

# Kantian Aesthetics

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## Kant on Genius and Art

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I

Kant's view concerning the nature of the connection between genius and art is not easy to discern. In particular, it is not a straightforward matter to say just what Kant's answer is to the question of whether one must possess genius in order to produce a work of art. As it stands, however, the question is still somewhat vaguely stated. For, on the surface anyway, Kant seems in the *Critique of Judgement* to employ at least two different notions of genius.<sup>1</sup> The first task—if we are to discover Kant's answer to the previous question—will be to distinguish these apparently different notions of genius.

II

The first notion of genius bears a resemblance to our notion of an artistic genius. We take an artistic genius to be a uniquely gifted individual whose work may exert an influence upon lesser artists, and this is more or less what Kant took an artistic genius to be. Such an individual, Kant says,

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<sup>1</sup> All citations are to Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement (CJ)*. The translation is that of J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952).

is one of nature's elect—a type that must be regarded as but a rare phenomenon—for other clever minds his example gives rise to a school, that is to say a methodical instruction according to rules, collected, so far as the circumstances admit, from such products of genius and their peculiarities. (*CJ*, §49, p. 318)

Let us refer to this as Kant's 'nature's elect' notion of genius.

Kant's second notion of genius is that of a 'productive faculty' of the mind. This notion of genius bears resemblances to certain notions of 'creativity' that are employed today. Kant attributes two very different kinds of functions to a productive faculty of genius: one is that of producing aesthetic ideas, and the other is that of producing rules guiding an agent's production of objects with beautiful forms. Call these the 'aesthetic idea-giving' and 'rule-giving' functions, respectively.

As far as the aesthetic idea-giving function is concerned, Kant describes the faculty of genius as 'the faculty of presenting *aesthetic ideas*' (*CJ*, §49, p. 314). An aesthetic idea is a 'representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible' (*CJ*, §49, p. 314). Poets, for example, are said to attempt to express aesthetic ideas through artworks when they interpret 'to sense the rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc. Or, again, as to things of which examples occur in experience, e.g. death, envy and all vices, as also love, fame, and the like' (*ibid.*). Kant will talk both of an artist's expressing aesthetic ideas (by employing a faculty of genius), *and* of an artefact—such as a poem—expressing such ideas. In the latter case, what Kant appears to

mean is that the aesthetic idea somehow figures into the artefact's representational content. The notion of an aesthetic idea has within Kant's philosophy a special meaning. In particular, it has to do with that aspect of his philosophy that concerns the 'supersensible'. The notion of an aesthetic idea will not here be explored in detail.

The second function that Kant attributes to a faculty of genius is that of giving rules guiding the production of objects with beautiful forms. He writes:

*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art. Since talent, as an innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may put it this way:

*Genius* is the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. (CJ, §46, p. 307)

The precise mechanism by means of which the faculty gives such rules is not discussed in detail by Kant. He does, however, say that genius cannot 'indicate scientifically how it brings about its product', for the agent 'does not himself know how the *ideas* for [the product] have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically, and communicate the same to others in such precepts as would put them in a position to produce similar products' (CJ, §46, p. 308). What seems clear is that the productive faculty guides the process of producing objects with beautiful forms in virtue of generating ideas (at this point, the ideas in question are not aesthetic ideas, but ideas or thoughts more generally concerning one's ends in acting). That is, the general picture is one according to which the overall action of producing the object may be divided into two logically, if not temporally, distinct stages: first, there is the having of ideas about what form the object will take, and second, there is the execution of various individual actions in order to produce an object with

this form. The productive faculty of genius in its rule-giving capacity is described as operating at the first stage.

It is one thing for an object to be beautiful, and another thing for it to express aesthetic ideas. Several of Kant's remarks indicate that he takes this distinction between being beautiful and expressing aesthetic ideas for granted. For instance, he writes: 'So far as beauty is concerned, to be fertile and original in ideas is not such an imperative requirement as it is that the imagination in its freedom should be in accordance with the understanding's conformity to law' (*CJ*, §50, p. 319).<sup>2</sup>

### III

Our original question was whether Kant believed that possessing genius is necessary in order to produce works of art. We have just encountered two distinct notions of genius found in Kant, and so there are two different versions of our question.

Let us begin with the nature's elect notion of genius. It would seem peculiar to answer that only nature's elect artistic geniuses can be capable of producing artworks. For it is part of the meaning of the concept of a nature's elect genius that, at any given time, there will be few artistic geniuses compared to the number of artists as a whole: the nature's elect genius is 'a type that must be regarded as but a rare phenomenon' (*CJ*, §49, p. 318). Moreover, other 'clever minds' who are not themselves geniuses are able, Kant says, by means of subscribing

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<sup>2</sup> Kant's enigmatic remark in §51 that 'beauty (whether it be of nature or of art) may in general be termed the *expression* of aesthetic ideas' may, if taken on face value, present difficulties for the reading being proposed. At any rate, on face value, the claim appears to be incoherent. For while one can see how a natural object can be formally beautiful, it is nearly impossible to see how a natural object can *express* an aesthetic idea or anything else. Natural objects, one would think, are not the sorts of things that are capable of expression. Kant was in all likelihood speaking highly metaphorically (and misleadingly) when he made this remark. Henry Allison, mistakenly, I believe, takes this remark on face value; see H. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001), pp. 258–259.

to the school initiated by the work of the genius to imitate him: ‘fine art is for such persons a matter of imitation, for which, nature, through the medium of a genius, gave the rule’ (*ibid.*). But from this it follows that there *are* individuals engaged in producing art who are not nature’s elect geniuses—it is just that, as Kant says, the activity will for them inherently involve a kind of imitation that it does not involve when practised by the nature’s elect genius.

Although Kant clearly did not think that being a nature’s elect genius is necessary for the production of *individual* artworks, remarks such as the ones cited above do tend to indicate that he thought that such geniuses were necessary for the existence of art as a whole. The argument in support of this thought is presumably the following: lesser talents, as has been suggested, require something to imitate. Otherwise such individuals could not even get started producing artworks. But the only way in which an artwork that can serve to be imitated can come into existence is if there is a nature’s elect genius who brings it into existence. Hence, the existence of at least one nature’s elect genius is a condition of the possibility of art as a whole.

The previous sketch of an argument, though potentially interesting, departs from the question at hand, which is about individual agents and individual artworks. For instance, from the first-person point of view, the question can be posed: ‘must I possess genius in order to be able to produce an artwork?’ Again, the first part of the answer—which concerns the nature’s elect sense of ‘genius’—is that it is not the case that Kant’s view entails that I must be an artistic genius in order to be capable of producing an artwork.

The original question can be posed again, however, this time employing the productive faculty sense of ‘genius’. Must a given individual possess and employ genius in the productive faculty sense in order to produce individual artworks? Let us call the thesis that an individual’s possessing and employing a productive faculty of genius is required in order for him to be

able to produce artworks the ‘productive faculty thesis’.

Many believe that Kant put forward the productive faculty thesis. One argument commonly attributed to him turns on the notion of a rule-giving function performed by a productive faculty of genius. So let us refer to this as the ‘rule-giving argument’ for the productive faculty thesis. Roughly, the argument is the following: in order to be an artwork, an object must have a beautiful form. But in order to produce an object with a beautiful form, an agent must possess a productive faculty of genius and employ it to generate rules relating to the act of production. Therefore, possessing and employing a productive faculty of genius is required for producing an artwork.

In what follows, I will have two main aims. The first aim will be to present the rule-giving argument for the productive faculty thesis in more detail and to show that Kant could not consistently have put forward this argument while also holding certain other more fundamental theses of his aesthetic theory. But I will show that this is not a problem for Kant, since he never put forward the rule-giving argument—in fact, the account he presents is one according to which employing a faculty of genius is explicitly *not* required in order to produce beautiful objects. My second aim will be to show that Kant’s remarks on a rule-giving function of a faculty of genius ought to be interpreted merely as the elucidation of a concept that he thinks must be employed by agents who judge the beauty of artworks.

#### IV

It should be obvious that the rule-giving argument for the productive faculty thesis will fall short if there can be artworks that do not possess beautiful forms. The natural first question to ask, then, is whether Kant holds that to be an artwork an object must possess a beautiful

form.

Kant claims that art in the relevant sense—which he refers to as ‘fine art’—is a subcategory of ‘art in general’.<sup>3</sup> A given object counts as art in general just in case it has been ‘formed in such a way that its actuality [has] been preceded by a representation of the thing in its cause’ (*CJ*, §43, p. 303). That is, the action of generating the product is guided by a goal or end that the agent has. Things like tables and chairs fall under the category of art in general, as do paintings and musical compositions. Sometimes Kant talks as if what distinguishes *fine* art is merely that it has an additional *aim* of being beautiful (*CJ*, §44, p. 306), where a particular work can be said to have this aim if the agent who produced it had the aim of producing a beautiful object. However, at other times, Kant talks as if *being* beautiful is a necessary condition of being an artwork.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, since the rule-giving argument requires the assumption that being beautiful is a necessary condition of being an artwork, let us grant this assumption in what follows.

## V

Eva Schaper is one commentator who appears to attribute to Kant the rule-giving argument for the productive faculty thesis. She writes:

[T]here is, as Kant has been at pains to establish, no concept of beauty, and thus no rule according to which to produce a thing of beauty. If there were a concept that could

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<sup>3</sup> I will henceforth employ the terms ‘art’ and ‘fine art’ interchangeably, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Kant appears to suggest that an object need merely aim at being beautiful, that is, have being beautiful as its end, in order to count as fine art, when he says that the description ‘fine art’ applies where the ‘end of the art is that the pleasure should accompany the representations... considered as *modes of cognition*’ (*CJ*, §44, p. 305). On the other hand, he appears elsewhere to claim that all fine art is beautiful, as when he equates the production of fine art and ‘the production of the beautiful’ (*CJ*, §57, p. 344).

function as a rule for the making of something beautiful, then that concept would also be available for assessing and judging beauty by taste. But Kant's entire discussion so far has ruled that out. Yet we know that beautiful objects are being made, and that at least in some cases they are made with the intention to produce things of beauty. How is this possible? Kant's answer is that there must be a capacity or 'natural endowment', a special gift that enables the artist to create artworks.<sup>5</sup>

As can be seen in the above quotation, Schaper appears to make the previously mentioned assumption: to produce an artwork is to produce a thing of beauty. Let us attempt to put the kind of argument that Schaper finds in Kant more fully. First, Kant claims that there can be no principles of taste. A principle of taste would be 'a fundamental premiss under the condition of which one might subsume the concept of an object, and then, by a syllogism, draw the inference that it is beautiful' (*CJ*, §34, p. 285). Kant holds that this kind of inference 'is absolutely impossible' (*ibid.*), because 'I must feel the pleasure immediately in the representation of the object, and I cannot be talked into it by any grounds of proof' (*ibid.*). But, according to Schaper, Kant thinks that since there can be no such principles of taste which serve as rules for judging, it follows that there can be no knowable rules that can be consciously followed in order to *produce* the beautiful things that are contemplated in judgements of taste. Presumably, this is because there would then be roundabout ways of assessing the beauty of a given artwork: one could, for instance, determine whether the rules for producing a beautiful thing had been followed; if they had been, then one could safely pronounce the object to be beautiful. This, would, of course be a cognitive judgement, not a

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<sup>5</sup> E. Schaper, 'Taste, Sublimity, and Genius', in P. Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1992), p. 389.



judgement based on an immediate feeling of pleasure. The possibility of such roundabout ways of judging artworks is said to be ruled out by Kant's simply denying that there are any knowable rules that can be consciously followed in order to produce an artwork. Now the act of producing an artwork must be rule-governed in some sense—since it is an act of 'production through freedom, i.e. through an act of will that places reason at the basis of its action' (*CJ*, §43, p. 303). As Kant puts it, 'every art presupposes rules which are laid down as the foundation which first enables a product, if it is to be called one of art, to be represented as possible' (*CJ*, §46, p. 307). Finally, it is claimed that the only way of accounting for the possibility of the production of art, given the assumption that, on the one hand, there is a need for rules of some sort, and on the other hand, there are no knowable rules that can be consciously followed, is to posit a productive faculty—that of genius—which gives the rules governing the act of production in such a way that the artist remains unaware of what the rules are. Hence, a productive faculty of genius must be employed in order to produce works of art.

Other commentators have taken Kant to have put forward this argument, or something very similar to it. Peter Lewis writes:

Either we estimate works of art as works, in which case we violate the conditions for judging things to be beautiful, or we judge artworks to be beautiful, in which case we violate the conditions for estimating them as artifacts, as works of art. Kant resolves the dilemma by employing the notion of genius. Works of fine art are products of genius, and 'genius is the innate mental aptitude *through which* nature gives the rule to art'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> P. Lewis, 'Original Nonsense: Art and Genius in Kant's Aesthetic', in G. MacDonald Ross and T. McWalter (eds), *Kant and His Influence*, (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), pp. 127–128.

And Paul Guyer writes:

Genius is required both for the creation of artistic intentions and for their realization.

There is thus no automatic connection between the formulation of a determinate artistic intention—whether it be to please, or to illustrate some determinate concept, or to exemplify some particular type or genre—and the existence of a beautiful object.<sup>7</sup>

However, if Kant had made the sort of argument being attributed to him by these commentators, he would have been guilty of, as Henry Allison puts it, ‘a gross *non sequitur*’.<sup>8</sup> For, Allison writes, ‘nothing about the *source* of the rule that must underlie a work of fine art (as a condition of its being art) seems to be entailed by the negative requirement that the *judgement* regarding the work cannot be based on a concept (presumably this very rule)’.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty with the kinds of arguments being attributed to Kant by these commentators can be seen most clearly by first considering the nature of Kant’s formalism.<sup>10</sup> Kant was a strict formalist with regard to beauty in nature and in art. An object’s formal properties consist of those properties appropriately related to the spatial and temporal organization of its elements, such as its figure and shape.<sup>11</sup> Concerning art, Kant makes this

<sup>7</sup> P. Guyer, ‘Interest, Nature, and Art: A Problem in Kant’s Aesthetics’, *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 31 (1978), p. 598.

<sup>8</sup> For a further example of the interpretation of Kant in question, see S. Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art: An Essay on Kant and the Philosophy of Fine Art and Culture*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Allison, it should be noted, would not go along with the argument against these interpretations I am presenting. For Allison does not take Kant to be the strict formalist that I argue he is. See, for example, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, p. 288.

<sup>11</sup> See D. Crawford, *Kant’s Aesthetic Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), p. 100. The issue of Kant’s formalism has been debated in recent literature. I am in agreement with Crawford on the question of the extent of Kant’s formalism. Crawford’s view is that ‘in the parts of the *Critique of Judgement* in which form is emphasized as the essential aspect of beauty, Kant is consistently a pure formalist, in the sense that every non-formal feature of an object is completely irrelevant to its beauty and is usually... also a positive distraction and interferes with the aesthetic experience of beauty’ (*Kant’s Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100). But see also D.W. Gotschalk, ‘Form Expression in Kant’s Aesthetics’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1967), pp. 250–260.

point again and again. He writes: 'in painting, sculpture, and in fact in all the formative arts, in architecture and horticulture, so far as fine arts, the *design* is what is essential. Here it is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases by its form, that is the fundamental prerequisite for taste' (*CJ*, §14, p. 225). Kant also says that 'in all fine art the essential element consists in the form which is final for observation and for estimating' (*CJ*, §52, p. 326). In the case specifically of painting, Kant says that the judgement of taste, so far as it is one upon what is beautiful in this art, is determined in one and the same way: namely as a judgement only upon the forms (without regard to any end) as they present themselves to the eye, singly or in combination, according to their effect upon the imagination. (*CJ*, §51, p. 324)

It is entirely correct for Kant to make such remarks given his project in the *Critique of Judgement* of justifying judgements of taste. For a strict aesthetic formalism is integral to Kant's deduction of such judgements. He aims to demonstrate in the deduction that

one who feels pleasure in simple reflection on the form of an object, without having any concept in mind, rightly lays claim to the agreement of every one, although this judgement is empirical and a singular judgement. For the ground of this pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective, condition of reflective judgements, namely the final harmony of an object (be it a product of nature or of art) with the mutual relation of the faculties of cognition, (imagination and understanding,) which are requisite for every empirical cognition. (*CJ*, §VII, p. 191)

Thus, it is part of Kant's overall view that one of the conditions which must be met if one is to be justified in making judgements concerning an object's beauty, is that only the object's formal properties be contemplated.

To say that Kant was a formalist with respect to the *beauty* of artworks is to say that he thought that if an artwork is beautiful, it is so in virtue of its formal properties. But this is not to say that Kant held that the only thing that might make an artwork valuable is its beauty. It appears that there is a broader notion of artistic value such that expressing aesthetic ideas can contribute to a work's value in this sense.<sup>12</sup>

We can see, however, that—given that Kant's formalism entails that an object is beautiful solely in virtue of its perceptible form—there cannot be the sort of connection between its level of beauty and the way in which an object comes to have the form it has (its causal history) that would be needed for the rule-giving argument to succeed. Any work with the right sort of form would have to be considered beautiful, *no matter how it has come to have this form*. Certain ways of copying pre-existing beautiful objects ought even to be considered by Kant to be ways of producing new beautiful objects. For instance, a perfect copy of a beautiful painting will have the same formal properties as the original. Hence, if we are inclined to judge one to be beautiful, then we should be equally inclined to judge the other to be beautiful. The previous consideration simply follows from the fact that what one cannot directly perceive in the work's form is irrelevant to its beauty. But, given that copying a beautiful painting cannot be said to require the employment of a faculty of genius (for it can be done mechanically and according to known rules), we must conclude that the employment of a faculty of genius is not strictly speaking required to produce a new beautiful object.

It is true, as Schaper and others emphasize, that we cannot be talked into finding an object to be beautiful 'by any grounds of proof' (CJ, §34, p. 285). But that has to do with the nature and justification of judgements concerning an object's beauty. Finding an object to be

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<sup>12</sup> Support for this interpretation can be found, for instance, in §48, where Kant distinguishes between artworks that possess 'spirit' (*Geist*) and those that do not. For an artwork to possess spirit is for it to express aesthetic ideas. Thus, a natural reading takes Kant to hold that an artwork can be in some way better to the extent that it expresses aesthetic ideas (and so, possesses spirit).

beautiful and being justified in doing so simply means, for Kant, feeling pleasure as a result of contemplating its form in the right way. But it cannot follow from the fact that the pleasure must be felt directly in order for one to be in a position to say that one has found it to be beautiful, that the only way of producing an object with a form that will *in fact* give one this pleasure when one encounters it is by employing a faculty of genius.

On the readings suggested by the previous commentators, then, Kant will have illegitimately drawn a conclusion about the production of artworks based on a claim relating solely to their proper reception.

## VI

In fact, Kant did not commit the previous fallacy, as many of his remarks make clear. In particular, he claims that the production of beautiful objects involves the conscious following of known rules guided by an exercise of taste. This is significant, for if one can consciously follow rules in producing an artwork, then one does not need to rely on a faculty of genius that gives the rules for the work's production. Along these lines, Kant writes:

there is still no fine art in which something mechanical, capable of being at once comprehended and followed in obedience to rules, and consequently something *academic* does not constitute the essential condition of the art. For the thought of something as end must be present, or else its product would not be ascribed to an art at all, but would be a mere product of chance. (*CJ*, §47, p. 310)

'By right', Kant says, 'it is only production through freedom, i.e. through an act of will that

places reason at the basis of its action, that should be termed art' (*CJ*, §43, p. 303). And beyond this, Kant claims that, in order to produce objects with beautiful forms, 'taste merely is required' (*CJ*, §48, p. 312). The acquisition of taste, Kant thinks, is, more than anything else, a matter of practice and hard work:

By this the artist, having practiced and corrected his taste by a variety of examples from nature or art, controls his work and, after many, and often laborious attempts to satisfy taste, finds the form which commends itself to him. Hence this form is not, as it were, a matter of inspiration, or of a free swing of the mental powers, but rather of a slow and even painful process of improvement, directed to making the form adequate to his thought without prejudice to the freedom in the play of those powers. (*CJ*, §48, p. 312–313)

One who has taste will be proficient at conceiving of certain ends, namely objects with beautiful forms. And through practice at producing such objects, one will become better at conforming one's actions to the ends of which one conceives.

## VII

The most obvious question that is prompted by the claim that Kant did not put forward the rule-giving argument for the productive faculty thesis is the following: what purpose does Kant's discussion of a productive faculty of genius that gives rules for the production of objects with beautiful forms serve in the third *Critique*? The answer is that this discussion

amounts to an elucidation of the *concept* of such a faculty.<sup>13</sup> Kant thought such an elucidation important, since he thought that it is the concept of such a faculty that we must employ in order to judge the beauty of works of fine art. Kant arrived at this view as a result of coming to believe that the conditions under which it is possible to experience an object's beauty cannot easily be met when the object has been made by an agent. Thus, his view is that it is only by representing an artwork as having come into existence through the employment of its maker's productive faculty of genius that one is able to experience its beauty. He writes: 'fine arts must necessarily be regarded as arts of *genius*' (*CJ*, §46, p. 307). Kant truly means here that fine arts must be *regarded* as arts of genius, where it is understood that the fact that one is to regard (or represent, or think of) any given artwork as having been produced by an artist who employed his productive faculty of genius does not entail that the work in question has in fact been so produced. Let us call the following the 'representation thesis': in order for an agent to be able to experience an artwork's beauty, he must represent the work as having been produced by an artist who employed his productive faculty of genius. I turn now to the argument Kant puts forward in support of the representation thesis. Since the argument concerns the notion of 'abstraction', let us refer to this as the 'abstraction argument' for the representation thesis.

## VIII

The abstraction argument begins with an assumption that is fundamental to Kant's aesthetic theory, namely that pure judgements of taste—where the agent experiences an object's

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<sup>13</sup> § 46, for instance, should be read as elucidating the concept of a rule-giving function performed by a productive faculty of genius.

beauty in virtue of feeling pleasure in contemplating the object's form—must involve a pleasure that is 'disinterested'. As Kant puts it, the pleasure one feels in engaging with a beautiful object must be a 'disinterested and *free* delight; for, with it, no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval' (*CJ*, §5, p. 210 ). The concept of 'interest' is explicated in terms of the idea of concern over a thing's real existence: 'where the question is whether something is beautiful, we do not want to know, whether we, or any one else, are, or even could be, concerned in the real existence of the thing, but rather what estimate we form of it on mere contemplation (intuition or reflection)' (*CJ*, §2, p. 204).

It is not difficult to see how it is possible for an agent to form pure judgements of taste concerning natural objects. The agent simply must ensure that, for the time being, he himself ceases to be concerned with the object's real existence. But in cases in which an object comes across as having been made by an agent, or is otherwise known or believed to be the product of an agent, things become more difficult. For even if the agent making the judgement can himself cease for the time being to be interested in the object's real existence, it is obvious to him that someone else has been interested in its real existence—its maker has been. For the maker wanted nothing other than to bring it about that the object begin existing. We have seen that this is true in the case of fine art, in particular: it is the *end* of the artist to produce a work of art, since art is 'formed in such a way that its actuality must have been preceded by a representation of the thing in its cause' (*CJ*, §43, p. 303).

It is not the case, of course, that one will be able to tell in every case that something is an agent-made rather than a natural object, or vice versa, merely by looking or listening. For while a consideration of the way something looks or sounds may enable one to guess, and often guess correctly, that it has or has not been designed by an agent, there will surely be cases in which what looks designed is not designed, and what is designed looks undesigned.



Kant even provides an example of the latter sort of case, in the form of a trick that one might play: a person might ‘plant in the ground artificial flowers (which can be made so as to look just like natural ones) and perch artfully carved birds on the branches of trees’ (*CJ*, §42, p. 299). The victim at first takes an interest in these as natural objects. But upon discovering that they are agent-made objects, ‘the immediate interest which these things previously had for him would at once vanish’ (*ibid.*).

By whatever means one comes to recognize an object as the work of an agent rather than nature, once this recognition has occurred, what is needed is a way of ceasing to think about the fact that the object’s maker had been interested in its real existence, since the possibility of experiencing the object’s beauty—if it possesses any—depends in part upon being able to do this. Kant refers to this as a capacity for ‘abstraction’. As Kant puts it: ‘In respect of an object with a definite internal end, a judgement of taste would only be pure where the person judging either has no concept of this end, or else makes abstraction from it in his judgement’ (*CJ*, §16, p. 231).

So it is clear that an agent must avoid thinking of any given artwork as having been made in the way in which it has *in fact* been made if he is to experience its beauty. The final steps in the abstraction argument aim to show that it is only by representing a given work of art as having been made through the use of a rule-giving function of a productive faculty of genius that it is possible to carry out the needed abstraction. Recall that the concept of a productive faculty of genius functioning in its rule-giving capacity is one of a faculty that produces rules guiding the act of the production of an artwork, but in such a way that the agent lacks knowledge of the rules and does not consciously follow them. If an agent were to lack such knowledge and conscious awareness, then it could be said that he lacked control over the process, and even that the work’s production was to be attributed to the process

rather than to the agent himself. According to Kant, the concept of a productive faculty of genius is the concept of a faculty that is part of nature; it is conceived of as 'nature in the individual' (*CJ*, §46, p. 307). So the process by which a productive faculty of genius would produce a work can be thought of as a kind of natural process, and to attribute the work's production to such a process would be to attribute its production to nature. The work that would result could be viewed as a *natural object*. And so, an agent who represents a given work as having been produced through the use of a faculty of genius will view the work, for the time being, as if it were a natural object. As Kant says, the work will 'have the appearance of nature' (*CJ*, §45, p. 306). But we have already seen that there is little difficulty accounting for the possibility of judging the beauty of an object insofar as it is viewed as a natural object. Thus, by representing a work as having been produced through the use of a faculty of genius, an agent can put himself in a position to experience its beauty. Moreover, Kant presumably thinks that this is the *only* way in which the agent can put himself in such a position. Hence, in order for an agent to be able to experience an artwork's beauty, he must represent the work as having been produced by an artist who employed his productive faculty of genius.

## IX

Now, I do not intend to consider the viability of the abstraction argument for the representation thesis in any detail. Clearly, it faces a number of serious objections. For instance, even if it were plausible to say that agents must perform an abstraction in order to experience the beauty of an artwork, how plausible would the claim be that agents who do not abstract in this particular way could not experience the work's beauty? Much more would need to be said (which Kant does not say) in order to convince us that the abstraction argument stands a

chance of succeeding. Nonetheless, the important thing to see is that, contrary to a commonly held interpretation, Kant need not be taken to have put forward the claim that a productive faculty of genius must literally be employed in order to produce a beautiful object. This claim would not only be implausible in its own right, but would also be blatantly at odds with his formalism and with the remarks he makes in Section 48 concerning the nature of the artist's productive activity.

I do, however, wish to consider a possible objection to the interpretation I am urging. It might be objected that Kant could not have put forward the abstraction argument, since he ultimately denies that it is possible to make pure judgements of taste concerning fine art in the first place. In particular, remarks he makes in §48 of the *Critique of Judgement* might be thought to support this objection. In this section, Kant writes:

To enable me to estimate a beauty of nature, as such, I do not need to be previously possessed of a concept of what sort of a thing the object is intended to be, i.e. I am not obliged to know its material finality (the end), but, rather, in forming an estimate of it apart from any knowledge of the end, the mere form pleases on its own account. If, however, the object is presented as a product of art, and is as such to be declared beautiful, then, seeing that art always presupposes an end in the cause (and its causality), a concept of what the thing is intended to be must first of all be laid at its basis. And, since the agreement of the manifold in a thing with an inner character belonging to it as its end constitutes the perfection of the thing, it follows that in estimating beauty of art the perfection of the thing must be also taken into account—a matter which in estimating a beauty of nature, as beautiful, is quite irrelevant. (CJ, §48, p. 311)

The previous passage, it is true, does appear at first to raise difficulties for the claim that Kant believed that it is possible to form pure judgements of taste concerning fine art. Guyer takes such a view when he writes of this passage: 'Kant simply asserts that any judgement on art must be a judgement of perfection, or a dependent judgement of beauty, involving consideration of the concept of an end under which a work of art must be subsumed. Abstraction from ends is apparently impossible in the case of art'.<sup>14</sup> Guyer does raise the possibility that 'Kant's use of the phrase "as such" in these lines might be taken to mean that it is only if we want to judge an object to be a *beautiful work of art* that we must consider a concept of what sort of thing it is or is meant to be'.<sup>15</sup> But he finds this reading implausible given Kant's apparent flat-out assertion in the third sentence that 'in estimating beauty of art the perfection of the thing must be also taken into account'.

However, this does not seem to me to be the best interpretive approach to take. For it attributes to Kant a claim that does not fit well with his aesthetic theory as a whole. First, we saw that he thinks that nature can be estimated 'as nature'. In such cases, the agent engages with the natural object without any thought of a maker's end. But Kant also clearly states that in addition to the possibility of estimating nature as nature, there is the possibility of estimating nature 'as art'. This involves estimating a natural object *as if* its production had been someone's end. Kant writes:

It is true that in forming an estimate, especially of animate objects of nature, e.g. of a man or a horse, objective finality is also commonly taken into account with a view to

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<sup>14</sup> Guyer, 'Interest, Nature, and Art', p. 601.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

judgement upon their beauty; but then the judgement also ceases to be purely aesthetic, i.e. a mere judgement of taste. Nature is no longer estimated as it appears like art, but rather in so far as it actually *is* art, though superhuman art. (CJ, §48, p. 311)

Given that Kant thinks that nature can be estimated either as nature or as art, it would be natural for him to hold that art can be estimated either as art or as nature. I have argued that Kant holds that an agent's performing an abstraction by employing the concept of a productive faculty of genius is precisely what enables him to estimate art as nature. If this is right, then it can be seen that there is a fundamental symmetry in Kant's aesthetic theory between the estimation of nature and of art.<sup>16</sup>

Now, the existence of an *asymmetry* would not inherently constitute a problem. But many of Kant's remarks throughout the *Critique of Judgement* have led us to expect the symmetry in question. Thus, when presented with the third sentence in the previously quoted passage from §48, we ought to consider it in the light of everything else we have been told by Kant, and conclude that he has merely found a misleading way of saying what one would have expected him to say all along. Kant is simply taking for granted that we will understand him to be talking here as he was just a few sentences earlier, namely, about the estimation of art *as such*. When he says that 'in estimating beauty of art the perfection of the thing must be also taken into account', he simply assumes that we understand him to mean that in estimating the beauty of art *as such*, the perfection of the thing is to be taken into account. It remains the case that art can be estimated as nature by employing the concept of a

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<sup>16</sup> The distinction between estimating an object 'as nature' or 'as art' corresponds to Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty. A particular object is not intrinsically a free or dependent beauty, as some have maintained, but may be estimated at one time as a free beauty, at another time as a dependent beauty. For a discussion of free and dependent beauty along these lines, see Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*: 'The distinction is not in terms of what is present; the distinction between free and dependent beauty is one concerning how the object is judged' (p. 114).

productive faculty of genius; hence, pure judgements of taste concerning art are possible.

X

I have attempted to show that Kant did not put forward the rule-giving argument in support of the productive faculty thesis, but did put forward the abstraction argument in support of the representation thesis. The broader conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Kant holds a view which involves, in important respects, the denial that there is anything deeply mysterious or problematic about the possibility of the production of art. It is true that Kant thinks that there is more to art than beauty—there are the aesthetic ideas that he thinks artists and artworks can express. Positing these ideas as well as special psychological processes by which agents generate them is certainly not without its difficulties. But being an agent-made object that is beautiful is what is essential to being a work of art, for Kant.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the most important parts of his theory of the production of art can be formulated in ways that do not ultimately make an even bigger mystery of that which is to be explained. On a plausible reading, Kant can be taken not to have held the productive faculty thesis at all.

Because of this, Kant's theory seems indicative of a departure from a tradition dating back to Plato which holds that there *is* something essentially mysterious surrounding the possibility of the production of art. In the 'Ion', for instance, Socrates claims that a poet 'is a delicate thing, winged and sacred, and unable to create until he becomes inspired and frenzied, his mind no longer in him; as long as he keeps his hold on that, no man can

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<sup>17</sup> Not only does Kant omit talk of aesthetic ideas when he defines fine art as having essentially to do with beauty (*CJ*, §44, p. 306); but there is also at least one positive indication on Kant's part that an object need not express aesthetic ideas in order to count as an artwork. He writes: 'imagination rather entitles an art to be called an *inspired* (*geistreiche*) than a fine art. It is only in respect of judgement that the name of fine art is deserved. Hence it follows that judgement, being the indispensable condition (*conditio sine qua non*), is at least what one must look to as of capital importance in forming an estimate of art as fine art' (*CJ*, §50, p. 320).

compose or chant or prophecy'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the peculiarly Romantic notion of the artist who cannot produce artworks unless taken over by a chaotic 'creative process' is, as I am urging, in important ways opposed to the view Kant presents in the *Critique of Judgement*. Kant holds that a full explanation of how artworks can be produced by human agents is found, in the typical case, by looking to the capacity of the artist to carry out purposive actions guided by a conscious exercise of taste.

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<sup>18</sup> Plato, 'Ion', in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 3, trans. R.E. Allen (New Haven, CT: Yale U.P., 1984), 534c.