



AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

Robert Clewis and the Origins of Kant’s Conception of Aesthetics

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Abstract

Robert Clewis focuses on a number of different themes in Kant’s precritical and critical aesthetics in *The Origins of Kant’s Aesthetics*. Clewis carefully documents where Kant’s views on these themes are the same, where they are different, and why; yet his approach might give readers the impression that Kant lacks a unified conception of aesthetics. I show, on the contrary, that the method and sources Clewis employs also reveal the frameworks within which Kant addresses the themes that Clewis discusses in *Origins*; the consistencies in Kant’s precritical and critical conceptions of aesthetics; and the changes in his conception of aesthetics that we find in the third *Critique*.

Keywords: Kant; aesthetics; sensibility; intuition; feeling

To begin, I would like to congratulate Robert Clewis for writing an excellent book. If I were invited to write a blurb for *The Origins of Kant’s Aesthetics* (Clewis 2023; hereafter, *Origins*, and cited by page number), I might submit something like ‘Have you ever wanted to know everything Kant ever wrote on a napkin about aesthetics? If so, then this book is for you!’. I doubt Cambridge would print that on the back cover of the paperback edition, but I really think it would appeal to the book’s readership.

Seriously, though, I think *Origins* is an important contribution to Kant scholarship because it is an account of the genesis of Kant’s aesthetics and not the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (*Critik der Urtheilskraft*, 1790). The ‘Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement’ in the third *Critique* may contain the official statement of Kant’s critical aesthetics, but Clewis shows that Kant defended some of the same views earlier in his career. The third *Critique* situates these views within a new systematic context and provides them with a different justification than they had during earlier phases of Kant’s intellectual development; yet scholars studying Kant’s earlier publications, his notes, and the transcripts of his lectures will find that his positions are not entirely different during the precritical and critical periods. *Origins* is particularly helpful for Kant scholars because Clewis carefully documents where Kant’s views are the same, where they are different, and why.

Origins is a particularly helpful addition to the scholarly literature on Kant’s aesthetics because Clewis approaches the subject through a number of different

themes. Each chapter of *Origins* addresses one of these themes, whether it is the rules of taste, free and adherent beauty, genius and the classification of the arts, the sublime, ugliness and disgust, or humour. There are also additional themes within the chapters that readers could trace throughout the book, including aesthetic ideas, formalism, free play, and the relationship between aesthetics, morality, and nature. The diversity of these themes is a welcome contrast to other recent works on Kant's aesthetics, many of which have tried to explain the unity of the third *Critique*. Clewis does not identify or defend a unified conception of aesthetics in *Origins*, which might give readers the impression that Kant's aesthetics is merely a collection of arguments for different positions, with shifting motivations and justifications, depending on the context in which they were presented.

Even if *Origins* leaves some readers with this impression, I do not think that is how Clewis sees Kant's aesthetics. Moreover, I think the method he employs in *Origins* could be productively applied to 'aesthetics' itself. Doing so would reveal that Kant's conception of aesthetics is consistent in some ways throughout his career, though there are also crucial changes in his views at different times. Identifying these consistencies and changes would help to illuminate the frameworks within which Kant addresses the themes that Clewis discusses in *Origins*. So, in what follows, I would like to explore Kant's conception of aesthetics during the three phases of his development that Clewis distinguishes in *Origins*, drawing upon the same kinds of sources that Clewis uses to examine the themes he addresses.

In the first phase of his development, during the 1760s and 1770s, it appears that Kant saw aesthetics and logic as counterparts, though in a different way than Baumgarten and Meier. For Baumgarten and Meier, aesthetics is the science of the confused, sensible cognition of the lower cognitive faculty, whose perfection is beauty, while logic is the science of the distinct, intellectual cognition of the higher cognitive faculty, whose perfection is truth. This makes aesthetics and logic 'sister' sciences, even though they are concerned with different kinds of cognitive perfection. Evidence that Kant accepted the complementarity of aesthetics and logic can be found in the Announcement of his lectures for the winter semester of 1765–1766, where he says that he will discuss aesthetics in his logic lectures; yet he characterises their relation in different terms, saying that aesthetics is a 'critique of taste', that logic is a 'critique of reason', and that 'the rules of the one at all times serve to elucidate the rules of the other' (Kant 2002: 297; 2: 311). Although Kant does not mention cognitive perfection in the *Announcement*, he does distinguish the aesthetic and logical perfections of cognition in the transcript known as the *Blomberg Logic*, which dates from the early 1770s. According to the transcript, Kant holds that 'all the perfections of cognition are . . . 1st, aesthetic, and consist in agreement with subjective laws and conditions' or '2nd, logical, and consist in agreement with objective laws and conditions' (Kant 1992: 31–32; Log-Bl, 24: 44). Explaining the nature of these perfections, Kant says that 'a cognition agrees with the subject when it gives us much to think about and brings our capacity into play', such that it 'has an effect on our feeling and our taste'. This distinguishes aesthetically perfect cognition from logically perfect cognition, where the cognition 'agrees with the constitution of the thing' and 'involves the distinctness of the representation, and also that it must be rational' (Kant 1992: 31–2; Log-Bl, 24: 44). Kant returns to this point several times, so similar formulations can be found throughout the transcript of the *Blomberg Logic*.

Kant's account of the difference between the aesthetic and logical perfections of cognition obviously differs from Baumgarten and Meier, because Kant does not appeal to either beauty or truth. Yet it is consistent with the 'principle of sensible comprehension' that Clewis identifies as central to Kant's account of aesthetic normativity in the earliest phase of his intellectual development (p. 32). According to Clewis, the principle of sensible comprehension states that 'the beautiful facilitates sensible comprehension according to the laws of intuitive cognition or sensibility' (p. 33). The 'facilitation' of sensible comprehension is essential to this principle because beauty makes it easier for us to grasp an intuition and also makes the process of sensing a beautiful object pleasurable. Clewis follows Guyer in treating the principle of sensible comprehension as a predecessor to the free play of the imagination and understanding, which is the source of aesthetic pleasure in the third *Critique* (p. 33). However, I would like to suggest that, during the first phase of the development of his views on aesthetics, the principle of sensible comprehension is not just a feature of Kant's account of the pleasure of aesthetic experience or the source of aesthetic normativity. Instead, it is a defining feature of his conception of aesthetics. The principle of sensible comprehension distinguishes Kant's conception of aesthetics from his rationalist predecessors because it defines sensible cognition as 'intuitive cognition' rather than 'confused cognition'. That means it concerns what is 'given' rather than 'thought'.

Kant continues to endorse the principle of sensible comprehension during the second phase of his development, which extends from the 1770s until 1787. Indeed, it is one of the main objections that Kant raises against Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics as a science during this period, when he denies that aesthetics can be a science because it is not grounded in *a priori* principles, which must be rational, unlike principles derived from sensibility, which are empirical principles, and can only be demonstrated *a posteriori*. See, for example, *Reflexion* 622 (c. 1769), where Kant says 'the rational cognition of the beautiful is only criticism and not science; it explains the *phaenomenon*, but its proof is *a posteriori*' (Kant 2005: 483; 15: 269). Similarly in *Reflexion* 626 (c. 1769), Kant writes:

all cognition is either criticism (judging) or discipline (*later addition*: doctrine) (instruction) or science. If the relations that constitute the form of the beautiful are mathematical, i.e., those where the same unit is always the basis, then the first principle of the cognition of the beautiful is experience and its criticism ... [I]f the relations that constitute the ground of beauty are relations of quality (e.g., identity and difference, contrast, liveliness, etc.): then no discipline is possible and even less science, but merely criticism. (Kant 2005: 485; 15: 271–2)

Similarly, in the *Blomberg Logic*, which dates from the early 1770s, Kant insists that 'whatever we know of the beautiful is nothing but a *critica*', because aesthetics is different from logic, whose rules 'can be proved by themselves, apart from all use, *a priori*' (Kant 1992: 12; Log-Bl, 24: 25). Later, in the *Vienna Logic*, from 1780 to 1782, he says that 'taste, by which to judge according to laws of the senses, has no canon, because it arises *a posteriori*' and therefore differs from logic, which is 'a rational

science, a canon for the understanding' as well as 'a demonstrated science' and 'doctrine' that can be 'taught from *principia a priori*' (Kant 1992: 253; Log-W, 24: 792–3).

While Kant presumably held similar views during the first phase of his career, they assume a new systematic significance during the second phase. In his inaugural dissertation, *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World* (1770), Kant seeks to exclude all sensible cognition from metaphysics on the grounds that it is empirical (Kant 2002: 387; 2: §8, 395). He applies this argument to the pure forms of intuition, space, and time, even though they 'do not touch the senses', and could be construed as *a priori*, because their objects are *phaenomena*, unlike intellectual cognition, whose objects are *noumena*, and are known intellectually through pure concepts (Kant 2002: 390; 2: §12, 397–8.). Kant reverses himself in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), where he accepts that the objects of all our cognition are *phaenomena*, and includes both the principles of pure sensibility and the pure concepts of the understanding in the propaedeutic through which he intended to lay the foundation for a new system and science of metaphysics. This leads him to include both a Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Logic in the Doctrine of Elements in the first *Critique*. His newfound appreciation for the principles of pure sensibility did not, however, extend to aesthetics. In a footnote at the beginning of the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant continues to deny that the 'critique of taste' could ever be a science, because its 'putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed' (Kant 1998: 156; CPR, A21). He even reserves the title 'aesthetics' for 'that doctrine which is true science', namely, the 'science of all principles of *a priori* sensibility' that Kant calls 'the **transcendental aesthetic**', and rejects any equivocation between this science and the 'critique of taste' (Kant 1998: 156; CPR, A21).

The relationship between aesthetics and the principle of sensible comprehension is not definitively broken until the third phase of Kant's intellectual development, after 1787, when he discovers an *a priori* principle (or, as Clewis notes, *principles*) for judgements of taste (*Origins*, p. 45). This represents a significant change in Kant's psychology and epistemology because he had argued for most of his career that there was and could be no such principle. Kant's views about the pure principles of sensibility changed in the inaugural dissertation and the first *Critique*, where he admitted that there were pure forms of intuition; yet even in the first edition (1781) of the first *Critique*, he still made an exception for judgements of taste, insisting that their principles were empirical. The first evidence that he has changed his mind about this can be found in the revisions Kant made to the footnote to the Transcendental Aesthetic in the second (1787) edition of the first *Critique*. There he says it is only the 'most prominent sources' of judgements of taste that are empirical and cannot serve as 'determinate' *a priori* rules (Kant 1998: 173; CPR, B35). These revisions hold open the possibility that there might be some less prominent sources of judgements of taste that could serve as *a priori* rules, even if these rules are not entirely determinate. And this is exactly what we find in the third *Critique*, where Kant identifies the principle of purposiveness as the *a priori* principle of judgements of taste and insists that aesthetic judgement is an expression of the reflecting power of judgement, rather than the determining power of judgement.

It is not surprising to find that Kant's conception of aesthetics also changed dramatically after 1787. At the very beginning of the Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement in the third *Critique*, in the 'First Moment of the Judgement of Taste, Concerning its Quality', he contends that judgements of taste are 'aesthetic' because their 'determining ground cannot be other than subjective' (Kant 2000: 89; 5: 203). This distinguishes judgements of taste from cognitive and moral judgements, both of which are determined by objective principles. In the case of cognitive judgements, the principles in question include the pure concepts of understanding, but also the principles of pure sensibility. Kant explicitly states that 'any relation of representations ... even that of sensations, can be objective (in which case it signifies what is real in an empirical representation; but not the relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation' (Kant 2000: 89; 5: 203–4). The fact that he regards sensible representations as objective grounds of cognition also leads Kant to distinguish sensible pleasure from aesthetic pleasure. He identifies 'that which pleases the senses in sensation' as 'the agreeable'. Genuine aesthetic pleasure differs from the sensible pleasure of the agreeable, not only because aesthetic pleasure is disinterested but also because it is a subjective pleasure of the faculty of feeling, and not an objective satisfaction arising from the faculty of sensibility. Although he tended to conflate sensibility and feeling during the first two phases of his career, the new conception of aesthetics he defends in the third *Critique* requires him to separate them and to deny that the principle of sensible comprehension plays any role in aesthetics.

I would argue, in conclusion, that applying the methods that Clewis employs in *Origins* to aesthetics reveals that there are indeed important consistencies in Kant's conception of aesthetics during the three phases of his career despite some decisive changes in his views. From the beginning, Kant's conception of aesthetics was different from that of Baumgarten and Meier. His notes and the transcripts of his lectures show that, like his rationalist predecessors, Kant associated aesthetics with sensible cognition; however, he rejected their claim that sensible cognition is confused, and insisted, on the contrary, that sensible cognition is intuitive. Kant is also consistent in his insistence that the principles of judgements of taste are empirical, which leads him to deny that there can be a science of aesthetics, since the principles of any science must be rational and *a priori*. He continued to deny that aesthetics could be a science during the third phase of his career, even after he claimed to have discovered an *a priori* principle of (or principles for) judgements of taste – albeit for different reasons. In the third *Critique*, Kant denies that there can be a science of aesthetics because its principle is subjective, and related to the faculty of feeling, not because it is sensible and empirical.

Understanding this change in Kant's views is important for understanding the larger framework in which his positions on art, beauty, criticism, and taste are situated. The sources upon which Clewis draws in *Origins* and the methodology he employs are helpful for bringing this change into focus, so I think *Origins* has a great deal to offer readers concerned about the origins of Kant's conception of aesthetics as well as the themes that Clewis tracks throughout its chapters.

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