

Schematizing without a Concept? Imagine that!

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to elucidate what Kant describes as the “free lawfulness of the imagination” in judgments of beauty in *aesthetic* terms, as called for by the distinctive nature of beauty. I argue that the aesthetic activity of the imagination differs from the theoretical activity of the imagination, and that the difference between the two has an aesthetic ground in terms of the special form of beautiful objects and the special value of beauty. In contrast to the theoretical activity of the imagination, the aesthetic activity of the imagination must be free of concepts and laws but nonetheless lawful otherwise it would not be able to unify the forms of beautiful objects, to attribute necessity to them, and by so doing to be adequate to the value of those objects as beautiful objects. On that basis, I aim to show that Kant’s theory is not committed to the absurd view that some scholars have attributed to him: the view that everything we judge must be judged to be beautiful.

The key to the judgment of taste, according to Kant, is the free lawfulness of the imagination:¹ when we judge beauty in nature and art the imagination must be free from the concepts and laws of the understanding. And yet, it must also be “in harmony with the lawfulness of the understanding in general.”²

In this paper I propose an “aesthetic interpretation” of Kant’s view of the aesthetic activity of the imagination: an interpretation that explains this activity in distinctively aesthetic terms, as analogous to, but independent of, the theoretical activity of the imagination. My proposal

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¹ *KU*, 5:240.

² *Ibid.*, 5:241.

is based on the conviction that only an aesthetic approach to the activity of the imagination in judgments of taste can successfully address the worry, raised by several Kant's scholars, that Kant's aesthetic theory is committed to an absurd view: the view that everything we judge must be judged to be beautiful (hereafter the "EIB problem").³ The EIB problem can be solved, I hold, only if one shows that the free but lawful activity of the imagination is called for by the distinctive nature of *beauty*, and thus is not involved in judgments of anything that is not beautiful. Specifically, if one is to address the EIB problem, one must show that the aesthetic activity of the imagination differs from the theoretical activity of the imagination, and that the difference between the two has an aesthetic ground in terms of the special *form of beautiful objects* and the special *value of beauty*.

Accordingly, I am going to argue that the imagination must act in a way that is free from concepts and laws but also in harmony with the lawfulness of the understanding if it is to unify the forms of *beautiful* objects, to attribute necessity to them, and by so doing to be adequate to the value of those objects as *beautiful* objects. Specifically, in order to allow us to be responsive to beauty, the imagination must, first, unify every beautiful object in a "holistic" and "singular" manner and not in the "compositional" and "general" manner that it employs in theoretical judgments, and second allow the aesthetic judge to attribute to the object a "singular" rather than a "general" necessity. Moreover, rather than schematizing any specific concept, the imagination in aesthetic judgment schematizes the lawfulness of the understanding in general as befitting not only the transcendental condition on the mind to experience the world as lawfully unified, but also the kind of responsiveness required by the value of beauty.

I.

Kant describes the free lawfulness of the imagination by attributing to it only a handful of largely obscure characteristics. Those characteristics suggest that the aesthetic activity of the imagination is lawful but "without

³ For the presentation of this view as a problem for Kant, see Guer, 1979, pp. 295-97, and 322-24.

a law”⁴ in at least two different senses. First, in contrast to “the rule-bound character [*Regelmässigkeit*]” of the activity of the imagination in theoretical judgment “that leads to the concept of an object,”⁵ the lawful but free activity of the imagination in aesthetic judgment does not *result* in a concept or concept-predication.⁶ For reasons that will be made clearer below, aesthetic judgments of the form “x is beautiful” do not, according to Kant, predicate the concept “beauty” of the object,⁷ even if they do legitimately employ and attribute to the object various concepts.⁸ Second, the activity of the imagination in aesthetic judgment is *governed* neither by general rules of artistic criticism, nor by concepts,⁹ the latter of which Kant regards as representations that provides rules for the unification of other representations.¹⁰ While in theoretical judgments, the imagination is guided by the concepts and principles of the understanding,¹¹ in aesthetic judgments “the understanding is at the service of the imagination and not vice versa.”¹² Moreover, while in theoretical judgments the imagination is responsible for the schematism of concepts, in aesthetic judgments it “schematizes *without* a concept.”¹³

In order to be in a better position to think of this difference, I will first introduce the unifying and the schematizing activities of the imagination in theoretical judgments. Sections II and III will point to the two principal ways in which this theoretical activity differs from the aesthetic activity of the imagination.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant takes himself to have established that theoretical cognition is possible only if what is received by the senses is unified by one of the pure concepts of the understanding.¹⁴ Kant stresses

⁴ *KU*, 5:241.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:242.

⁶ E.g., *KU*, EE, 20:221, 5:209.

⁷ *KU*, 5:209, 5:288.

⁸ Particularly, in dependent judgments of beauty and judgments about fine art. See, *KU*, 5:229-31.

⁹ E.g., *KU*, EE, 20:222-25, E, 5:189-92, 5:211, 5:215.

¹⁰ *KrV*, B94/A 69, A79/B105, *JL*, §17, 9: 101, 19:101, and one of Kant’s notes, edited as *Reflexion.* 3057 (179?), 19:63

¹¹ *KrV* B152, A142/B181.

¹² *KU*, 5:242.

¹³ *KU*, 5:287.

¹⁴ E.g., *KrV* A97, B133-36.

that this required unity cannot be arbitrary, private, or in the language of the third *Critique*, lawless. Rather, it is *lawfully* unified¹⁵ by the categories, the pure concepts of the understanding, by an “act of *a priori* synthesis according to a law.”¹⁶

Kant regards the possibility of this act of lawful unification as demanding a special explanation. Since the pure concepts of the understanding are intellectual and not sensible, if they are to unify sensible representations, they must be “exhibited” [*darstellen*.]¹⁷ in sensible terms. And if sensible representations can be experienced only as unified by the concepts of the understanding, they must be recognized in terms of the understanding. According to Kant, only the transcendental imagination, as the author of the “figurative synthesis” (*synthesis speciosa*) and the schematism of concepts, can serve for this task.¹⁸ The transcendental imagination allows the mind to recognize the sensible manifold in terms of the understanding, and the concepts of the understanding in sensible terms.¹⁹

In theoretical judgments, it enables the mind to recognize sensible representations in terms of pure or empirical *concepts*, and those concepts in spatiotemporal terms. For example, the imagination is responsible for our capacity to recognize a certain sensible representation as the kind of thing that is a plate, but not a cup, and thus as fit to stand under the concept of a plate. At the same time, it is the key to our capacity to regard the pure concept of substance, not only as indicating a representation that can only be the subject but not a predicate in a judgment, but also in sensible terms, as “the persistence of the real in time”.²⁰

¹⁵ E.g., A97, B-140-68, *KU*, 5:242.

¹⁶ E.g., A77/B102-3.

¹⁷ A13-7/B176.

¹⁸ B151 and A137/B176-A147/B187 respectively.

¹⁹ Kant claims, “[the imagination is] the faculty for representing an object even without its presence in intuition” (B151). J. Michael Young proposes, correctly I believe, that this claim indicates that the imagination is capable of construing sensible intuition in terms of something else, i.e., what is “absent” from them. See, Young, 1988: p. 143.

²⁰ *KrV*, A144/B183.

When it “schematizes concepts”²¹ and unifies sensible representations by the “figurative synthesis,” then, the task of the transcendental imagination is to render concepts in sensible terms, and reversibly, of recognizing sensible manifolds as falling under some concept.

On my view, the role of the imagination in aesthetic judgments is also at least in part recognitional. However, the recognitional role of the imagination in judgments of beauty differs from its role in theoretical judgments because the special form and value of beautiful object *qua* beautiful call for a different kind of recognition. The recognitional activity of the imagination in aesthetic judgments cannot be understood in terms of concepts for two main reasons. First, the generality of concepts contrasts with the singularity of the forms of beautiful objects, and with the kind of responsiveness required for the value of beauty, and second the compositional unity that characterizes unifying acts according to concepts contrasts with the holistic character of the forms of beautiful objects.

II.

For Kant, all concepts are general.²² Not only is the extension of a concept general because it necessarily contains other representations under it,²³ the intension of a concept is also general because concepts represent only general features that can in principle be common to the representations of several objects. Even though we are capable of referring to individual objects through concepts and intuitions and the singular use of judgments,²⁴ concepts do not represent particular objects *qua* concrete individuals. They represent them only as realizing *general* features that characterize them as particular instantiations of possible general kinds.²⁵

²¹ A137/B176-A147/B187. Kant’s expression is the “schematism of the pure concepts of the understanding” (*KrV*, A 137/B176). However, as is well noted, he leaves room for the schematism of empirical and mathematical concepts, from which he draws most of his examples.

²² *JL* 9:94, 9: 91, *KrV* A106, B94, A320-B376-77.

²³ A69/B94.

²⁴ A71/B96.

²⁵ Kant holds, accordingly, that there is “no lowest concept” (*JL*, 9: 97). No concept (other than the concept of God) is an ultimate subject of a judgment that can never be-

Since concepts are necessarily general so also are the schemata, the products of the transcendental imagination by which it schematizes concepts. Rather than a particular image of an individual object, the schema is a pure representation of a “general procedure.”²⁶ A schema is thus responsible for our recognizing *any* sensible representation that can fall under the corresponding concept.²⁷ As the imagination’s interpretation of concepts in sensible terms, the schema allows us to judge individual objects only as realizing different general descriptions, but not *qua* individuals “*in concreto*.” However, Kant argues that *qua* beautiful, beautiful objects must be judged as concrete individuals both because of their form and because of the kind of responsiveness called for by beauty. I explain the first of this pair (form) in what remains of this section, and the second (responsiveness to value) only briefly in section III.²⁸

Consider, for example, Adolph Menzel’s painting *Das Balkonzimmer* (see FIGURE I).²⁹ Only in light of this individual painting as a *whole* can one appreciate that the specific dull white color and rectangular shape of the reflection of the window on the brown floor is so utterly beautiful. Independently of this individual painting as a whole, the reflection is simply a dull white rectangle, and not necessarily beautiful. In light of this example, I propose the following. First, as “beauty-making features,” the features by which we judge an object to be beautiful are singular features of an individual whole, rather than general features, like those of an object judged theoretically through concepts. Second, the unity of those features and of the beautiful object as a whole is holistic in aesthetic judgments, but

come a predicate. Even proper names are concepts that represent individuals by means of a feature that is in principle general, i.e., that can in principle be applied to another object.

²⁶ *allgemeinen Verfahren* der Einbildungskraft (A140/B179-80).

²⁷ A140-41/B180.

²⁸ Although my reading of Kant’s account of aesthetic form as I present it *in this section* was originally developed independently of Rachel Zuckert’s reading of this form, it does not substantially differ from the core of her reading. However, there are some fundamental differences between our readings that concern (1) the role of the concept of perfection in relation to Kant’s view of form, (2) the role of time and normativity in Kant’s view of the aesthetic activity of the imagination, and (3) the axiological nature of the requirement to judge beauty in a singular judgment. See Zuckert, 2007, chapters 5 & 6.

²⁹ 1845, located in the *Alte Nationalgalerie*, Berlin.

compositional in theoretical judgments.



FIGURE 1. Adolf Menzel, *Das Balkonzimmer*, 1845.

First, Kant argues that the empirical properties we predicate of objects in theoretical judgments are general.³⁰ By that he indicates that the empirical properties of an object considered theoretically can be legitimately attributed to this object and to all other objects of the same kind independently of their relation to the other properties of the object and to the object under consideration as an *individual whole*. For example, “extension” can be attributed to every body independently of the specific way in which any individual body is extended. Being extended is a feature applicable both to my new crystal vase, and to Giacometti’s bronze sculpture, *Woman of Venice*, independently of the way in which each of them is extended. It is the concept “body” and the general mark of extension that it contains, rather the appreciation of the vase and the sculpture as two individual wholes, that render it possible to judge both the vase and the sculpture as extended bodies. The properties we attribute to objects through

³⁰ *KrV*, B133-34n.

concepts are general, then, in part because they represent an object by a general description that it in principle shares with all other objects of the same kind.

In contrast, a “beauty-making feature” is singular in the sense that it is not independent of the beauty of the individual object whose beauty the feature constitutes in the same way as a property like “extension” is. Moreover, the unity of the “beauty-making features” of any beautiful object does not represent it by a general description, but by a description that is internal to its individuality. For example, the white rectangular shade in *Das Balkonzimmer* might not be a “beauty-making feature” in any object other than this painting, surely not in all other beautiful objects, all other paintings, or all other nineteenth-century realist paintings. This shade is not a mark of a term like “beauty,” the concept “painting” or the concept a “Menzel painting,” as extension is the mark of the concept “body,” and thus a feature of any body. Surely, even “extension” does not apply to the vase and to the sculpture in the same way. However, it does apply to *all* bodies simply by virtue of their falling under the concept “body,” while the white rectangular shade is not applicable to all beautiful objects by virtue of the term “beauty,” or to all the beautiful nineteenth-century realist paintings by virtue of the concept of their genre.

Second, this example points to the different *manners* of imaginative unification and imaginative recognition in theoretical judgments and in aesthetic judgments. In theoretical judgments, the activity of the imagination is *compositional* in the sense that the recognition of the individual object as a whole need not precede the imaginative recognition of any of its features as long as it is guided by a concept: here, the individual whole is *composed* out of the parts or properties that are given in advance through the concepts under which it falls.³¹ As Kant puts it, the concepts of the understanding facilitate only a compositional movement from the parts of an individual object to the object as a concrete whole.³²

In contrast, the “beauty-making features” of beautiful objects are recognizable *as beautiful* only through the recognition of the individual beautiful object as a whole. It is hard to explain how we judge the white rect-

³¹ *JL*, 19:93-94.

³² *KU*, 5:373-74.

angular shade in *Das Balkonzimmer* as beautiful and as a “beauty-making-feature” if we do not appreciate how it complements and contributes to the other “beauty-making features” of the painting, for example, to the light that comes in from the window, the serenity of the painting, the allusions it makes and the other visual and “thematic” elements that make up its beauty. Such a white rectangle might not have been beautiful or a “beauty-making feature” in another painting, or on the shabby wall of my office. What justifies the judgment of it as beautiful is the recognition of the way it reciprocally interacts with the other “beauty-making features” of the painting, and the painting as a whole.³³ I take that as a reason to think that the imagination presents the forms of beautiful objects in a “holistic” manner, in Kant’s terms, “all at once,”³⁴ and not in the compositional manner it employs when governed by concepts. Kant suggests as much when he claims that our understanding, which cognizes only through concepts, cannot go “from the whole to the parts,”³⁵ but only “from the parts” to the whole. I propose to think about this contrast as the contrast between a “compositional representation” and a “holistic representation” I introduced above.

Now this reading is clearly reconstructive. I do not intend to claim that Kant explicitly attributes holistic and singular unities to the activity of the imagination in aesthetic judgment or to the form of beautiful objects. However, I think that his view of aesthetic judgment commits him to regarding this activity and this form as holistic and singular, as the textual evidence that I now turn to review suggests.

First, the very idea of holistic unities is internal to Kant’s thought. Although he never refers to them by the name “holistic,” Kant introduces several forms of unity that are in many respects similar to the notion of holistic unity that I introduced above.³⁶ For example, the unity of the pure

³³ Just as much as the recognition of any “beauty-making feature” presupposes the recognition of the beautiful object as a whole, so the recognition of this beautiful whole presupposes the recognition of the interdependent relations of its “beauty-making features.” Thus, the judgment of beauty is based on the imaginative capacity to see its parts and its whole as *reciprocating*.

³⁴ *Anth.*, 7:145.

³⁵ 5:407.

³⁶ See also, the distinctions that Kant draws between intuitive and discursive universality in *Reflexion*, 6178, 18:481, and between *totum* to *compositum* in A438/B466.

forms of sensibility is holistic — in Kant’s terms, intuitive rather than conceptual — in the sense that the grasp of this form as a whole must be prior to the grasp of its parts, since those parts are realizable only in light of the whole.³⁷ The third *Critique* presents further the form of organisms and the mental capacity required in order to judge it.³⁸ The judgment of this form, Kant claims, is based on the recognition not only of the whole as preceding the parts, but also as reciprocating with them, albeit in a *causal* and *material* manner that contrasts with the *formal* holistic reciprocity of parts and whole in the case of beautiful objects.³⁹ Kant emphasizes that the general and compositional form of concepts, which he calls here “analytical universal,” cannot be the basis for judgments of this form. For, again, concepts facilitate only a compositional movement from the parts to the whole.⁴⁰

Kant’s various discussions of natural and artistic beauty strongly suggest that the form of beautiful objects, which he explicitly relates to the form of organisms, consists of an analogous holistic rather than compositional unity. For example, he writes that the form that we find and appreciate in objects we judge to be beautiful is characterized by a kind of “variety and unity” that allows the imagination to act free of concepts.⁴¹ A student of Kant cites him as claiming, “the power of the imagination... provides for the understanding a *whole* from the manifold of the object.”⁴² The lectures on anthropology suggest further that the form of beautiful objects cannot be exhibited on the basis of the unity of the compositionally related marks of a concept. Instead, the imagination must present the

³⁷ *KrV*, A25/B39.

³⁸ §64 ff.

³⁹ *KU*, 5:373-74. Although, on my reading, both the forms of beautiful objects and of organisms are holistic, there are nonetheless important differences between those two kinds of form. Briefly, for Kant, an organism is characterized by an *internal, material* or *real* holistic or purposive form since (1) all of its parts are the reciprocal *cause* and *effect* of one another and of the whole of which they are parts, and since (2) it is a self-organizing being. Beautiful objects differ from organisms because they do not answer those two requirements. They are rather *formally* holistic or purposive (5:373) for reasons that I have no space to explain here.

⁴⁰ 5:407.

⁴¹ *KU*, 5:359.

⁴² *Metaphysik Vigilantius, K₃* (1794), 29:1012; [my italics].

features that constitute an object's beauty "all at once (*en masse*),"⁴³ as a whole. Although I cannot fully support this claim here, I also believe that Kant's view of the beauty of nature and fine art as characterized by a purposiveness of form and as expressive of aesthetic ideas indicate that the representations of the imagination both in the production of art and in judgments of natural and artistic beauty are characterized by holistic unities.

Thus, when Kant claims that the activity of the imagination in aesthetic judgments is lawful but without a law he might mean that no general rule or concept, not even the concept of, for example, a Menzel painting, can be the basis of our appreciation of the unity of the aspects that constitute the beauty of this painting. Nor can any such concept — no matter how helpful it might be for fully appreciating the beauty of this painting — be the basis for judging the unity of those elements as such that can make any painting beautiful. In contrast to the form of the objects judged through concepts, the form of a beautiful object calls for a singular and holistic activity of the imagination.

III.

Even though the unity of a beautiful object as it is formed by the imagination is singular, it is not an arbitrary, but a *necessary* unity. In Kant's terms, it is not lawless but lawful. However, while theoretical necessity is "general," aesthetic necessity is "singular."

The theoretical activity of the imagination enables us to recognize that a sensible representation that falls under a certain concept necessarily stands in certain relations to other representations. This necessity is general: for example, when the sensible representation "being four-legged" is perceived as falling under the concept "dog" it is perceived as necessarily connected to the representation "mammal," "having the capacity to bark," and so forth no matter what dog I judge. In aesthetic judgment, in contrast, we recognize that the unity of the "beauty-making features" formed by the imagination is necessary to the beauty of *this* object but not to *any* object of its kind. Here we recognize a singular necessity.

⁴³ *Anth*, 7:145.

Imagine, for example, that we change the particular shade of white in the reflection of the window on the floor in *Das Balkonzimmer* and try to replace it with a lighter shade of white. If we do that, the beauty of the whole painting might be lost. When we judge the painting to be beautiful, we take this particular shade of white to be “necessary” for the beauty of the painting on the grounds that if it were replaced, the painting as a whole would be different, and perhaps not beautiful anymore. This phenomenon suggests that the necessity of the unity of features that makes an individual object beautiful is a “singular” necessity “without a law.”

If this account is valid, then in claiming that in aesthetic judgment the imagination is lawful but without a law, Kant suggests that it is akin to the theoretical imagination in that in both cases the imagination allows the mind to recognize and construe sensible intuitions in terms of the lawfulness of the understanding, and to schematize this lawfulness in sensible terms. However, the aesthetic imagination differs from the theoretical imagination because it schematizes the lawfulness of the understanding *in general*, but not any specific concept. By the expression “the lawfulness of the understanding in general,” I take Kant to refer to the transcendental condition on the mind to experience the world as lawfully unified, that is, as unified in a necessary way, and to the understanding’s corresponding capacity to generate such lawfulness,⁴⁴ that is *necessary unities*.⁴⁵

While in theoretical judgments, the imagination schematizes the concepts of the understanding in sensible terms, in aesthetic judgments, it schematizes the lawfulness of the understanding *in general* in the sensible terms of an *individual* beautiful object: when it engages in this schematization without a concept, the imagination does not specify any concept in the *general* sensible terms of *anything* that might fall under it, but translates the understanding’s general requirement for, and capacity to generate, lawful unities in the sensible terms of a *concrete individual* beautiful object. Here the imagination allows the mind to judge even what cannot be judged through concepts as exhibiting a special kind of necessary unity that does not only meet the transcendental condition on the mind to experience the world as lawfully unified, but is also responsive to the special

⁴⁴ See *KrV*, A97, B-140-68, *KU*, 5:242.

⁴⁵ *KrV*, B162-68.

value of beauty. The following is how I understand this responsiveness to beauty.

Kant's insistence that the aesthetic activity of the imagination is not lawless, but an activity that schematizes the lawfulness of the understanding, points to the role of spontaneity in it. This view of Kant's suggests that we are not externally determined to judge an object to be beautiful and to take pleasure in it. Rather, just as *we bring ourselves* under the normative orders of reason and the understanding when we judge objects practically and when we judge objects theoretically, in judgments of taste *we bring ourselves* under the normative order of the faculty of pleasure and displeasure. The schematization of the lawfulness of the understanding *in general*, free of any law, allows us to regard an object as beautiful, and, as such, as calling for certain responsiveness from each one of us: in contrast to truth and goodness, beauty calls on us to acknowledge it as a characteristic of a concrete individual object, and as meriting pleasure.

I find this suggestion to be contained in Kant's insistence that one of the (transcendental) constraints on the judgment of beauty (but not on theoretical or practical judgment) is that it be a *singular* judgment. This condition indicates that, as a distinctive value, beauty applies certain constraints on the appropriate responsiveness to it. One of those constraints is that the understanding and the imagination interact freely in a way that allows the aesthetic judge to acknowledge the unity of the beauty-making features of an object as *grounded in its own individuality*, not in any collection of general features that the individual happens to possess. To be responsive to beauty, I must be able to experience a beautiful object as (itself) giving content to the unity that characterizes it, that is, I must experience it "in its own terms," not in general terms that apply in principle to other individuals. To paraphrase Stanley Cavell, each beautiful object calls on us to *acknowledge* it as the concrete individual it is, not simply to *know* it as a particular instantiation of a general kind.⁴⁶ The imagination's schematization without a concept allows us to acknowledge a beautiful object in such a way, and thus be responsive to its value.

⁴⁶ Cavell, 1976, pp. 238-266.

IV.

To conclude, I have argued that both in aesthetic judgment and theoretical judgment, the imagination is lawful because it presents, and in its agreement with the understanding brings about, a *necessary unity*, as suitable to the lawful nature of the understanding in general. However, both the unity and the necessity, and thus the activity of schematization, are in each case different because of the special nature of beauty. Therefore, the free and lawful activity of the imagination is not an ingredient in theoretical judgments but only in judgments of beauty. Thus, Kant is not committed to the view that everything we judge must be judged to be beautiful.

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