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Philosophical Theory of Goods

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**Taste, Subjectivity, and Music**

Immanuel Kant was well known for his Parisian style. He was a paradigm of high taste through his eloquent writing, extravagant parties, and elegant clothing. This was all highlighted in its comparison to the rest of Konigsberg, which was a model of the strictly utilitarian Prussian society. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant explores judgments of taste and their odd position of appearing to be universalizing without being a priori. In his treatment of taste, beauty is woven into the background of each inquiry and through beauty, its connection with morality. It is clear from Kant’s understanding of beauty (through the play of fine art, nature, and the sublime) that a moral element is always present. In his treatment of fine art Kant charges music without words to be one of the lowest pleasures of aesthetic judgment and lacking in beauty because it does not demonstrate its purposiveness towards nature. I argue that in his time music had not yet been used in a way purposive to anything but God in the western classical tradition, but shortly after Kant’s lifetime Beethoven and the Romantic school of music which followed him was entrenched in music that *did* represent nature in a new and profound way. I assert not just that romantic music would have made Kant revise his assessment of music, but that his encouragement for the representation of natural elements in music was one of the sparks that ignited this new age of music.

The *Critique of Judgement* is the third and final transcendental critique of Kant’s project. Although it was written last, it was far from being an afterthought. Rather, I believe that the work of Kant before the third critique demonstrate a trajectory to create the ground for a *Critique of Judgement*. These foundations were built in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the first *Critique* Kant develops a “Copernican Revolution”[[1]](#footnote-1) in which we don’t learn about the world through empirical knowledge or purely rational concepts, as had been the traditional debate. To settle where knowledge comes from, we must take a different viewpoint. This viewpoint is a human-perspective based theory of knowledge where the a priori manifold (of space and time) and the power of imagination make all understanding possible. The concepts provided in the categories enable us to use our reflective power of judgement. Therefore, all concepts, impressions, reasons, and judgements are informed by *a priori* faculties.

Why is judgment still in need of questioning after its exploration in the first *critique*? Because the importance of judgement can’t be established without the groundwork developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason.* Once we know how we can come to understand concepts in space and time, we will be able to determine how to judge those concepts. Therefore, a critique of pure reason was necessary for establishing the conditions of judgement. As Henry E. Allison explains it, “it is judgment’s legislation to feeling through judgments of taste concerning the beauty of objects of nature and art that makes a critique of judgment both possible and necessary… only if cognitive faculty lays claim to some *a priori* principle that it becomes the appropriate subject matter for a critique.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It is important to note that the goal of the three critiques is to challenge the dogma of the time that pure reason, through empirical knowledge, is the only way of knowing the world. Kant sees in this system of experience that freedom is nowhere to be found and where there is no freedom then there is no morality. Without the critiques we will have no basis of human freedom of which the second critique argues. The *Critique of Practical Reason* is the practical side of the first *critiques’* theoretical framework. We know which faculties we have in order to judge, and we know we have the freedom to make judgements, now we need to know what sorts of judgements they are and how they work. The *Critique of Practical Reason* gives the practical basis of a free will which is derived from the fact that we use such a faculty to legislate universal principles. These universal principles will be essential to the third *Critique* leading Pluhar to argue, “What needs a justification (deduction) is only the *a priori* claim of the judgment, the claim that the pleasure (and to this extent the judgement as well) has universal validity.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Claims of agreeableness are related to the faculty of judgement. This specifically means that when a claim of judgment is made that something is “good”, another idea established in the second *Critique,* Kant would suggest that such a judgement is referring to something agreeable i.e. that which invokes a pleasurable feeling. Because judgements of taste concern the difference between what is agreeable and what is artistically “good” they need to be set apart. The problem Kant is pointing out here is that the term “good” does not refer to a teleological judgment for example: a “good fridge” keeps food cold and a “good cow” eats grass and produces milk. He also does not mean “good” in terms of something morally good, although morality will enter conversation with the beautiful below. Instead, good is referring to a universal judgment that all people ought to find the same sorts of things to be agreeable. George Dickie classified the 18th Century as both the “Age of Reason” and the “Age of Taste”.[[4]](#footnote-4) During this period people were inclined to expect that judgments of taste were universal and that those without an appreciation for a certain piece of art simply lacked the required “sense of taste”. As Kant describes it himself “we require from everyone as a duty, as it were, the feeling in a judgment of taste.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This is the context in which Kant expects that judgments of taste need to be universal and thus, grounded in an *a priori* principle. This is because in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant explains that anything that is necessary and universal is connected to an *a priori* faculty.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is not a topic that should seem too foreign to modern readers because we are often stifled with indignation when others say that they hate our favorite film or song. It is as if the universal judgment of taste is part of what comprises our conception of self. The example of film and music taste today is a remnant of the Enlightenment values which were a great deal more relevant to judgments of taste in their time.

What is left for Kant is to explore different ways in which we interact judgments of taste. He starts by turning to the arts. Kant wants to find what distinguishes fine art from plain art. He claims that “I may look at a rose and make a judgment of taste declaring it to be beautiful. But if I compare many singular roses and so arrive at the judgment, Roses in general are beautiful, then my judgement is no longer merely aesthetic, but it is a logical one based on an aesthetic one.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is how we distinguish a judgment of taste “This rose is beautiful” as a reflective judgement about a quality of a specific item. To say that “all roses are beautiful” is to go further and universalize a quality in which all roses participate in. This means that all roses have a purposiveness towards beauty. This beauty is natural to roses and reports a fact about a product of nature i.e. a flower. Art on the other hand is not natural but appears to be natural, like a painting of a rose. In Kant’s words, “in all the visual arts…*design* is what is essential.”[[8]](#footnote-8) So long as art is designed to imitate nature, while intentionally not being nature, it can be classified as fine art. In this way a birdsong is not music because it is nature, not an art made intentionally to resemble nature whereas a piano can create fine art because it is a synthetic item which can never be truly natural. To go further when we judge fine art, we “become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This is where music as a fine art is questioned. Because it is not obvious that music is representing nature Kant proceeds as Paul Guyer here describes, “…following his reference to such natural objects as flowers, hummingbirds, and crustacea, Kant classifies such artifacts as "designs a la greque, foliage for frameworks or on wallpapers," and "fantasias" or "all music without texts" as paradigmatic works of fine art precisely because they signify nothing, represent nothing, no object under a determinate concept, and are free beauties.”[[10]](#footnote-10) If this is true of music then it is clear to the reader why music, although pleasing, is questionable in its purity as an artform.

Kant lived during the classical period of music. The classical period is epitomized by Mozart and Haydn. Classical music was an expansion of musical theme, form, and vocabulary from its predecessor the baroque period. Like its predecessor the music of the classical era played on the tension and release through cadences as its main artistic expression. However, it changed from the baroque period in that value was not placed in the complexity of the harmony and movement between voices, as characterized by Bach, but rather relied on simple harmony and beautiful melodies classified as “gallant” meaning, pleasing to listen to. It is no wonder that this art was not purposive to nature in Kant’s view! The music was also homophonic, meaning a single voice carried the melody and it was accompanied by an orchestra, small ensemble, or *pianoforte*. To say that this type of music was in any way representing nature would be a sever mischaracterization and Kant knows this. However, he cannot discount the play of imagination that takes place in the composition of this music by “genius” artists. Kant then proceeds to classify music in the least purposive, and thus least beautiful arts namely “The art of the beautiful play of sensations which… we may divide into the artistic play of the sensations of hearing and sight, and hence into *music* and the *art of color…* these [senses], are also capable of having a special sensation connected with that receptivity, a sensation about which is difficult to decide whether it is based on sense or on reflection…”[[11]](#footnote-11) While this may have classified the music of Kant’s time, he could not have predicted what this view of music would create in the latest student of the classical period, a genius in the Kantian sense if ever there were one, Ludwig Van Beethoven.

Beethoven was born in Bonn to a musical family. His father was the Kapellmeister in the court of the Elector of Cologne, as Beethoven would later be as well. He spent his early life singing at court and would have been very familiar with the music that Kant was referring to as non-purposive. However, during Beethoven’s life something changed significantly. He ushered in a new era of music, Romantic music. This would be the dominant style of music from 1798 to 1837 and is characterized by chromaticism, intense drama, and most importantly for this argument, programmatic music. Program music is precisely what Kant felt that music was lacking. It was music about nature. Program music was meant to directly reflect states of nature in its harmonic material and structure. Although nature had been explored in music during the baroque with Vivaldi’s “*Four Seasons”[[12]](#footnote-12)*, it became the dominant form of music making in the Romantic era. Instrumental music would be issued with program notes which described for the audience what they ought to listen for and how the music would recall a certain image or feeling. Not only did it show a purposiveness for natural beauty, but it also showed a purposiveness towards philosophy. Philosophical texts were treated to musical interpretations adding new metaphysical questions that would be taken up by post Kant philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger.

“It is from a reflection on what is common to these patterns of apprehension or schemata, combined with an abstraction from their differences, that one arrives at the concept…”[[13]](#footnote-13) This reflection as described by Allison is a perfect characterization of what Kant would see as understanding the purposiveness of the concept. Given the sounds and the written material involved in program music, when cognized with empirical sensations associated with a given schemata and then abstracted in the form of music, art that looks like nature, it is hard to see how music is any less fine than the art of painting or poetry. This is especially true regarding Kant’s own definition of fine arts given in §45 that, “fine art must have the look of nature even though we are conscious it is art. And a product of art appears like nature if, though we find it to agree quite *punctiliously* with the rules that have to be followed for the product to become what it is intended to be, it does not do so *painstakingly.* In other words, the academic form must not show; there must be no hint that the rule was hovering before the artist’s eyes and outing fetters on his mental powers.”[[14]](#footnote-14) It is important here to note that Kant deals with songs, music that accompanies poetry, as the same fine art of poetry which is why it is not being considered in this account of music as a refutation to Kant. But the romantic period sparked a new sort of poetry in music classified as *lieder* in which moral themes were often developed. This was most famously demonstrated by Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Hugo Wolff.

The moral philosophy explored in program music and lieder gives a particularly Kantian spin on romantic music. Part of this may be seen in the questions of sensory experience where music is concerned. Music is seen as a transcendental idea principle in that music does not exist in a physical manifestation much like geometry and physics. One qualification of fine art is also elucidated; it is clearer that music can be agreeable and that it can be fine art, but by participating in these can it also be beautiful? If what I argued above is true, that program music does make music which resembled nature, then it will count as a presentation of beauty in a judgment of sense according to Kant. “A natural beauty is a *beautiful thing*; artistic beauty is a *beautiful presentation* of a thing.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

It would be ignorant to assume that the shift to program music happened in a vacuum. The romantic tradition, as with all artistic movements, is a reaction to that which came before. Kant was likely the most prominent voice in German academics that a young Beethoven would have encountered.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is also clear from Beethoven’s personal journal that he was at least familiar with the work on Kant in his recitation of the conclusion to the *Critique of Practice Reason* in which he refers to “The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Kant’s influence on the age can also be captured in twin parables about Napoleon’s invasion of Germany. Famously, G.F. Hegel was writing his *Phenomenology of Spirit,* a reaction to Kantian philosophy, as canons roared outside carrying with them the flood of Napoleons French army.[[18]](#footnote-18) Beethoven had written his famous *Eroica* symphony[[19]](#footnote-19) and dedicated it to the famed general, but upon Napoleon’s invasion of Germany and the tyrannical practices that Napoleon practiced, Beethoven scratched out the dedication in the score and rebuked Napoleon.[[20]](#footnote-20) These cases demonstrate the influence of Kantian thought on the age proceeding him and how he was an influence on the German educational landscape. Both Hegel and Beethoven as products of a German education would have been read Kant in school as he was considered the greatest thinker of the age and foremost amongst the philosophers of the modern day. To a modern onlooker it may seem difficult to connect Kant with a musical tradition like romanticism, which is an age often associated with counter-Kantian argument, but Kant’s extream project of rejecting pure empirical research as the only means of knowledge opened the door for these romantics. Kant specifically ignited romantic interest through his third *Critique.* His movement to practical philosophy as relates to taste gave the taste savvy romantic philosophers legs to stand on.The project in the *Critique of Judgement* can be seen considering changing musical gestures and as a spark for further gestures in both art and philosophy. Paul Guyer best captures this when he states, “Kant begins by asserting that a work of art requires not just taste but "soul" or "spirit" (Geist).” By this he is referring to Geist in Kant’s definition, “Spirit in an aesthetic sense is the animating principle in the mind.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The Geist will go on in Romantic philosophy to be exactly that transcendental ideal which fuels meaning, freedom, and sociability.

Romantic music as classified above certainly would cause Kant to reconsider where music without poetry fits into the hierarchy of fine arts, but it is still worth considering if music can then be beautiful for Kant. This is necessary because providing for music’s legitimacy as a fine art the purposiveness towards nature must be the central focus. However, Kant distinguishes between kinds of beauty as well, “There is ‘free’ or ‘vague’ beauty, Kant says, and ‘accessory’ or ‘fixed’ beauty, beauty fixed by the concept of the thing’s purpose the concept of what the thing is (meant) to be.”[[22]](#footnote-22) With the Romantic music described Kant would classify music without words as ‘fixed’ beauty. Is this where music is forever destined to remain? Because nature oriented romantic music contained a concept (that of nature) and a purpose (imitation of nature while remaining unnatural) it fits the criteria that “beauty of which there can be all ‘ideal’ must involve a concept of the purpose of the beautiful thing…”[[23]](#footnote-23) Fixed beauty is then diminished by Kant when he asserts that “If we judge objects merely in terms of concept, then we lose all presentation of beauty.”[[24]](#footnote-24) There is an apparent tension in Kant as regards the beautiful, fine art, and the genius’ ability to make art. In the former beauty contains the concept of the purpose of the beautiful thing and in the latter Kant says that judging only using a concept will destroy the presentation of the beauty. This tension can be resolved by understanding that it is not that beauty contains no concept, in fact it requires one, but the concept and rules through which that concept is realized, must not be visible in the presentation. The presentation which can be called beautiful must look natural, even when if it is not. Music is uniquely suited to this beauty because in Guyer’s reading “…listening to music produces feelings of unity and wholeness in a manifold of ‘combining as well as changing impressions,’ and as stating that the feeling of ‘comfortable self-enjoyment,’ which is produced by the mind’s grasping all these impressions as unified without a rule, is a consequence of the awareness of such feelings”.[[25]](#footnote-25) This innerplay of awareness of a concept, nature, and harmony are necessary conditions for judging music as an fineart.

Traveling ahead in the history of western music the trajectory of music lends itself to free beauty in the music of the late 19th and 20th centuries through their shift in presentation. The performance of the music is an inspection of itself that is akin to Kant’s “purposiveness without a purpose”. The music of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg investigates its own structure through reflection and certainly seems to have a purpose in its performance but lacks a concept of which is aims to represent. It is purposive without a purpose. This style of music focus on balancing phrases with note values that create pictures within the music. This demonstrates the composition of the music and the score study to be where beauty is found. There is no classical tension and release, only recurrent sounds.

With the evidence of music’s ability to be among the highest of arts and a presentation of the beautiful, why did Kant himself not pay attention to the shifting musical character of his late life? Kant was highly interested in taste demonstrated in his lectures, his third *Critique,* his Parisian style of clothing, and the elegant parties he threw. I propose that his location and sensitivity to sound most likely led to his lack of experience with music.

First, being born in Protestant, Pietist Prussia it is reasonable to postulate an aversion to Catholic Viennese classical music where Beethoven’s innovations were being realized. Any concert in a *konzerthalle* or the Konigsberg Cathedral is unlikely to be enthusiastic about the emerging Viennese romantic tradition. Even if Kant were to attend the symphony, he may not have encountered the emerging romantic tradition because Beethoven was leading the charge at that time playing in Salons in Vienna. Beethoven’s genius could never be realized by Kant by mere proximity. Secondly, Kant reportedly had an extreme sensitivity to sound. He would often complain about the noise in the prison near where he lived. Someone with such a sensitivity would be unlikely to actively seek out music and the sensation of pleasure and the faculty of reflection make an unbiased, universal judgement on Kant’s part impossible.

Had Kant experienced a neurotypical hearing of romantic music at the end of his life and shortly after, his *Critique of Judgement* could not have relegated music to the lower of the fine arts, but instead would have realized that its artistic ability to demonstrate nature using purely manmade tools (instruments) classifies it among visual art and poetry as the highest of fine arts. This has been argued using Kant’s own terms and can be reconciled with the conceptions of fine art, the beautiful, judgements of taste, and agreeableness. A Kantian conception of music which I have indicated is likely to have influenced the shift in musical character in the long 1790s. Beethoven in this light is more clearly a genius in the Kantian sense because “*Judging* beautiful objects to be such requires taste; but fine art itself, i.e., *production* of such objects, requires *genius*.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Music then is not only representative of good, but through its connection with taste and the purpose of nature it is reflective of the morally beautiful. “The moral law within…” that Beethoven felt impelled to transcribe is seen in his music through his genius as a producer of fine art. “The stary heavens above” are the demonstration in nature that programmatic music of which Beethoven will advance.

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1. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* intro. Second Edition [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste,* pp.4, Cambridge [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pluhar, *Kant’s Account of Judgement of Taste*, lix, New York [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dickie, *The Century of Taste,* pp. 86-87, Chicago [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* Ak. 296, Prussia [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* B 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 225 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Ak 306 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Guyer, *Kant’s Conception of Fine Art, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* pp.276 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 324 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Vivaldi, *Four Seasons,* Op. 8, 1725 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste,* pp. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* Ak. 307 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* Ak. 311 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Swafford, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph,* New York [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* 162 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pinkard, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Introduction, xi [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Beethoven, Symphony no. 3 op. 55, *Eroica,* 1804 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Swafford, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* Ak 313 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pluhar, *Beauty and Fine Art,* lxvi [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Pluhar, *Beauty and Fine Art,* lxvi [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* Ak 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste,* pp. 100, Harvard [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* Ak 312 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)