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Sympathia Aesthetica: On the Possible Significance of Intersubjective Cognitive Uniformity in the Critical-era Philosophy of Immanuel Kant

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the discussion regarding intersubjectivity in the critical- and post-critical work of Immanuel Kant. Beyond Kant's aesthetic theory, intersubjectivity has been relatively underrepresented in the literature. Despite this, the thesis of this paper contends that universal intersubjective cognitive uniformity¹, a transcendental idea which *functions* as a concept to distinguish Kantian judgments of taste, is in fact an implicit postulate of practical reason as the teleological condition of practical (i.e. social and moral) affairs within the Kantian system.

In addressing this question, I analyze and compare conceptual aspects across Kant's epistemological, moral, and aesthetic philosophy. Firstly, I analyze § 30 through § 40 of the "Deduction" in *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Second, I introduce *sympathia moralis*, a concept briefly discussed in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. Third, I argue that *sympathia moralis* is a materially binding subjective condition of morality, complementary to the *categorical imperative* and the existence of practical freedom. Fourth, I show that both the principle of taste and *sympathia moralis* are conditional upon UICU. Finally, I argue that the assumption of UICU is neither accident nor *a priori* principle. On the contrary, because no evidence sufficient for knowledge of UICU is *directly* intuitable, the need for effective communicability in any practical agency or social intercourse is sufficient to prove the primary need of practical reason to postulate UICU as a transcendental idea of pure practical reason.

I -- The Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments

Why do Pure Aesthetic Judgments Need a Deduction?

A Kantian "deduction" serves to justify assumption of an *a priori* principle by proving its necessity in making one judgment or another. Both transcendental deductions, for example, serve respectively to prove the necessity of the assumption of some unifying principle of experience in general.

Kant includes within objects of pure aesthetic judgment "the beautiful" and "that which we call sublime". The wording here is key in highlighting a fundamental distinction: judgments of beauty attribute the quality "beautiful" *to the object itself*, whereas sublimity is never correctly predicated *of* objects. Sublimity, rather, is a *feel-*

¹ Henceforth, UICU=universal intersubjective cognitive uniformity, and ISCU=intersubjective cognitive uniformity.

ing evoked in one by *reference* to and so *indirectly* by a phenomenon. In other words, while an object can *be* beautiful (in perception), to call an object “sublime” is simply to speak of a feeling that refers to it. Judgment of sublimity is therefore *wholly subjective*, and *ipso facto* does not require its own *a priori* principle—the judgment claims only the assent of the judging subject in question. A judgment of taste (–of beauty), however, *does* require deduction of its *a priori* principle argues Kant. The reasons for this are quite complex, and mostly comprise the two *peculiarities* of the judgment of taste:

namely, **first**, universal validity *a priori*, yet not a logical universality in accordance with concepts, but the universality of a singular judgment; **second**, a necessity (which must always rest on *a priori* grounds), which does not, however, depend on any *a priori* grounds of proof, by means of the representation of which the approval that the judgment of taste requires of everyone could be compelled.²

In other words: a deduction of its *a priori* principle is necessary since it is a judgment about experience, and yet *a priori* valid, not unlike, for example, empirical judgments about natural causation. The validity of the judgment must be grounded not in some *a posteriori* fact, but rather, in some aspect of the human experience itself—an *a priori* cognitive structure. Eva Schaper remarks on this point: “as universality and necessity are marks of the *a priori* [...] justificatory arguments will have to be of the transcendental kind.”³ I am inclined to agree with Schaper on this point—it is in fact the logical peculiarities themselves, presenting an “apparent paradox”⁴ which necessitates deduction of the *a priori* principle.

The Peculiarities of Pure Aesthetic Judgments

The first peculiarity states that a judgment of taste is a singular judgment with universal validity *a priori*. Parsing this statement, the first claim is clear: a judgement of taste is a singular judgment. The second claim—namely, to a universal validity unlike logical universality in accordance with concepts—is much more complex. Since the

² Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:281.

³ Schaper, Eva. “Taste, sublimity, and genius: The aesthetics of nature and art” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 375.

⁴ *Ibid.*

judgment does not claim universality in accordance with concepts, it cannot be, for example, like the statement “the object is blue, because I recognize ‘blueness’ in my perception”. Beauty, insofar as it might be conceptual, in any case lacks this *conceptual solidity* or *determinacy*. For clarity, Kant writes: “to say ‘this flower is beautiful’ is the same as merely to repeat **its own claim** to everyone’s satisfaction.”⁵ The claim of beauty then must be much more like if one were to say: “It is blue, because it *claims* that everyone *agree* of its blueness”. This peculiarity, I must note, has less to do with truth and more with justification, and further, the *burden* of justification. The burden in a judgment of taste is neither placed on perceived nor perceiver, but in the *phenomenon of perception itself*. To put it another way, beauty is vindicated neither by the object as it appears, nor by the knowledge of whom it appears to—the predicate of beauty is proven in the very perception of it. A judgment of beauty, therefore, is not judgment *about* a fact, but *is* the fact *itself*: “It is beautiful because I judge it so”.

Paradoxically, the second peculiarity states that judgment of taste requires this assent of all not on *a priori* but *a posteriori* grounds. Yet, Kant writes: “The judgment of taste is not determinable by grounds of proof at all, just as if it were merely subjective”.⁶ Here I read two major implications: 1) One cannot be convinced of an object’s beauty without having perceived the object; and 2) A judgment of beauty cannot be invalidated by any means of argumentation, once an object has been judged beautiful.

The Justifying Principle of Judgments of Taste is Intersubjective Validity

From the two peculiarities, Kant gathers that there is no *objective* principle of taste. As noted above, the principle of taste must make use of some cognitive structure as well, since it has universal validity among embodied rational beings. Now, by “objective” principle, Kant refers to a concept furnished by intuitions, by which judgment subsumes objects (as the faculty for subsuming particulars within universals). In other words, there are no *empirical* criteria gained in the apprehension of many beautiful objects, so that one might better judge beauty (the way one might judge an object to be blue, green, grue, or bleen).

The principle of taste, then, is at least partially subjective, though notably it is quite unlike other subjective judgments which are validated by their subjectivity alone (i.e. “I like x thing”). On this note, Henry Allison perceives a striking difference between judgments of agreeableness and judgments of taste, that “to call something agree-

⁵ CJ 5:282.

⁶ CJ 5:284.

able is to claim that it actually gives rise to pleasure; and that to think of something as beautiful is to assume a necessary reference to liking”⁷. It seems plausible to infer from his observations on the peculiarities that these non-objective judgments are not wholly subjective either, since the feeling is neither *evoked causally by* nor *characteristic of* the object itself. Because the principle of taste is neither an empirically furnished nor pure concept (i.e. cognitive structure), the judgment of taste is anomalous, with a special distinct principle.

Kant writes: the principle “is grounded only on the subjective formal condition of a judgment in general [...] the faculty for judging, or the power of judgment”⁸ itself. Other *a priori* principles of judgment, pure concepts, have schemata, or structure, applicable to perceptions. For instance, a judgment of modality directly relates identifiable characteristics between a perception and categories of modality. The principle of taste does not subsume a *perception* under a pure concept of the understanding—rather it *subsumes the state of certain cognitive faculties as they relate to a given perception*. The criteria of beauty are not recognized in the apprehension of an object precisely because they are not *in* or *of* the object at all—conversely, they may not be identified in the judgment itself because there is no pure *concept* of formal beauty.

Beauty, Kant argues, is apprehended formally by a specific state of *harmony*, achieved in the “free play” of the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding. Further, Kant argues, the pleasure recognized in this state is *attributed* to the object, and this necessary *reference* is why an object is predicated beautiful *itself*. What is asserted, then, is a pleasure not mine alone, but as well of any other agent who 1) perceives this object and 2) shares the structures of cognition which make this pleasure possible for me:

[I]t is not the pleasure but **the universal validity of this pleasure** perceived in the mind as connected with the mere judging of an object that is represented in a judgment of taste as a universal rule for the power of judgment, valid for everyone. **It is an empirical judgment that I perceive and judge an object with pleasure. But it is an *a priori* judgment that I find it beautiful, i.e., that I may require that satisfaction of everyone as necessary.**⁹

⁷ Allison, Henry E. *Kant's Theory of Taste: a Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001),146.

⁸ CJ 5:287.

⁹ CJ 5:289, emphasis my own.

To call an object beautiful and require the assent of others, then, presupposes some degree of ISCU between different (non-identical) beings. Conversely, if such a judgment is not assented to by others, it would signify difference in cognitive faculties. The difficulty here, I must note, is that a presupposition of sameness must be made if Kant is to argue that judgments of taste really can hold validity in common human perception, and beyond simple *speculation*. Kant himself admits this difficulty in a footnote to the deduction:

In order to be justified in laying claim to **universal assent** [...] it is sufficient to admit [that] in all human beings, the subjective conditions of this faculty, as far as the relation of the cognitive powers therein set into action to a cognition in general is concerned, are the same, **which must be true, since otherwise human beings could not communicate their representations and even cognition itself.**¹⁰

It is not only that these assumptions must be made, however, but the former appears as the formal condition for the judgment's possibility itself. And of course, it must be noted that because we are speaking of formal conditions of possibility, we are talking about a *transcendental idea*. What remains is the question of whether we must concern ourselves with:

1. a relational hypothesis about ISCU and intersubjective validity of judgments of taste,
or;
2. an existential hypothesis about the ontological nature of UICU based on assumptions.

For my purposes, I do not feel it necessary to accept 2), regardless of Kant's own beliefs. Statement 1) alone is sufficient to justify the thesis that UICU is a necessary postulate of practical reason. As such, I will reformulate the bolded portion of the above passage as: that UICU "must be [*taken*] to be true, since otherwise human beings [*would*] not communicate their [...] cognition". Written as hypothetical, it is clear that UICU is a condition of intersubject communication--I will be careful to note here that this relationship implies neither that there is or is not UICU either in terms of structures or concepts, nor anything about the communication itself. Merely that the assumption of UICU is required to communicate with others, since communication

¹⁰ CJ 5:290n.

would otherwise be deprived of its main function. Now, to show the role of the UICU condition in all contexts would be far beyond the scope of this paper. At present, I will focus primarily on the condition *vis-a-vis* the relationship between the principle of taste and the principle of morality.

II -- On a Deeper Relationship Between Morals and Aesthetics in Kant

The Duty to Humanity and the Categorical Imperative

Since Kant's discussion on *sympathia moralis* is both brief and conceptually dense, I will quote it in full, though divided the passage into two sections. The first is as follows:

Sympathetic joy and sympathetic sadness (*sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure or displeasure (which are therefore called “**aesthetic**”) at another's state of joy or pain (**shared feeling, sympathetic feeling**). Nature has already implanted in human beings receptivity to these feelings. But to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty. It is called the duty of humanity (*humanitas*) because a human being is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason.¹¹

Firstly, I'd like to compare *sympathia* as it appears here with the *categorical imperative*¹² itself. In the *Groundwork*, Kant formulates the CI in a number of ways, one of which is: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end”¹³. This is the formula of humanity (henceforth FOH). To treat humans as ends in themselves requires, as Schneewind suggests, “that the ends of others—if morally permissible—set limits on the ends we may ourselves pursue.”¹⁴ In a sense, what we can infer from this is that we must make the end of others *our own*, posi-

¹¹ Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Lara Denis, trans. Mary J. Gregor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6:457.

¹² Henceforth CI.

¹³ *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:429. Qtd. in Schneewind, J.B. “Autonomy, obligation, and virtue: An overview of Kant's moral philosophy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 322.

¹⁴ Schneewind, 322.

tively or negatively, insofar as those ends are rational. Schneewind suggests as well that Kant “allows that we will have permissible ends that will compete for time and resources with the morally required ends”¹⁵. In other words, while the categorical imperative makes promotion of the good a duty, it does not require that promotion of the good is the *only* duty—provided the amoral end in question does not violate the CI.

Compare this analysis of the CI with Kant’s definition of the duty of humanity as it appears in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. As quoted above: the duty to humanity is the duty “to use [the natural receptivity to the feelings of others, namely *sympathia moralis*,] as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence.” Immediately, this passage bears a striking resemblance to the FOH. Firstly, note that like the categorical imperative insists we ought to treat others as ends, the duty to humanity insists on the promotion of *benevolence*, which Kant defines exactly as the wide duty of making the happiness of others one’s own ends.¹⁶ Further, Kant *explicitly* notes in the passage above that the duty of humanity requires that one must not *merely* promote benevolence, but like the CI states, must do so *rationally*. I will conclude, then, that the “duty to humanity” mentioned above refers to this formulation of the CI. If this is the case, then, since *sympathia* is a condition of the duty to humanity, it must also be a condition of any actions regarding the categorical imperative.

Sympathia Moralis, The Categorical Imperative, and the Principle of Taste

Now, humanity can be located either in the capacity and the will to share in others’ feelings (*humanitas practica*) or merely in **the receptivity, given by nature itself, to the feeling of joy and sadness in common with others** (*humanitas aesthetica*). The first is free, and is therefore called sympathetic (*communio sentiendi liberalis*); it is based on practical reason. The second is unfree (*communio sentiendi illiberalis, servilis*); it can be called **communicable** (since it is like receptivity to warmth or contagious diseases), and also compassion, since it spreads naturally among human beings living near one another. There is obligation only to the first.¹⁷

In second half of the passage, quoted above, Kant identifies two elements of sympa-

¹⁵ Schneewind, 324.

¹⁶ MM 160.

¹⁷ See n. 11.

thy, marked respectively by (1) capacity and will, and (2) receptivity. Receptivity will be the focus of the present discussion.

Note, here, Kant’s musings on the latter point: “the receptivity, given by nature itself, to the feeling of joy and sadness in common with others”. Ought we not take Kant, here, to be suggesting that this receptivity is the capacity for shared feeling generally (analogous to the relationship between sensibility and intuitions)? Now, if this is the case, and this capacity is the condition of sympathy, the fact of emotional experience as subjective must then imply again some degree of ISCU if we are able to attribute this same state to others whose subjectivity remains largely inaccessible to me. Hence it is clear that ISCU is by no means restricted to Kant’s Aesthetic philosophy; this assumption, which justifies the principle of taste, is the very same that justifies the categorical imperative, the supreme principle of Kantian moral judgment.

III -- In Conclusion: Is Universal Intersubjective Cognitive Uniformity a Transcendental Idea, or Postulate of Practical Reason?

In his paper “*Beauty, Disinterested Pleasure, and Universal Communicability*”, Bart Vandenabeele suggests that, for Kant, “an imputation of general assent in aesthetic pleasure is ‘only’ a transcendental idea. Against the rationalists, Kant insists that the required universal agreement in aesthetic judgments is always uncertain.”¹⁸ In this passage, he is remarking upon Kant’s statement that:

The judgment of taste itself does not postulate everyone’s agreement (since only a logically universal judgment can do that, because it can adduce reasons); it merely requires this agreement from everyone, as an instance of the rule, an instance regarding which it expects confirmation not from concepts but from the agreement of others¹⁹

Now, in parsing both Kant’s statement and Vandenabeele’s observation, it is important to remember two things. Firstly, the transcendental idea being referred to here is the universal assent in a judgment of taste. Second, note that while Kantian postulates *are* transcendental ideas, they are distinguished from transcendental ideas

¹⁸ Vandenabeele 19

¹⁹ CJ 5:216; as quoted by Vandenabeele. For full transparency, I have opted here for Vandenabeele’s translation over the Cambridge for a number of reasons, most especially for the use of the word “requires” instead of “ascribes”, and “agreement” instead of “consent”.

generally by their teleological function. The postulates of practical reason, are, for Kant, an *extension* of theoretical reason into the supersensible justified by the need of practical reason for *ends* in action. Notably, however, these postulates may not be used for any purpose other than satisfying a teleological need (i.e. they must not conflict with empirical or rational concepts or principles).²⁰

Now, recall that pure judgments of taste, i.e. of beauty, do not *postulate* but rather *assume* that all will assent. As Kant writes: “It is an empirical judgment that I perceive and judge an object with pleasure. But it is an *a priori* judgment that I find it beautiful”²¹. Kant is correct in supposing that the immediate *assumption* of the assent of everyone is not in fact a practical postulate, since mere agreement offers practical reason virtually no teleological value. It is not difficult to see however that the assumption of the assent of all in a judgment of beauty is related to the UICU condition.

Now, when we speak of the mere agreement of all in a judgment of taste, we do so in terms of communicability. When we speak of ISCU, however, we are speaking of supersensible or transcendental elements of cognition. Psychiatrist and philosopher R.D. Laing once wrote: “As adults, we have forgotten most of our childhood, not only its contents, but its flavor”, and while I am removing the terms from their original context, I find them useful to express these ideas. If we are able to communicate the “contents” of experience, if we can agree on these communicable contents, what remains incommunicable, untouchable, invisible, is the enigmatic flavour--when I communicate to you the conceptual contents of my experience, of my judgment of beauty, you understand them in your own terms, which may be entirely or slightly different from or exactly the same as the *flavour* of my own experience.

It is the content that we *communicate*, then. The agreement of others communicates an agreement on conceptually relevant *content*. A mutual understanding between friends of emotional states is an agreement between friends that the shape fits in the hole--only it must be assumed that the shape is, for us both, a circle, say. Were my shape a circle, and yours a square; my flavour tangy, and yours tart; and were we to recognize these discrepancies, our ability, or perhaps *will*, to communicate our experiences to one another would be severely hindered--why explain my experience to you, if you couldn't understand it the way I do? This anxiety, the desire to be understood, and what is required for it, is captured succinctly by Vandenabeele. He writes:

²⁰ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason in Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J Gregor, (New York:Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124-126; 137-140.

²¹ See n. 9.

“The demand for universal communicability [...] can serve as the basis for the universal validity of the aesthetic judgment.”²² What we may find here, then, is that while Kant is correct in saying that the assumption of universal agreement is not itself a postulate, it *is* conditional on the postulation of UICI, which, in short, is the teleological condition of social and moral action in regards to other humans.

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²² Vandenabeele, 25.