Notes on Kant’s concepts of Universality and Purposiveness

Universality

Kant’s second condition for making judgments about beauty is that ‘the beautiful is that which pleases universally without concept’ (*ibid* §9). Kant’s notion of ‘concept’ refers here to our *a priori* understanding of a particular object. If we judge a rose to be beautiful, it should not be because we are aware of its attendant qualities, for example that it smells nice, or that it is pleasant to touch or that it grows at time of year or in a particular place for which we have some affection. Kant’s perspective here is quite distinct from that of Hume. Whereas Hume would suggest that there are ‘certain qualities’ of the rose that prompt the well-trained eye to perceive it as beautiful, Kant argues that such judgments are problematic because they depend upon the viewer ‘bringing the object under a concept’:

‘… Through the judgment of taste (on the beautiful) one ascribes the satisfaction in an object to everyone yet without grounding it on a concept… this claim to universal validity belongs so essentially to a judgment by which we declare something to be beautiful that without thinking this it would never occur to anyone to use this expression, rather everything that pleases without a concept would be counted as agreeable… no-one expects assent to his judgment of taste of anyone else, although this is always the case in judgments of taste about beauty. I can call the first the taste of the senses, the second the taste of reflection’ (§8).

Agreement on the aesthetic qualities of an image or object is therefore neither a matter of personal taste nor dependent upon our understanding of its essential nature: the rose cannot be called beautiful simply because it *is* a rose. In order to explore the condition of universality it is interesting to compare the two images below.

Fig 3.7 Hira’s image
It is possible to describe these two images, shared by students during a discussion on beauty, in a way that would make them sound similar. They are both photographs of a mother and her daughter; there is an informal feel to each of the images, a sense that the anticipated audience for each is limited to the family, while the palette of colours in each image is largely restricted to a narrow band of oranges, greys and browns. Yet the photographs are very different. Though each was greeted warmly by the students, it’s fair to say that one left a far stronger impression upon them than the other. Hira’s image, borrowed from a family album, featured herself as a baby, held by her mother on a summer’s day. Mother and daughter each look to their left, smiling at someone other than the photographer – perhaps another photographer - while the Volkswagen Beetle behind them suggests their recent arrival or imminent departure. Hira described how she had chosen the image to evoke the time in which it was taken, to represent the nature of the relationships within her family and to celebrate the sense of continuity offered by the photograph, now displayed in her family home. The combination of these factors, she explained, made it beautiful to her - though she did not expect that others would agree. This is a comment that we will return to when we consider the last of Kant’s four conditions.

When it came to Lottie’s turn to describe her image, displayed on a screen at the front of the room, she promptly burst into tears. This was a response that might have suggested that Lottie’s reasons for selecting the image, like those articulated by Hira, were very personal, and it should logically have followed, therefore, that the universal appeal of the image would be limited. However, the photograph was quickly recognised by many students as having qualities that distinguished it from the other images and, while it may not have conformed to their preconceived ideas about beauty, it was instantly agreed – there were audible gasps in the room – that it was beautiful. Lottie’s tearful pause prompted several people to offer reasons why they thought it was beautiful and, while she was too modest to expect agreement from her peers,
she was not unduly surprised by their responses. Many of us, she reasoned, are able to recall
the sensation of the warmth of a parental bed we enjoyed as children. Although, no-one else
in the room could be moved by the image in quite the way that she was, most people would
have appreciated that the image might prompt an emotional reaction from someone intimately
connected with it. Kant would suggest, however, that the reason for the universality of the
response was not dependent upon people’s ability to identify with such an experience -
otherwise, they would have responded in a similar way to Hira’s photograph, which essentially
depicts a similar experience. There was, he would have argued, an additional layer of aesthetic
experience brought into play by Lottie’s photograph, one that involves not only ‘the taste of
the senses’ but also ‘the taste of reflection’. This capacity for reflection involves not only
understanding but also imagination – concepts that are central to Kant’s third condition for the
beautiful, that of purposiveness.

Purposiveness

So far, it might be assumed that the process of applying Kant’s conditions for judging
something to be beautiful is one designed to restrict, rather than enrich, our experiences of
beauty and that if we were to maintain such a rigorous stance towards our aesthetic experience
we would find that fewer things are beautiful than we once thought. Kant addresses this
cconcern in the Critique through the introduction of the condition of ‘purposiveness’.

Contemporary interpretations of purposiveness would be connected with a use, a
purpose or a determination. However, Kant’s notion of purposiveness relates to one of the
central ideas in the Critique, specifically the interplay in the human mind between imagination
and understanding (ibid §17). Whereas the first two conditions for judgments of beauty could
be described as negative in their conception – something can only be beautiful if I have no
personal interest in judging it to be so, or this is beautiful to me - the third condition is framed
more positively in that Kant highlights a specific and gratifying element of the experience of
beauty. The idea proposed by Kant has a striking clarity, summarised by Savile (2006) as
follows: ‘A beautiful object is one which in virtue of its particular form lends itself to engaging
the two active cognitive faculties of the mind – imagination and understanding – in such a way
as to cooperate in a notably harmonious and satisfying fashion’ (2006:445). The role played
by understanding in the experience of beauty is to make sense of the visual material presented
to the mind by referring to previous experiences of similar material – while the role played by
imagination is to make connections with features of the image that are absent but implied. In
the process, the question of the extent to which the image is an accurate representation of some
aspect of real life becomes irrelevant compared with the experience in which the viewer
becomes engaged: whether the beautiful object represented actually exists or not is immaterial
to their perceptions of its beauty.

With these ideas in mind, it is interesting to return to the pair of family photographs.
Analysing the details of Hira’s image, it is to some extent possible to use our understanding of
what we can see to inform our imagination. The process of decoding the image is likely to lead
us to conclude that it represents a mother and child beginning or ending a journey, which may
evoke in us thoughts and emotions associated with themes of love, time, distance and
separation. But the chain of mental associations soon stops. We are intrigued to some extent
by the possible pathways taken by the subjects of the photograph, but it is easy to become
distracted by elements of the image that make little or no contribution to the quality of our
aesthetic experience: the vertical white line to the left of the image, for example, or the sense
that the car door is given equal prominence in the composition as the mother and child. The
beauty of the photograph is entirely dependent upon the viewer’s perception and understanding
of the loving relationship between the mother and child; there is little in the image to sustain
the viewer’s attention on a purely aesthetic level. Once the image has been read and its story
told, there is no reason to dwell any further upon it: the interplay between experience and
imagination comes to an end.

Before turning to Lottie’s photograph, it is useful to pause for a moment to reflect on
the term ‘aesthetic’, one used frequently throughout this chapter and in the title of the first
section of Kant’s Critique (Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment). Kant’s use of
the word is likely to have been influenced by that of Baumgarten, who appropriated it from the
Greek to denote ‘things perceived by the senses’ (rather than the mind) a definition that roughly
equates with ‘feeling’ (hence its antonym, anaesthetic). Kant’s notion of aesthetic, therefore,
relates to his assertion that judgments concerning taste are ‘entirely subjective and quite
uninformative about the object’ (Savile 2006:442). A definition of aesthetics that highlights
the role of feelings has a particular resonance when engaging with an image such as Lottie’s
photograph. While it is possible to identify an initial set of specific visual features that make
the photograph beautiful, such as the representation of a relationship between a mother and
child, there is also a second set of features, the qualities of which are more difficult to articulate
but that nonetheless make a crucial contribution towards the viewer’s perception of the image.
These features are inextricably linked with the experiences that viewers themselves bring to
the photograph and emerge from the ‘harmonious interplay between imagination and
understanding’.

The viewer’s initial level of engagement with Lottie’s photograph involves ‘reading’
information about the scene: two people are in bed, a woman and a small child. The context
in which the image was presented enabled its audience of students to quickly deduce that the
child in the photograph was Lottie and that the woman was almost certainly her mother. So
far, this description could also be applied to Hira’s image. But as soon as we move beyond the
description of these initial elements, Lottie’s photograph begins to assume qualities that
distinguish it from the Hira’s image. The aesthetic qualities that initially attract the viewer’s
attention begin to sustain a deeper level of engagement as the imagination becomes engaged
by details that conceal as much as they reveal. Much of the image is shrouded in darkness
while the two faces are illuminated by a lamplight. Some of the objects that surround the faces
- a lamp, a bowl, a corner of a table - are easily identifiable, while others – semi-circles of light,
a dark rectangle in the corner – are less distinct. Closer inspection prompts further reflection:
each detail of the photograph adds another layer of recognition that feels like an additional
layer of warmth. The fine texture of the cotton sheet contrasts with that of the heavy woollen
blanket covering the child and the soft, embroidered fragment she holds to her face. The
dark space to the left of the picture contrasts with the collection of abstract shapes to the right, each
of which generates or reflects light. Blurred shapes in the foreground reveal themselves as a
lamp, a cup, an acoustic guitar. The eyes of the woman and child gaze directly at the camera,
at the person holding the camera, and our understanding leads our imagination to identify this
person as the missing part of the picture, the father. While these details of the image are all
present from the moment the viewer encounters it, they do not immediately resonate with the
viewer until the ‘free play’ of the imagination is engaged.

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