

On the Subject/Object Distinction in Kant's Aesthetics: A Response to Zuckert

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to stress a small but significant point that arises in the context of Kant's aesthetics. It is the sort of point about which there ought to be little ambiguity, for Kant expresses himself clearly enough. Nevertheless misreadings abound, and it is also my concern here to address one of them. The point I wish to stress is this: for Kant, judgments of taste are not judgments about objects in the world. (Just what they *are* about is a matter for further discussion in Section III below.)

Recently Rachel Zuckert has suggested quite otherwise: she suggests that for Kant judgments of taste are about the object.¹ More precisely, she rightly reads Kant as claiming that judgments of taste depend upon our admiration of purposive form, but she wrongly reads Kant as claiming that the form that we admire is the form of an objective thing in the world. Zuckert proposes that we read Kant as a "whole-formalist," where whole-formalism is opposed to property-formalism and kind-formalism. But her preferred reading, just like those she rejects, is founded upon a misreading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, since all three formalist views operate as though judgments of taste were object-oriented. If judgments of taste were object-oriented as Zuckert holds them to be, then this fact would reveal a deep inconsistency in Kant's critical project.

In Section II, I offer a summary of Zuckert's claim that Kant is best read as what she calls a "whole-formalist," and I make the case that she considers judgments of beauty to be oriented toward objects. In Section III, I explain that for Kant aesthetic judgments are crucially not about determinate objects at all; rather, they are about the relationship between the object's presentation to sensibility and the feeling of pleasure that accompanies that presentation. I then examine and respond to Zuckert's argument against my reading of Kant. I conclude with an explanation of why a non-object-oriented conception of judgments of taste is important for Kant's larger project of legitimizing the practice of aesthetic judgment.

II: Zuckert's Three Formalisms

Zuckert, having noted Kant's claim that judgments of taste are concerned in some sense with form, distinguishes between three kinds of formalism that readers of Kant attribute to him. Those three formalisms are property-formalism, kind-formalism, and whole-formalism, and it is the third that she prefers. Whole-formalism is the view that objects are beautiful insofar as their physical, spatio-temporal properties present to the observer a unity amidst variety.² I contend that Zuckert's whole-formalism is founded upon the wrong sort of thing—it is founded upon objects, rather than upon presentations of objects to sensibility. Perhaps she is correct in some sense to call Kant a whole-formalist, since Kant, following Francis Hutcheson, does stress uniformity amidst variety when discussing the beautiful. But Kant is not a whole-formalist *about objects*; he cannot be, since judgments of taste themselves are not about objects. The locus of Kant's formalism lies elsewhere than in the objective world.

My summary of the three formalisms, which follows below, takes pains to illustrate the pervasiveness of the object-oriented misreading in Zuckert's presentation of the debate between them. But first, it is worth remembering that the famously untraveled Kant is largely uninterested in works of art in and of themselves. Whereas certain of his philosophic predecessors and contemporaries lavish many pages worth of analytic detail upon specific works, Kant typically mentions works of art only by name and usually just to serve as examples. He is dubious of the instructive power of concrete examples, which as aids to clarity "help in the parts but often confuse in the whole; and all their bright colors paint over and make unrecognizable the articulation or structure of the system, which yet matters most when it comes to judging its unity and soundness."³ I mention his disinclination to discussing particular works of art for two reasons: first, because it reinforces the idea with which I began this paper, i.e., that for Kant the locus of judgments of taste is not objective. Consequently we should expect to find in Kant, and indeed do find, an abundance of discussion of the structure of the act of judgment, but one accompanied by a relative paucity of examples of works of art. His antipathy toward works of art is therefore founded on two different grounds: any detailed discussion of artworks would both interfere with his critical method, as examples are wont to do, while simultaneously missing a large part of the point of that very critical inquiry, which is to establish judgments of taste as non-objective. The second reason why Kant's lack of interest in art is noteworthy here is that Zuckert explicitly defines formalism as object-oriented *in general*. Since she reads Kant as a formalist, and since she considers formalism generally to be object-oriented, she reads him as far more concerned with works of art than he really is. This discrepancy signals a critical incongruence between Kant's and Zuckert's understanding of judgments of taste. Though she attempts to "give a wider sense of what formalism might be,"⁴

Zuckert's list of types of formalism is certainly not exhaustive, since Kant's own type of formalism falls outside its bounds.

From the outset of her discussion, Zuckert closely ties the idea of formalism with the object in the world. She does so in regard to all the varieties of formalism, including the whole-formalism she seeks to defend. She characterizes formalism in general in the following way:

Broadly speaking, "formalism" is the view that, in aesthetic appreciation of an object (usually a work of art), we do and ought to pay attention not to the object's representational content, emotional expressiveness, historical, institutional, or social context (whether conditions for the production of the object or its effects), but only to its form.⁵

She therefore takes formalism to "specify positively (if vaguely) that the form of an object is what makes it beautiful."⁶ The three varieties of formalism in which she is interested disagree over what counts as the "form" of an object. But the three formalisms all agree on the point that the form in question—the form on which rest judgments of taste—is the form *of the object*.

Zuckert's disambiguation of the differing conceptions of "form" that correspond to the three kinds of formalism makes clear that none of them are concerned with anything but the form of the object. She writes, "Form,' however, can mean a number of different things, all of which (in some sense) are the design or arrangement of an object's parts, often of its sensible properties."⁷ So, just as her broad definition of formalism seems to commit her to discussing the forms of objects, her disambiguation of the different conceptions of forms operative within the three types of formalism reaffirms that very commitment. That commitment remains apparent, and its pervasiveness receives special emphasis, in the following summary, as I examine each type of formalism in turn.

Property-formalism is "the view that the form of an object can be described in terms of a set of specific spatial or temporal properties that characterize the relations that hold among different parts of the object, and that these properties are responsible for the beauty of the object."⁸ Zuckert observes that many readers of Kant mistake him for a property-formalist, in part because property-formalism seems to correspond to Kant's discussion in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of space and time as *a priori* forms of intuition.⁹ The case against reading Kant as a property-formalist is a sound one, though. Since property-formalism makes of beauty a mere matter of the configuration of spatiotemporal properties, the difference between beautiful and ordinary objects just comes down to fulfilling the right spatiotemporal conditions. Since the spatiotemporal features of things in the world are open to objective assessment, property-formalism seems inevitably to require a set of rules by which to stipulate the conditions for beauty, rules founded upon desiderata of geometry or

symmetry or proportion, and Kant explicitly rejects the possibility of enumerating such a set of rules.¹⁰ Moreover, Kant argues that considerations of geometric propriety are inherently and merely conceptual, and so not available in pure judgments of taste.¹¹ These considerations rule out the possibility of Kant's being a property-formalist. Property-formalism is, most obviously of the three types of formalism, founded upon considerations of the object; it requires of beautiful objects that their sensible properties be arranged *just so*.

Whereas property-formalism focuses on rules of composition for assessing an object's form, "kind-formalism, by contrast, identifies the form of an object as that which makes it a (good) exemplar of its kind."¹² As with property-formalism, kind-formalism would require too much conceptual work to permit pure judgments of taste. This is because under kind-formalism judgments of taste must involve an assessment of the object's correspondence to its proper exemplar, which would require the subsumption of the object under a concept. This point alone indicates that Kant cannot be a kind-formalist. Kant also speaks strongly against the possibility of establishing ideals "of beautiful flowers, of beautiful furnishings, of a beautiful view [...] a beautiful mansion, a beautiful tree, a beautiful garden, etc."¹³ Like property-formalism, kind-formalism places the determining characteristics of beauty in the object, since the object will either succeed or fail as beautiful depending upon its composition and arrangement of sensible properties.

In the face of property-formalism and kind-formalism, Zuckert advances the thesis "that one may interpret Kant's formalism as a claim that in aesthetic experience we appreciate the object as an individual, as comprising all (or indeterminately many) of its sensible properties as inextricably interrelated or unified to make the object what it is; in other words, we appreciate what has been called an object's 'individual form.'"¹⁴ This sense of form is admittedly "much vaguer [...] than either of the two preceding."¹⁵ Zuckert calls her view whole-formalism, according to which "an object is beautiful if it is ordered or unified, if its parts harmonize to form a whole—or, more specifically, [it claims] that beauty is a unity of diversity or of variety."¹⁶ Whole-formalism is tied to neither the compositional rules of property-formalism, nor to the teleological requirements of kind-formalism, though whole-formalist accounts may in some cases turn out to be consistent with either property- or kind-formalist explanations of beauty.¹⁷ But like the other two, "whole-formalism is a formalist position: it claims that the arrangement (indeed the whole arrangement) of the sensible properties of the object is responsible for the beauty of the object, and it excludes external, contextual considerations, such as social meaningfulness or manner of production."¹⁸

Zuckert rejects property-formalism and kind-formalism in part because they are overambitious in regard to their specificity: they attempt to pin down exactly which physical configurations satisfy the formal desiderata of beauty. Whole-formalism, on the other hand, deliberately resists the temptation to get too specific about what makes objects beautiful. By

adopting the broader scope of whole-formalism, Zuckert avoids the more fatal pitfalls of the two competing accounts. But she still fails to correct those accounts' most egregious error, for as it happens, all three of the formalist accounts suppose erroneously that judgments of taste are about the object. Her very presentation of the debate between the three kinds of formalisms is therefore founded upon a misreading that dooms them all in equal measure.

All three types of formalism depend upon the sensible properties of the object, in the sense that they suppose that when we make judgments of taste, what we are doing is assessing certain features of those sensible properties. Insofar as this is true, all three types of formalism are mistaken. Judgments of taste are not the sort of thing Zuckert and many other formalists take them to be, since they are not about objects in the world.

III: What Are Judgments of Taste About?

Judgments of taste can't be about determinate objects in the world, since they are crucially non-discursive and unable to be articulated. The judgment that an object is beautiful precedes my verbal utterance "This is so beautiful!"—the latter is only a signal that I have made a judgment of taste, but the judgment itself remains hidden and can't be voiced. I can refer to the pleasure I feel, but as Kant writes, any reference to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure "designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself, [namely] how he is affected by the presentation."¹⁹ This is to say that such references are subjective—but only subjective in the sense that they aren't available for discursive expression between subjects. For just as judgments of taste are not about the object, neither are they without qualification simply about the subject judging. It is important to resist the temptation to frame judgments of taste according to a binary subject/object opposition.²⁰ Many readers of Kant, Zuckert among them, strive to tie judgments of taste to objects, since they take the only possible alternative view to be a subjectivism akin to banal relativism. But Kant's own view (detailed below) does not cleave to either path of the bifurcation. In any case, Kant denies explicitly that judgments of taste are about objects; for "if we refer them to the object, the judgment we make by means of them is logical,"²¹ and therefore a cognitive one. But cognitive judgments are by definition distinct from aesthetic judgments; and *they must be so*, since if judgments of taste were cognitive they would involve the subsumption of the particular object under a concept, and any such subsumptive act would mark the termination of the experience of "purposiveness without a purpose," the appreciation of which serves as the lynchpin of the aesthetic stance. Ergo, judgments of taste, as aesthetic judgments, cannot be about objective things in the world, or about the determinate properties of those things.

When we describe an object as beautiful—suppose we were to say, “This tulip is beautiful”—it sounds as though our judgment of taste refers to the object, the tulip. But on Kant’s account, this cannot be, for the reasons given above. So what accounts for the discrepancy between the structure of our pronouncement and the structure of the judgment of taste? Within that question lies the very answer: we need to distinguish between the *judgment* and the proclamation that follows it. The latter is a discursive expression of a judgment, already completed, that is in itself subjective and non-discursive. The sentence is about the object, but the judgment of taste is about the feeling of pleasure that accompanies the intuitive presentation of the object by the imagination to the sensibility. The judgment of taste “does not contribute anything to cognition, but merely compares the given presentation in the subject with the entire presentational power, of which the mind becomes conscious when it feels its own state.”²²

Kant certainly is a formalist, but he isn’t interested in the forms *of objects*. Rather, he is interested in the form of universality that accompanies pure, subjective judgments of taste. The person judging “must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which only he might be dependent, so that he must regard it as based on what he can presuppose in everyone else as well.”²³ Judgments of taste therefore presuppose their own public character. They are universal in the sense that we can indiscriminately exhort others to share in them, since they don’t depend on anything peculiar or idiosyncratic about the person judging. Indeed, when we make a judgment of taste, the judgment is responsive not to the satisfaction of the judge’s contingent preferences, but about—precisely the opposite!—the form of universal availability or graspability that accompanies the presentation of the object to sensibility. The free play of the faculties in which we delight operates only in recognition of that universal openness to others. Paul Redding has recently made this same point:

In judging an object to be beautiful, although we tend to treat *the object itself* as containing the “ground” of that judgment, the ground [...] is really to be found in those inter-subjective relations mediating the community of subjects who make and seek agreement for these sorts of judgments. [...] In saying something is beautiful I am not ascribing to the object some property which, as it were, is responsible for and which explains the fact of my finding it beautiful.²⁴

Zuckert anticipates this reading of Kant, though her response is deeply unsatisfactory:

One must ask how (or whether) [the whole-formalist] interpretation of beautiful, purposive form—and of aesthetic judging as an intimate engagement with the object in its

individuality—might be reconciled with Kant’s repeated characterizations of aesthetic judgment as subjective, as providing “no cognition” of the object, or concerning the subject alone. [...] Indeed, the interpretation I have proposed cannot be reconciled with Kant’s claim [...] Thus, in reconstructing Kant’s account, one must choose one or the other of these claims.²⁵

She admits that “there are, in other words, textual grounds for the subjectivist interpretation,”²⁶ but she sees more and better evidence for her own objectivist reading. Her mistake lies in supposing, along with those she criticizes as subjectivists, that if Kant is not an objectivist about judgments of taste, he must be a straightforward subjectivist—that is, one who views judgments of taste as wholly contingent and idiosyncratic. Her opposition to the straightforward subjectivist reading is understandable, for it is on that reading that Kant’s aesthetics turns out to be the least interesting, as it leads to a relativism that precludes discussions of beauty from being of much use. But as I have explained, judgments of taste aren’t so plainly subjective as to be wholly idiosyncratic; they don’t depend upon anything contingent in the person judging, or else we would not find pleasure in their universal character. So the fear of the relativist’s abyss needn’t lead us to ignore the parts of Kant that conflict with the objectivist reading, as Zuckert would have us do. The subject/object distinction on which she (as well as her interlocutors) relies is too crude. As an alternative to choosing whichever of the objectivist and subjectivist views does the least violence to Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment, I propose that we instead see Kant as having offered a more nuanced view than Zuckert takes him to have done. That, after all, is what Kant himself urges us to do.

Notes

¹ Rachel Zuckert, “The Purposiveness of Form: A Reading of Kant’s Aesthetic Formalism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.4 (2006): 599-622.

² Zuckert 601.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 104.

⁴ Zuckert 600.

⁵ Zuckert 600.

⁶ Zuckert 600.

⁷ Zuckert 600.

⁸ Zuckert 600.

⁹ Zuckert 599, 604. The foundation of this relation between property-formalism and space and time as *a priori* forms of intuition isn’t clear. Zuckert asserts that the two “cohere” with each other, but does not explain why. If the relation is as roughshod as it appears—that property-formalists think beauty is a matter of spatiotemporal form, and that Kant also happens to discuss the topics of space and time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—then so much the worse for property-formalism. Kant makes clear in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that space and time are *a priori* grounds of experience, but are themselves neither to be found in sensible appearances, nor even “as a determination dependent on them” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 175).

¹⁰ Zuckert 605.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 92.

¹² Zuckert 601.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 80-81.

¹⁴ Zuckert 599-600.

¹⁵ Zuckert 601.

¹⁶ Zuckert 601.

¹⁷ Zuckert 601.

¹⁸ Zuckert 602.

¹⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 44.

²⁰ I am indebted to Rebecca Kukla for directing my attention toward the dangers posed by this potential trap.

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45.

²² Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 44.

²³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 54.

²⁴ Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 180.

²⁵ Zuckert 619.

²⁶ Zuckert 619.

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