

Kantian Aesthetics : A Pragmatist Critique

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If Kant were a "confused pragmatist" can we lay any claim to his pragmatism as having a bearing on his aesthetics ?¹

We should first examine the pragmatic tools he used in a range determined by practical reason. Then we may profitably examine them in the range determined by aesthetic reason. The practical reason mainly accompanies the participation of human consciousness in the spatio-temporal order of facts. The nature of this participation remains, even at the level of practical reason, as well as of pure reason, indeterminate and confusing. But it becomes clearer at the level of aesthetic reason. But in another way, should question the nature of the spatio-temporal order of facts : what really *is*; and does it exist independently or is it dependent on human consciousness ? We should add a further epistemological question : does Kant's skepticism allow to ascertain the knowledge of this order, or of what really *is* ? Let us expand this question to the realm of aesthetic facts.

The categorical imperative of action, which is an absolute principle of action, applies practical reason in the realm of facts.² Via the laws of intellect, this reason can subject and reduce these facts to certainty. This certainty is valid, according to Kant, only as far as the phenomenal order is concerned; so, the very nature of this order remains, I imagine, unclear. The method implied by the aforementioned procedures is deducton. We should always bear in mind that such gaining of knowledge implies the experiencing of this order at the phenomenal facts.³ According to Kant, we are unable to pursue any truth-values at the level of the noumenal facts. But then, are not these values fallible ?

We could clarify such an issue if we refer to aesthetic values and to aesthetic experiences. As such, they imply within Kant's philosophy the ideal strain more than the empirical one. As a matter of fact they imply a more profitable strain, that is a creative one, taken from a pragmatic viewpoint.⁴

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If the aesthetic fact, in its spatio-temporal order is indeed beautiful, it does not really matter. What matters, indeed, is its interpretation as such.

At this point, we deem it necessary to open a parenthesis stating that we should deal cautiously with such terms as "interpretation." Its substance has been discussed *ad nauseam* through the history of ideas. We do not intend here to proceed toward an examination of the historical background as far as this substance is concerned. We could reduce, in fact, the whole value inquiry into such an examination calling into question the degree upon which values exist independently or dependently on human consciousness; something, here, logically unnecessary. Thus, we should tackle this inquiry only from a logical viewpoint. By the same token we should be aware of the classical Fregean differentiation between *Sinn* (meaning or sense) and *Bedeutung* (indication or reference), as these terms are sometimes translated to define the capability of consciousness to refer to things.⁶ Which is the particular sense qualifying a thing which could enable us to attribute a meaning to it? And, hence to interpret it?

Back to Kant again, since we differentiate aesthetic things—that is, things interpreted as such from the naturally beautiful ones, we refer to the term "interpretation" in a pragmatic sense. This sense implies that the ascertaining of any meaning to the aesthetic things presupposes their reconstruction, their recreation. This recreation, in order to be successful, has to be executed according to their very nature and through a plan of action of human consciousness. In such a view, principles determining such a procedure exist only to serve this success.

Likewise, we could scrutinize Kant's pragmatism in his doubts about the validity of aesthetic principles, regarding the noumenal order of things, especially the aesthetic ones. In view of such procedures, we need not repeat that Kant refutes any possibility of pure reason to expand our conceptual range thus far as to reach noumena, that is the things-in-themselves (what really *is*). It can only reach phenomena, that is, what they look like. In the same order of ideas, if this range could guarantee any certain knowledge, is due to the use of the aforementioned imperative of action. Again, such knowledge seems fallible even at the level of practical reason, since Kant was never clear if such use could guarantee our grasping of what really *is*, of the things-in-themselves. Such fruition is only expected after experiencing aesthetic things.

Are we then allowed to speak of knowledge in such a sense, since our empirical tools are overemphasized, and at the expense of ever accomplishing any analytic truth? It is only by aesthetic judgement that knowledge is, in a pragmatic sense, more certain and less fallible than knowledge gained by pure reason or practical reason.

On the grounds of induction, such a judgement does not imply any general principle or imperative; it implies, instead, each time, a qualitative assessment, a representation of the aesthetic objects themselves. We should here take into consideration the two systems of categorization of the objects in question, the system of the beautiful and that of the sublime (*The Critique of Judgement*, Books I-II). However, no particular and necessary sense could qualify these objects in order to be referable to the aforementioned categories.

Likewise, every sublime or beautiful aesthetic phenomenon (§ 58) is sublime or beautiful, according to Kant, because we feel that it is referable to each of these categories. The uniqueness which qualifies its form, each time, implies that any certainty of knowledge, before experiencing, sham; any attempt to evaluate it in this way would prove meaningless.

Kant does not easily repudiate his idealism; still, the aesthetic things in their order do not cease to exist virtually by the aforementioned categories, or tools of categorization. The knowledge thus rendered possible is due to the success of the aesthetic judgement regarding the representation, the reconstruction of the aesthetic objects in their spatio-temporal order.⁷ Such a judgement is true.⁸

If we call it in question as we did earlier we would lapse into a lazy skepticism. Wishing to avoid it we call into question the factitive action; a factor of utmost importance regarding the use of Kant's aesthetic theory. This could be then viewed as a theory trying to do justice to both aesthetic things and their reconstruction.⁹ And this could be due to the special nature of aesthetic things, a preeminently creational one.

Notes and References

1. Cf. James Feibleman, *An Introduction to Peirce's Philosophy* (London : Harper), p. 300.
2. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (London : Macmillan, 1985), pp. 20 ff.
3. Cf. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 13-26, 86.
4. Cf. William James, *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York : Longmans-Green, 1949), pp. 131-132.
5. Cf. Michael Proudfoot, "Aesthetics" in *An Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, eds. G. H. R. Parkinson, T. E. Burke, J. G. Cottingham, M. A. Proudfoot, J. E. Tiles (London : Routledge, 1988), pp. 831-856, esp p. 847 and n. 30.
6. Cf. Gottlob Frege, "Uber Sinn and Bedeutung", *Zeitschrift fur Philosophie and philosophische Kritik*, 100 (1892), pp. 25-50.
7. Cf. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (London : Longmans-Green, 1920), pp. 225 ff., esp. pp. 243-248; James, *Psychology, Briefer Course* (New York: Holt, 1910), pp. 335-350.
8. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 155-165.
9. Cf. T. E. Burke, "Science as Conjecture and Refutation" in *An Encyclopaedia, loc. cit.* pp. 205-224.