

A Kantian Critique of Positive Aesthetics of Nature

I. INTRODUCTION

Readers of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* can readily observe that upon introducing aesthetic judgment, Kant then proceeds to focus almost exclusively on positive aesthetic judgment. At issue, then, is the question: are negative judgments possible in the Kantian framework?

In the field of environmental aesthetics an analogous issue exists. Environmental philosophers adhering to the position of positive aesthetics claim that only positive aesthetic evaluations are appropriate for "virgin" nature;¹ negative judgments are, for the most part, inappropriate and even incoherent.² Defenders of this position concede that it appears counterintuitive, but they take comfort in the somewhat surprising number of environmental philosophers who in fact adhere to some version of this position.³

This paper will first examine whether negative judgments are possible within a Kantian framework and then apply these results to the position of positive aesthetics of nature. While Kant is not the sole arbiter of truth in matters of aesthetics, his aesthetic theory is fundamental to the field. Any irreconcilable point of contention between Kant and positive aesthetics therefore poses an important challenge, either to positive aesthetics or to Kant's own aesthetic theory. Juxtaposing the two passages below gives the flavor of the contention:

There is no science of the beautiful, but only critique; and there is no fine science, but only fine art. For in a science of the beautiful, whether or not something should be considered beautiful would have to be decided scientifically, i.e., through bases of proof, so that if a judgment about beauty belonged to science then it would not be a judgment of taste.

—Immanuel Kant⁴

Scientific knowledge is essential for appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature; without it we do not know how to appreciate it appropriately and are likely to miss its aesthetic qualities and value. Thus if this account is correct, it explains the ability of science to both promote and enhance aesthetic appreciation of the natural world.

—Allen Carlson⁵

To be fair, an important distinction is to be made. Proponents of positive aesthetics of nature often willingly concede that negative aesthetic judgments are appropriate to works of art, because of the kind of thing that they are: they are made by human artists whose work is subject to the critique of their audience. What positive aestheticians of nature contend is that judgment plays little or no role in evaluating nature and objects of nature because of the kind of thing they are.

That is, they claim, for various reasons, that the only appropriate response to nature and natural objects is appreciation and acceptance of nature for what it is.

I contend that negative aesthetic judgments of nature are possible, and suggest that the type of appreciation positive aestheticians of nature are talking about is better called simply appreciation, or scientific understanding of nature, but not *aesthetic* appreciation.

II. KANT'S AESTHETICS

A full exposition of Kant's aesthetics is beyond the scope of this paper, but a few key elements need to be highlighted. First, an aesthetic judgment for Kant is a judgment based on feelings of pleasure or displeasure. The problem is that after telling the reader as much, Kant proceeds to focus almost exclusively on feelings of pleasure. This need not mean that aesthetic judgment must only deal with feelings of pleasure, however, because Kant explicitly states that judgments can also be based on feelings of displeasure.

Second, Kant firmly distinguishes between cognitive judgments and aesthetic judgments. For Kant, aesthetic judgment is based on feeling, not cognition; aesthetic judgment is different from logical judgment. These two points come together in the following passage:

If we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not use understanding to refer the presentation to the object so as to give rise to cognition; rather, we use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure.⁶

Also important for our investigation here is Kant's notion of "purposiveness." What Kant means here is that for an object to appear beautiful to me, it must appear to be purposeful, but without my knowing the object's specific purpose. If I understand the object's purpose, then I am likely to judge it according to a concept. I will set this object against my understanding of what a "good" object of this kind should be like. For Kant, this departs from aesthetic judgment and enters into the domain of cognitive judgment.

Commentators point out that Kant balances two different sequences of thought. On the one hand, Kant bases judgments of beauty on feelings independent from concepts, therefore making them impossible to prove; yet on the other hand, he emphasizes disinterestedness, and he claims that judgments of beauty are universal; therefore seemingly leading to the conclusion that aesthetic judgment is analogous to cognitive judgment. Kant's solution to this problem rests on his description of the "free play" of imagination and understanding. Hannah Ginsborg explains this as follows: "Rather than perceiving the object as green or square, the subject whose faculties are in free play responds to it perceptually with a state of mind which is non-conceptual, and specifically a feeling of disinterested pleasure."⁷ It is this state of free play that Kant considers to be universally communicable.

The problem is that the feeling of pleasure is heavily privileged, and Ginsborg admits that Kant "has very little to say about the judgment that an object is not beautiful, or about the displeasure associated with judging an object to be ugly."⁸ With this in mind, we will turn to an exchange between David Shier and Christian Wenzel about the possibility of negative aesthetic judgments in Kant's aesthetic theory. First, however, we shall sketch out the positive aesthetics of nature position, to which we will apply the insights gleaned from Kant.

III. POSITIVE AESTHETICS OF NATURE

Positive aesthetics, particularly the brand espoused by Allen Carlson, is wedded to a cognitive approach that is in large part a reaction against aesthetic theories such as Kant's. The prime points of contention are Carlson's rejection of "disinterestedness" and his appreciation of formal characteristics, with a turn toward accounting for information related to the object under consideration and appreciating objects "for what they really are."⁹ So for nature, this means a rejection of what Carlson would deride as a *scenic* appreciation of formal qualities in a landscape, in favor of what he would call an authentic form of appreciation that necessarily entails knowledge of what it is one is engaging, applying the knowledge of natural sciences to the objects in question.¹⁰

Essentially, Carlson takes Kendall Walton's position in "Categories of Art" and applies that framework to the natural world.¹¹ Walton argues that facts about a work of art are essential to proper aesthetic judgment of the work.¹² To accurately appreciate a piece of art, you must situate that work within appropriate categories. Walton's example of Picasso's *Guernica* demonstrates that if we view the piece within a certain category it appears violent and dynamic; viewed within another category it appears dull and lifeless.¹³ Walton contends there is a *correct* way to view the piece, and that this correct view yields the most accurate aesthetic appreciation of the object.

Just as "categories of art" exist, Carlson suggests "categories of nature" also exist.¹⁴ In art, the categories are informed by art history and criticism, whereas categories in nature are informed by natural history and science.¹⁵ One of his examples is the humpback whale: viewed as a fish it might appear "oafish," but viewed in its correct category as a mammal, it appears "majestic."¹⁶

To aesthetically appreciate nature according to appropriate categories is the *correct* way to do so, according to positive aestheticians of nature; doing so reveals that the natural world has positive aesthetic qualities: "All virgin nature, in short, is essentially aesthetically good. The appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive and negative aesthetic judgments have little or no place."¹⁷

Now let's turn our attention to whether negative aesthetic judgments have any place in Kant's aesthetics and determine how this might help in evaluating the positive aesthetics position.

IV. KANT AND UGLINESS

In "Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly," David Shier argues for the impossibility of negative aesthetic judgments within Kant's aesthetic theory. He points to two passages in which Kant opens the possibility for negative judgments.

In order to distinguish whether anything is beautiful *OR NOT* we refer the representation, not by the understanding to the object for cognition, but by the imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure *OR PAIN*.¹⁸

Taste is the faculty of judging an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction *OR DISSATISFACTION*. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*.¹⁹

Shier wonders why discussion of negative judgments is conspicuously absent from the rest of Kant's text; he considers the possibility that Kant sees the two judgments as analogous to the point that treating negative judgments would simply duplicate his discussion of positive ones. If this is Kant's approach, Shier argues, it doesn't hold—and in fact, negative judgments are impossible.

Why wouldn't Kant's treatment of positive judgments transfer to negative ones? The answer is found in what Shier calls the "central riddle of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful,'" which is the tension between the existence of a subjective judgment not based on concepts and the universally binding nature of that judgment.²⁰ The solution to this dilemma is that it's the state of mind of the subject that is universally communicable—the "free play of the imagination."²¹

Shier's argument hinges upon his ability to demonstrate that Kant always thinks this state of free play is pleasurable; if this is the case, then there is no room for negative judgments. Shier contends that this free play is always bound up with pleasure and that it cannot be otherwise in Kant. Shier points to a few passages in Kant in which he believes he finds evidence for his position, such as the following: "Hence it is the universal capability of communication of the mental state in the given representation which, as the subjective condition of the judgment of taste, must be fundamental and must have the pleasure in the object as its consequence."²² Shier concludes his essay, "Since harmonious free play is always pleasurable, and since all judgments of taste are accompanied by harmonious free play, it follows that every judgment of taste must be accompanied by the feeling of pleasure in the subject... Therefore, within Kant's aesthetics, and contrary to the obvious fact of the matter, negative judgments of taste about free beauty are quite impossible."²³

Christian Wenzel responds to this argument in his article "Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?" He follows Shier's supposition that positive and negative judgments are analogous for Kant, but does not agree that this necessarily rules out negative judgments. He argues that Shier overemphasizes harmony and fails to consider the possibility of a parallel case of aesthetic disharmony.

He introduces the positive reality of negative judgments, or, one could say, a positive reality of ugliness (as opposed to the mere absence of beauty). He finds precedent for this in other writings from Kant, specifically Kant's *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*, found in *Theoretical Philosophy*. Here Kant gives examples of negative realities and specifically refers to the beautiful and the ugly; he says, "Displeasure has its positive grounds as much as pleasure."²⁴

This raises the possibility of a positive reality for negative judgments. Indeed, Wenzel translates Kant as claiming, "Ugliness is thus something positive, not merely lack of beauty, but the existence of something opposite to beauty."²⁵ Wenzel thus asserts it is "reasonable to expect Kant to have believed in *a priori* grounds for *negative* judgments of taste as well as he did regarding positive judgments of taste."²⁶

Wenzel also introduces what he calls "negative purposiveness," whereby something can be judged as ugly. He argues that just as an object may induce pleasure in me accompanied by the free play of imagination, so too an object can strike me as ugly and I can respond with displeasure. This results not in harmony, but rather disharmony. Just as we can engage in a pleasurable and harmonious free play of the imagination, so too can we engage in an unpleasant, disharmonious free play.

Wenzel considers a third, neutral case, which would occur when we encounter an object that sparks neither a harmonious free play nor a disharmonious free play. Though this neutral case seems only something of an afterthought for Wenzel, I find it very instructive. That there could be positive, negative, and neutral judgments seems to map onto our intuitive thoughts on the matter. I submit that for the most part our encounters with objects are neutral; most objects we encounter in our daily experience do not present themselves to us as objects for aesthetic consideration. It takes something to shock us out of the neutral in either a positive or a negative manner. For example, I am walking down the street and reflexively (not reflectively!) divert my path to avoid stepping on the rotting possum corpse engulfed with flies. This, I would say, is a disharmonious free play. Or, to the contrary, I stop in my tracks on my ordinary route upon encountering a particularly beautiful smell of flowers in a nearby garden, or the pleasant smell of the rain beginning to fall on the cement sidewalk. This is a harmonious free play.

V. THE ARGUMENT AGAINST THE POSITIVIST CONCLUSION

I consider it legitimate to hold that there can be positive and negative judgments within Kant's framework, as well as a neutral position. Furthermore, I think these three positions can apply to our aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, as an olfactory example will demonstrate. The senses of sight and sound are often privileged in the aesthetics of art; but when we are dealing with nature, scent plays a large role.

I love the smell of the first drops of rain as they fall on the street on a warm spring or summer day.²⁷ This is a free-play response to the smell, not informed by scientific concepts. I do not positively value this scent because I know how the warm concrete is reacting to the cool raindrops that fall on its surface. In fact, if I reflect upon it, I might be more inclined to devalue the scent: because, from an environmental perspective, it might seem better not to have so much of the earth's surface paved. Yet this is not my aesthetic reaction to the smell. My aesthetic response is positive, even if my cognitive afterthought is negative.

The converse is a repulsive smell. When I drive my daughter to her preschool in the morning, there is one spot where I frequently smell the distinctive odor of a skunk. I react negatively to this odor, and in a Kantian manner, I expect everyone else to react similarly. The very value of this biological adaptation lies in its repulsiveness. It is a well-known defense mechanism to discourage would-be predators from attacking the skunk. When I understand the value of this defense mechanism, I might marvel at the many ways species have adapted to their role as predator or prey and appreciate the value of this offensive odor to the skunk's survival. That is, I can categorize it in the manner Carlson speaks of, and come to a certain appreciation of the smell. Importantly, however, this does not alter my aesthetic response to the smell and henceforth *make* the smell beautiful to me in later encounters. No, it is just that I have acquired a greater appreciation for the smell and the role it plays within this environment. That is, I have come to have a greater appreciation for the smell, but not a greater aesthetic appreciation; I still judge the smell negatively when I encounter it. The scent is still ugly, or perhaps better described as foul, since we often use "ugly" for what we perceive visually. On a scientific level, I am awed by this capacity of the skunk, but on an aesthetic level I react with distaste.

Thus I think negative aesthetic judgments of nature are legitimate, not merely a matter of a person's being misinformed and failing to appreciate nature "correctly." This leads us to a related point of contention between Kantian aesthetics and positive aesthetics of nature, which is that positive aesthetics of nature, on a Kantian understanding, is not aesthetics at all. It does not engage in aesthetic judgments of beauty, but rather in cognitive evaluations of ecological goods, evaluations that override negative aesthetic responses. The beauty positive aesthetics purports to locate in a particular object in nature is not beauty for Kant, because it falls under a certain concept. For it to be appreciated as "beautiful," one must be informed of certain scientific concepts; only then does the ordinary become *transformed* into something beautiful. This is not aesthetic judgment for Kant. Kant's understanding of aesthetic appreciation has more to do with what we perceive sensually and how that sparks the free play of the imagination, which is prior to the application of any concepts. Kant separates cognitive from aesthetic judgment where positive aestheticians of nature clearly want to roll them together.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what the analysis above means for aesthetics is that we are compelled, then, either to say that positive aesthetics fails as an aesthetic theory or to throw out Kantian aesthetics and

embrace a central role for cognition in aesthetics. I suspect the latter will be perfectly palatable to some, but if aesthetic judgment and cognitive judgment are to be so intermixed, it begs the question of just what actually distinguishes aesthetics from aesthetic judgment.

I do find value in the positive aesthetics of nature position—just not aesthetic value. I think the model is essentially correct: enhanced and accurate scientific knowledge of an animal or an ecosystem can certainly increase one's appreciation for that object. However, I'm not convinced this is accurately called *aesthetic* appreciation. I would like, with Kant, to be able to differentiate between an aesthetic judgment and a cognitive one.

Rather than concluding that Kant's aesthetics and positive aesthetics are necessarily contradicting theories, one possible way forward is to suggest that while a science of aesthetic appreciation is undesirable and inappropriate, Kant's framework may accommodate scientific knowledge within aesthetic judgment and appreciation. What I mean by this is that while it would still be inappropriate to utilize concepts to assist us in determining whether a certain object is beautiful, our knowledge and life experiences do naturally shift the way we perceive the world. In this respect, then, when I have a positive or negative aesthetic experience, I may be inclined—post-aesthetic-judgment—to take an interest in that object. The knowledge gleaned from these experiences may shift how I approach similar objects in the future; not in the sense that I apply this scientific knowledge in the process of future judgments, but in the sense that it alters my outlook and thereby changes how likely the object is to spark the free play of my imagination. Acquiring scientific knowledge, then, may foster appropriate aesthetic experiences in the future. And this is relevant, because both Kant and positive aestheticians like Carlson are interested in *correct* aesthetic judgments and appreciation.

While this approach may ameliorate apparent tension between Kant's aesthetics and aspects of scientific cognitivist approaches, it does not ameliorate the tension between Kant's aesthetics and positive aesthetics; in fact it may serve to reinforce the points of conflict. To return to the skunk example, if I have a negative aesthetic response to smelling a skunk's spray, and I later search out scientific information pertaining to the odor, this will likely serve to confirm my noncognitive aesthetic response to the odor. The offensive odor is the skunk's biological defense mechanism to fend off predators; and so, in a sense, I was correct to find the smell offensive. A negative aesthetic judgment as the most appropriate and correct response to a natural object does indeed pose a problem for positive aesthetics.

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¹ "Virgin" nature is defined as nature that has not been altered by human hands.

² Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 72.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 172.

⁵ Carlson, 90.

⁶ Kant, 44.

⁷ Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 2, 2005; <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/> (accessed November 11, 2007).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, eds., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (New York: Broadview Press, 2004), 16.

- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The analytic tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
- ¹²Ibid., 143.
- ¹³Ibid., 147.
- ¹⁴Carlson, 89.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 72.
- ¹⁸Kant, 37. Shier's emphasis.
- ¹⁹Kant, 45. Shier's emphasis.
- ²⁰David Shier, "Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 4 (October 1998), 415.
- ²¹Ibid.
- ²²Kant, 51.
- ²³Shier, 418.
- ²⁴Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 180–81.
- ²⁵Christian Wenzel, "Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39, no. 4 (October 1999), 418.
- ²⁶Ibid., 419.
- ²⁷An objection may be raised that this is not an example from "virgin" nature, and thus not under the purview of the positive aesthetic position. Rather than seeing this as a convincing objection, I find this to be a serious weakness of the position, one that relegates it to the fringes of irrelevancy. "Virgin" nature—that is, nature that is *untouched by human hands*—exists in very few places, if at all. Think of the American settlers who looked upon vast swaths of what they considered "wild" land, which in fact consisted of actively utilized cultural landscapes of the native populations who had been inhabiting those lands. Or think of global climate change, in which through our local actions we alter remote "pristine" and "virgin" locations. If we allow there are virgin landscapes, this certainly doesn't help us—in the United States at least—deal with the vast majority of our interactions with the natural world.

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