (24: 710),³⁸ remarking that it is to be considered as a positive process in its own right. It seems best to say that counterplay is a *kind* of free play. It is certainly free in the

³⁶ For an explanation of reflective judgment as a stage in concept formation: Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998).

³⁷ Cohen, p. 203.

³⁸ Quoted in Wenzel, “Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?” Wenzel translates ‘*Widerspiel*’ as ‘counterplay’ (pp. 418-419): “*Das Widerspiel ist nicht allein Negatives, sondern wirklich etwas Positives.*”

requisite sense: it also does not settle on any determinations. The real difference, what makes the ugly result from counterplay, is that the faculties are in disharmony rather than harmony. As the synthesis of taste goes smoothly when the presentation just seems right, the process of synthesis runs into trouble when the representation just seems wrong.

But synthesis is not thwarted altogether. The faculties *do* join, even if in conflict. The conflicted state of the imagination and understanding has reference to cognition in general, since it ostensibly occurs within the bounds of cognition's universal conditions. But it simultaneously violates those conditions by failing to culminate in harmony, which underlies empirical concept-formation. The judgment is not communicable because only concepts are communicable. The feeling of incommunicability—the sensation of counterplay—is the displeasure of the judgment of ugliness.

The judgment of ugliness is the combination of a representation with a feeling of displeasure. While, on one hand, this displeasure represents a breakdown of sociability—it is a feeling of absolute privacy amounting to isolation—it is, on the other hand, one term in a judgment spoken with a universal voice because its conditions are universal. Part of the meaning of the pure judgment of ugliness is that it is valid intersubjectively. What is valid, however, is the incommunicability of the presentation, so the intersubjective validity of the judgment does nothing to ease its displeasure, just as a prisoner should take no comfort in knowing that others are imprisoned too.

(c) [Contra-purposiveness Suspends Teleology](#)

While the play of the faculties constitutes the core of the theory of taste, the significance of that play—the recognition of purposiveness inherent in cognition in general—links Kant’s aesthetics to the overarching theme of the third *Critique*, the *a priori* principle of judgment. Kant identifies the judgment of taste’s logical moment of relation as pertaining to purposiveness (*forma finalis*), traces this characteristic to the transcendental powers of subjectivity, and hence establishes the *a priori* footing of teleology.

For Kant, all empirical judgments (including concept formation) are purposive in that the understanding, in its acts of judgment, must regulatively assume the ideal preexistence of concepts in searching for determinate kinds of things. When the mind comes to form some universal concept as a result of the synthesis of two terms, it holds that concept as if it were responsible for the existence of the object corresponding to the representation given in intuition, not as an efficient cause but as a final cause. But this same assumption is clearly not possible in the judgment of taste. The judgment of taste has no reference to any object, so the teleological causality of a concept cannot be brought to bear on one. Since the imputation of purposiveness stems from a subjective rather than an objective requirement—which is to say that it is transcendental, not empirical—teleological attribution is nevertheless evident, if only as an unfulfilled intention. This is what is captured in the phrase “purposiveness without a purpose.” When an affirmative categorical judgment relates a concept to a representation, the judgment is formed in accordance with the presupposition that the object fits a teleological scheme. In going about judging the world, in other words, the mind assumes the reality of natural kinds, and assumes the existence of a concept for each one.³⁹ Categorical judgments are thereby subjectively undergirded by a type of causal relation: purposiveness.

³⁹ Kant makes this point in the First Introduction of the *Critique of Judgment*.

Judgments of taste are those in which that purposiveness has no conceptually determined end. In contrast, there are times when we see some object and find it fit or lacking because it does or does not seem suited to its objective use. These judgments also involve purposiveness, but are not judgments of taste. This distinction, between beauty and perfection, is the topic of §15 of the third *Critique*. In discussing this distinction for the second time, in the General Comment on the First Division of the Analytic, Kant introduces the term ‘contrapurposive’ (*Zweckwidrig*), which is fundamental to understanding all judgments of ugliness, impure and pure. In the General Comment, however, Kant only employs it in reference to judgments of (im)perfection:

A room whose walls form oblique angles, a garden plot of that kind, even any violation of symmetry in the figure of animals (such as being one-eyed) or of buildings or flowerbeds: all of these we dislike because they are contra-purposive, not only practically with regard to some definite use of them, but contra-purposive also for our very judging of them with all sorts of possible aims [in mind]. This is not the case in a judgment of taste; when such a judgment is pure, it connects liking or disliking directly with the mere contemplation of the object, irrespective of its use or any purpose (5:241-242).

In this passage, things are only explicitly said to be contra-purposive in respect to objective uses. But it does not at all rule out a pure, subjective contra-purposiveness without a purpose parallel to the purposiveness of beauty. Such a possibility is intimated by Kant when he alludes to disliking connected with the mere contemplation of the object in some judgments of

taste. This remark is a clear indication that there can be a pure negative judgment of taste; why would it not be based in contra-purposiveness too? There seems no better way to explain it.

Just as the judgment of taste's purposiveness has no reference to an objective concept, its contra-purposiveness will not either. But instead of finding a presentation to be the kind of thing that can (if only in principle) be conceptualized, as in the judgment of beauty, the understanding judges that the presentation synthesized by imagination does not fit the requirements of empirical concept formation. It belongs in no category; it is no kind of thing at all. The object as represented cannot have any use and does not conform to any natural design—a feeling held despite the fact that no specific aims are entertained.⁴⁰

Ugliness is an object's form of contra-purposiveness without a purpose, in reference to cognition in general. While judgments of ugliness show just as much as judgments of beauty that teleology is a transcendental requirement of cognition, they also show that the requirement will not always be met; that the possibility of the failure of teleology is intrinsic to human subjectivity. It will not *always* be possible to actively construct the world of experience so that it fits the demands of human understanding.

(d) Conclusion

In sum, I do not believe there is any reason why Kant should rule out pure judgments of ugliness based on the disharmonious free play of the faculties, whether on epistemological or moral grounds. On the contrary, there is every reason to think he would countenance such an

⁴⁰ Because the judgment of ugliness is logically indeterminate, it can, without logical contradiction, be made of a representation of an object simultaneously judged to be both useful and part of a design.

interpretation. The absence of an explicit discussion of judgments of the ugly in the third *Critique* should not call their existence into doubt. Kant's intention is to ground the possibility of teleology, not to diagnose ways in which teleology might break down. Furthermore, it should not be considered an excessively speculative exercise to work out how negative aesthetic judgments fit into the theory developed in the *Critique of Judgment*. Not only is their existence viable, but the role they might play in the moral and aesthetic landscape of the whole system—especially, though I cannot explore this issue here, as a symbol of radical evil—justifies interest in contra-purposive reflective judgment.

The judgment of ugliness involves a necessary, disinterested displeasure that is subjectively universal in its validity and rests on the attribution of contra-purposiveness to pure form. In many ways it runs directly parallel to the judgment of beauty, but diverges in that the principle of judgment, the practical assumption that there is an understandable phenomenal world divided into knowable classes, is shown in cases of ugliness to be vulnerable to failure even in its non-empirical exercise. Even so, the existence of the pure judgment of ugliness does not undermine Kant's belief that teleology is an *a priori* feature of the structure of human subjectivity. It does, however, call into question how and whether judgment's teleological presumption will meet with confirmation. Ugliness signifies an intrusion of transcendently rooted contra-purposiveness, thereby demonstrating that the real opposite of purposiveness is also grounded in the structure of subjectivity. It challenges the expectation, often associated with transcendental idealism, that a harmonious natural and social order will follow automatically from the nature of human cognition.