The Topic of the Judgement of Beauty

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A short critical response to Hannah Ginsborg’s book, The Normativity of Nature, in which I raise some questions about how to understand the idea that calling something beautiful is a form of praise of that thing.

The back cover of Hannah Ginsborg’s book The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant’s Critique of Judgement says:

Most philosophers have taken the importance of Kant’s Critique of Judgement to lie primarily in its contributions to aesthetics and to the philosophy of biology. Hannah Ginsborg, however, sees the Critique of Judgement as representing a central contribution to the understanding of human cognition more generally.

This is certainly a just description of the distinctive ambitions of the book and what is exciting about the sophisticated interpretation Ginsborg gives of Kant’s great text, but, as a philosopher with more grounding in aesthetic concerns than in Kant scholarship, I feel this description risks doing scant justice to Ginsborg’s contribution to aesthetics itself. The appearance of Ginsborg’s book bringing together these essays is particularly gratifying for me in that there is no writer on Kant from whom I have learned more about how Kant’s third Critique matters to specifically aesthetic concerns. Her writings on this text have always stood out for me for their steadfast concern to be faithful to aesthetic experience and judgement, as well as for the systematic reading of the third Critique in the context of Kant’s general theory of judgement. The issues I raise here will centre on the nature of the judgement of beauty and whether it is captured in the formulations Kant gives it, plus I raise some questions as to whether what I consider the proper understanding of this form of judgement is consistent with the wider role in the understanding of cognition generally that Kant gives to it on Ginsborg’s reading.

For Kant, to call something beautiful [schön] as opposed to merely agreeable [angenehm] is to claim ‘universal agreement’ with one’s judgement, even though the basis of one’s judgement is a subjective feeling of pleasure and does not have the grounding in a concept that would enable one to prove or demonstrate the validity of one’s judgement to others. I am in strong agreement with Ginsborg in her understanding this claim to universal agreement to be distinct from a mere prediction of similar responses in others and to express a kind of normative ‘requirement’ of such agreement. In calling something beautiful I do not only say that it is likely to be a cause of pleasure in others, but that it merits such a response of pleasure from all others (23). For Ginsborg, the judgement of beauty has a self-referential character that is part of the explanation of one of Kant’s central claims that, while this judgement is subjective (being based on a feeling of pleasure) and lacks the backing of a concept for a cognitive justification, it may nonetheless claim ‘universal validity’:
For Kant, my awareness is not simply the awareness that the object merits a certain general kind of pleasure. Rather it is the awareness that the object merits a very specific feeling of pleasure: namely the very feeling of pleasure that I am experiencing now. (31)

For Kant the judgement of beauty is subjective in at least two senses. It is grounded in pleasure and unlike other feelings (perhaps sensations of heat or colour) pleasure ‘does not involve a representation being referred to an object’ (43). And further, the judgement of beauty involves the application of no concept to the object, which would normally be the ground of a judgement’s claim to objectivity and its status as a genuine cognition.

Nonetheless, on Ginsborg’s reading, the faculty of aesthetic judgement reveals to us a ‘primitive normativity’, a self-referring sense of appropriateness of our response that is the ground of its claim to universal validity. While it is aesthetic experience that reveals to us this ‘primitive normativity’, its discovery is not merely of aesthetic significance for it is in fact a necessary presupposition of any cognition whatsoever (115). Here Ginsborg makes good on Kant’s claim that the *Critique of Judgment* in some way completes the critical project itself, and is not simply a contribution to philosophical aesthetics (and teleological judgement). As she puts it in her ‘Introduction’:

> Very briefly put, … if cognition is to be possible, our natural perceptual and imaginative responses to the world must incorporate a primitive claim to their own normativity: a claim which, while legitimate, is not itself cognitive, and so does not admit of cognitive justification. … The insight I ascribe to Kant is that, in responding as we do to the objects which affect our senses, we take—and are entitled to take—our responses to stand in a normative relation to those objects, and more specifically to be appropriate to them. (4)

In the context of cognition generally (and with particular reference to Wittgenstein on rule-following), it is this primitive normativity that makes for the difference between understanding our basic natural responses as ‘blind impulses’ and seeing them as including a tacit sense of their own ‘rightness’ or ‘appropriateness’:

> If my interpretation of Kant’s conception of aesthetic judgement in section II is correct, then judgements of beauty have the same presumption of legitimacy which characterizes the claims implicit in the primitive reactions underlying our cognitive judgements. Because pleasure in an object’s beauty is the consciousness of the appropriateness of our imaginative response to the object, we have the same default entitlement to claim that all others ought to share our response to the object as we do in the case of our response to the pointing hand and the number series. And this is what I take to be the force of Kant’s argument for the possibility of taste. (130)

What the possibility of aesthetic judgement shows is that we can have a ‘default entitlement’ in both kinds of case to our sense of the validity or legitimacy of our response. With respect to the sense of ‘requirement’ or ‘meriting’, the only difference between the judgement of beauty and that of an ordinary empirical judgement ‘is that it is a feeling of pleasure, rather than the application of a concept, which we take to be required of those who perceive the object’ (114).
What this seems to show is that, on the Kantian account presented here, the normativity of the judgement of beauty is restricted to the primitive ‘rightness’ or ‘appropriateness’ of one’s response to the object and does not express any praise or admiration of the beautiful object itself. But, when a sunset or a painting is called beautiful, this is surely meant to express praise or admiration for the sunset or the painting itself, finding in it a form of excellence that we may lack the words or the concepts for. In saying that my response of pleasure (tenderness, awe, exhilaration) is merited by the sunset or the painting, I mean to be appealing to that which is admirable in the sunset or painting itself and saying that what I am responding to in it deserves the pleasure and admiration of anyone. This, in any case, is how I understand the claim to universal validity in the judgement of beauty, insofar as it is distinguished from a predictive claim about the responses of other people.

The ‘primitive normativity’ Ginsborg finds in aesthetic judgement is the same as that which is said to be part of the basis of ordinary empirical judgement, such as the application of the concept ‘dog’ to a particular creature or the continuation of a number series in a particular way (122). These are non-conceptual, natural responses but which carry within them an approval of themselves as appropriate in their circumstances. Once I have a concept of ‘dog’, I will approve of my synthesizing and reproducing activity which accords with the concept ‘dog’ and stands as a rule for how objects of that kind should be experienced. (And perhaps this self-approval contributes to the ‘self-maintaining’ of that mental activity with respect to the dog before me.) In the cognition of a dog, however, I am not approving of the dog itself, but only of the accord between my mental activity and how the object should be cognized. Unlike the judgement of beauty, there is no praise of the dog in my reflective consciousness of the correctness of my apprehension of it. We can see such responses as reflectively approving of themselves, but such normativity implies nothing in the way of approval or evaluative response with respect to the object of such a response. The same normativity (‘the same “ought”’) applies to ordinary cognitive judgement, anywhere there are standards of correctness for judgement, where there is no implication that the thing being judged is being approved of or found to be appropriate. But praise of the ‘rightness’ of the object itself is part of what it is to call something beautiful and I take this to be true even if a philosopher would urge an ‘error theory’ with respect to such judgements. My concern here is not the one she addresses to the effect that it may turn out on this view that anything at all may be judged beautiful (51), but rather that it fails to mark the difference between taking my own response to be ‘as it should be’ and approving of, praising the object I am responding to.

This may be a price that Ginsborg’s Kant is willing to pay, both in the interests of maintaining the wider connection with ‘primitive normativity’ in the understanding of judgement generally and in rigorously adhering to what is the subjective, non-cognitive and self-referring Kant’s account of the judgement of beauty:

Pleasure in the beautiful, as we have seen, does not consist for Kant in the awareness of an objective feature. But it does consist in an awareness of another kind. Specifically, it consists in a reflective awareness of its own appropriateness or legitimacy with respect to the object. (29)
But even if we want to deny that the judgement of beauty provides us with a proper cognition of the object, it still seems true that we should want the focus of such judgements to be on the objects that we find beautiful, to what in them is praiseworthy, to what in them merits the pleasure we feel in contemplating them.

It might also be thought that the specific normativity of aesthetic judgement is maintained by the special role of pleasure in distinguishing it from the ‘default entitlement’ we have to take our other responses to be appropriate to their objects. Ordinary concept application is not an expression of pleasure after all and pleasure (of some kind anyway) may be thought of the ground of a kind of approval of what is taken pleasure in. However, the Kantian definition of pleasure in general terms as a tendency of a state to maintain itself in a ‘consciousness of itself as appropriate to the object’ (121) makes such an appeal problematic, for that seems simply identical with the ‘default entitlement’ that lies at the basis of cognition generally, when this involves no approval of the object itself (or pleasure for that matter). And even with respect to something that is found beautiful, such as a cloud, one may take one’s response to it to be ‘right’ or ‘appropriate’ in a number of different ways that have nothing to do with its beauty, either with respect to the application of some concept (‘cirrus’) or some non-conceptual sense of rightness. Hence the ‘rightness’ that is relevant to aesthetic judgement would have to appeal to an independently understood sense of ‘appropriate with respect to the beauty of the object’ (121).

On page 122, Ginsborg appeals to what is ‘irreducibly self-referential’ in the judgement of beauty, the fact that (as contrasted with applying the concept ‘dog’) there is no specific respect in which I claim the agreement of all others, but rather it is ‘this very response’ of mine for which I claim universal validity. I can see how this marks a crucial distinction between the consciousness of appropriateness in the two cases, but I’m not sure I see how this difference accounts for the specific role of pleasure in the case of the self-approval that is irreducibly self-referential and which is not present in the case where a specific respect of agreement can be appealed to. And, in any case, it seems that this understanding of pleasure would not provide a way to understand the difference between the approval of one’s own state and the admiration of the beautiful object as meriting one’s response of pleasure. I am still learning from Ginsborg’s work and I look forward to hearing how these qualms of mine are either misunderstandings or are answered in ways I haven’t yet seen and none which diminish my pleasure in, or admiration for, The Normativity of Nature.¹

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