

Kant's aesthetics, Proustian moments and concepts

I Introduction

On the surface, Kant's aesthetics seems very attractive: it allows us to accommodate art works as diverse as postmodern novels, abstract art and songs with multiple meanings. Unfortunately, it is less clear how Kant's theory applies to objects that push the boundary of what we usually consider as art. Cristy (2016), for example, has convincingly argued that wine can give raise to Judgments of Beauty (JoB), despite Kant's insistence to the contrary. In this paper, I ask if Proustian moments can constitute JoB and consider what this would entail for the role of concepts in Kant's aesthetics.

To answer this question, I will show that concepts play two distinctive roles in Kant's theory: (i) they can be imposed on an art work prior to the aesthetic experience (thus rendering our JoB impure) and (ii) they can be involved in the free play of imagination and understanding in pure JoB. I then argue that since Kant would like to claim that Proustian moments do not give raise to JoB, we need to adopt a *multicognitive* interpretation of free play (Guyer, 2006). On this interpretation, free play occurs between different concepts without being constrained to a single one. Thus, examining Proustian moments provides a reason for adopting the *multicognitive* interpretation.

The rest of this essay support this position in three stages. I begin by describing the roles of concepts in Kant's aesthetics by discussing JoB and free play (Section II). Drawing on Guyer (2006), I then differentiate between three interpretations of free play depending on the role of concepts (Section III). Next, I consider Proustian moments and suggest why only on the *multicognitive* interpretation of free play they do not constitute a JoB (Section IV).

II Concepts in Kant's aesthetics

To understand the roles of concepts, it is necessary to first define JoB. In the Second Moment of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (CPJ, §§6-9),¹ Kant defines JoB in terms of their differences to judgements of the agreeable and judgements of the good. Judgements of the agreeable refer to our ability to take satisfaction in objects such as 'sparkling wine from the Canaries' (CPJ, §7). While they resemble JoB in being based on subjective feeling, they do not make any claims to universality in the same way as JoB do (CPJ, §§6-7). Kant thinks that when we say something is beautiful, we postulate that others should also find it beautiful. On the other hand, judgements of the good refer to things that 'please us by means of reason alone, through the mere concept' (CPJ, §4). For Kant, things are good if they are either good in themselves such as a morally good act or instrumentally good such as a sharp knife for cutting (Wicks, 2007, pp.25-28). Judgements of the good are related to JoB in demanding universal agreement but differ in the basis for that demand which is conceptual and not related to feelings, i.e., objective and not subjective. Thus, JoB are characterised by subjective universality. Having established this, I will now introduce three features of JoB where concepts play a key role. Before that, note that a concept in Kant's system is roughly understood as a representation of the common features to a plurality of particular things.²

II.1 Free play

In §9, Kant asks what the basis for JoB's claim to universality is, given that this claim cannot be grounded in concepts as in the case of judgements of the good. His answer is that in making a JoB we all experience a unique mental state of 'free play' of the imagination (the faculty of intuitions) and understanding (the faculty of concepts) where 'no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition' (CPJ, §9). This free play results in a harmony between our faculties (Wicks, 2007, p.44). After introducing

¹I work with Guyer and Matthews' translation (Kant, 2000).

²Due to time constraints, I will discuss further how concepts are understood in other works by Kant.

free play, we can see how Kant views the phenomenology of aesthetic experience (CPJ, §9). Once we observe an art work, we start judging it. If our initial judging produces a harmonious free play of imagination and understanding, it also produces pleasure in us (Guyer, 2017, p.409). Next, after reflecting on the initial judgement and the ensuing pleasure, we make the universality claim that everybody observing this object ought to find it beautiful (Guyer, 2017, pp.409-410). This interpretation of the aesthetic experience is labelled in the literature as a two-act view: (i) the first act involves free play and a subsequent pleasure and (ii) the second act concerns reflection on the initial judging and a claim to universality.³

At this point, we may wonder how free play works. To illustrate, consider the song ‘Hotel California’ by the Eagles. When listening, we can find clues towards various interpretations such as heroin addiction, Satanism or a critique of capitalism but what we get pleasure from is the floating between different interpretations. This example fits particularly well a *multicognitive* interpretation of free play (Guyer, 2006, pp.169-170), on which free play occurs between different concepts without being constrained to a single one. While in Section IV I argue why the *multicognitive* interpretation should be preferred over other interpretations of free play, for the present I assume its validity.

II.2 Subjective purposiveness

Not only are JoB based on a universal mental state, but they are also grounded in the *a priori* principle of subjective purposiveness (CPJ, §12). Before grasping this concept, we need to clarify Kant’s idea of purpose. An object has a purpose if its concept causes it to come into existence (CPJ, §10). For instance, suppose that in the evening I decide to cook myself a dinner. Then, the concept of dinner caused me to cook a dish and so for a dinner to come into existence (Wenzel, 2008, p.81). In that sense, a JoB exhibits purposiveness if it can only be conceived in reference to a purpose (Allison, 2001, p.124).

³One alternative is Ginsborg’s one-act view (2017). However, the question which view is better does not seem fundamental for examining the role of concepts. Since I also find Guyer’s account closer to how I make JoB, I subscribe to his view.

Purposiveness can be objective as in the case of my dinner which is conceived in terms of an unambiguous concept. However, it could also be subjective where there is no single purpose which can be attached to an object. To illustrate, it may seem clear to me that ‘Hotel California’ is trying to tell me something, i.e., it is purposive. However, I am not sure exactly what this is. Thus, ‘Hotel California’ seems subjectively purposive. If the Eagles come and tell me that the song is actually about heroin addiction,⁴ the song would still seem purposive to me but with reference to a specific concept: it will exhibit objective purposiveness.

While concepts play a role in distinguishing subjective and objective purposiveness, discussing these notions would not shed much light on the importance of concepts in Kant’s *aesthetics* in my view. The reason is that many interesting debates about purposiveness enter into Kant’s *teleology*. For instance, Teufel (2011) introduces a non-teleological notion of purposiveness. Although his notion might be useful in Kant’s biology, it does not seem directly applicable to Kant’s aesthetics. As result, examining purposiveness require not only understanding Kant’s teleology (which is beyond the scope of this essay), but might also not be too informative about the role of concepts specifically in Kant’s aesthetics. So, I will not discuss subjective purposiveness further.

II.3 Impure JoB

When discussing buildings, we often evaluate their beauty relative to a concept, e.g., a particular architectural style. Since Kant argues that there are no determinate concepts in free play (CPJ, VII), it is unclear if his theory can accommodate such JoB. For this reason, he differentiates between pure JoB and adherent (or impure) JoB: ‘The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and [judges] the perfection of the object in accordance with it’ (CPJ, §16). Thus, Kant allows us to pronounce impure JoB relative to concepts, e.g., whether ‘Hotel California’ is

⁴One can object that the meaning of art work is not necessarily what the artist claims. However, I only need to *believe* heroin addiction is the meaning of the song and judge the song relative to that concept.

beautiful given our concept of a rock song. However, such JoB are affected by conceptual considerations and so do not allow for free play as pure JoB do. We can also see a close link between perfection and beauty in impure JoB which is absent in pure JoB. It is possible for a rock song to be perfect, because it fits ideally with my concept of a rock song.

Here the question emerges how exactly concepts enter into impure JoB. On Zuckert's reading (2007),⁵ judgements of perfection based on concepts have two functions in impure JoB. They have a *negative* function. Depending on the class an art work belongs to, concepts constrain the set of characteristics which we consider as relevant in our JoB, e.g., guitar solos are important in rock songs but not so much in jazz. Additionally, they have a *positive* function which helps us focus on the (non-free) play⁶ specifically among these characteristics that are considered as relevant to this type of art works (Zuckert, 2007, pp.205-7). To illustrate this distinction, consider Bob Dylan's song 'Mr. Tambourine Man' and specifically the harmonica solo (which many find intolerable). By the *negative* function of concepts, we can rule out the solo as standard for Dylan's songs and focus on the play among the different meanings of the song.⁷ In contrast, due to the *positive* function of concepts in impure JoB, we can focus our attention on the play inspired by characteristics specific to Dylan's style such as the interaction between the harmonica solo and his distinctive voice. Thus, concepts can have two different functions in impure JoB.

We can now appreciate the different roles of concepts in impure JoB and free play. In *multicognitive* free play, concepts are inspired in us by the art work during the aesthetic experience. On pure JoB, we engage in a free play that is not constrained by any (pre)conceptions about the art work. In contrast, impure JoB amount to the imposing of concepts which we already possess prior to the experience and which affect the features of the art work we focus on. On impure JoB, the play between imagination and understanding in impure JoB might also inspire in us further concepts like free play in pure JoB.

⁵There are alternative interpretations. For a recent review, see Tuna (2018, pp.164-166). Some commentators are sceptical of the possibility of impure JoB (e.g. Fletcher, 2005, pp.6-10).

⁶Zuckert (2007) is careful not to say free play when discussing the play involved in impure JoB.

⁷It has been interpreted as a song about drugs, religion or artist's muse.

Temporally, therefore, concepts can enter JoB in two places: (1) prior to the experience which would render the JoB as impure and (2) during the experience in the free play of imagination and understanding.

III Interpretive issues with free play

Guyer (2006) discusses three different interpretations of free play depending on the role of concepts. To understand Guyer's distinction, it is crucial to get a rough idea of how Kant understands empirical cognition (FI, VII). In cognition, a manifold of intuition (or sensations) is apprehended by the imagination and then comprehended via a determinate concept provided by the understanding. This allows us to classify the object as belonging to a certain type determined by the concept. When cognising a table, I firstly apprehend only shapes and colours, on which I impose the concept of table. So, in cognitions the intuitions from my imagination and the concepts from my understanding are in harmony. Given the importance of cognition for the different interpretations of free play, Guyer calls the three views *precognitive*, *multicognitive* and *metacognitive*.

Firstly, the *precognitive* interpretation (Guyer, 2006, pp.165-169) postulates that free play is a mental state that falls just short of cognition. Although we receive a manifold of intuition from an art work, we have no determinate concept, under which to put this manifold. However, since the manifold is held in unity and looks to us *as if* there is a concept that should apply, understanding and imagination are in harmony as in cognition. The unity in aesthetic experience is a special kind of unity that is different from the unity required for cognition. We can find strong textual support for the *precognitive* view. For example, Kant says that in free play 'the power of judgement, which has no concept ready for the given intuition, holds the imagination (...) together with the understanding' in harmony (FI, VIII).

Secondly, as discussed in Section II, the *multicognitive* interpretation (Guyer, 2006, pp.169-170) suggests that free play involves the application of multiple concepts to the art work. In a sense, the manifold of intuition from the art work seems cognisable under

different concepts but without a single one applying. The *multicognitive* interpretation helps us understand free play in music *with* lyrics such as ‘Hotel California’. In contrast, the *precognitive* interpretation seems better equipped to capture our response to music *without* lyrics, e.g., listening to a relaxing performance of Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The reason is that music *without* lyrics is more likely to generate in us intuitions rather than concepts.

Thirdly, the *metacognitive* interpretation (Guyer, 2006, pp.182-187) proposes that free play ‘goes beyond’ what is necessary for normal cognition. On my reading, there are two stages on this view. The first stage is to cognise the art work as we cognise normal objects: we first apprehend qualities such as colours and shapes and then apply a particular concept, e.g., this is a rock song by the Eagles.⁸ Since this is not sufficient to generate a JoB, the second stage is to recognise that the manifold of intuition generated in us by the art work has more unity than the manifold generated by normal objects: ‘we experience [the art work] as inducing a degree or type of harmony between imagination and understanding – between the manifold it presents and our desire for unity – that goes beyond whatever is necessary for ordinary cognition’ (Guyer, 2006, p.184). When saying that ‘Hotel California’ is a beautiful song, I begin by apprehending its lyrics and instrumental and classifying it as a rock song (cognition step). Next, I feel the unity of the manifold of intuition stemming from ‘Hotel California’ and this generates the harmony between imagination and understanding. Importantly, in contrast to the *multicognitive* view, this interpretation does not necessarily require free play between concepts but also allows free play as conceived on the *precognitive* view (Guyer, 2006, p.188). So, this reading of free play allows us to understand our responses to music both with and without lyrics. For this reason, Guyer (2006, p.187) argues that the *metacognitive* interpretation unites the other two views.

⁸This is in contrast to *precognitive* view.

IV JoB and Proustian moments

The previous subsection raises the question which interpretation of free play is most sensible. To answer this question, I will apply Kant's aesthetics to Proustian moments and show that the only way to argue why such moments do not constitute a JoB is to subscribe to a *multicognitive* view of free play. What are Proustian moments? In the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust, 2003, pp.46-50), the narrator takes a sip of tea together with a bite of a madeleine which makes him recall a childhood memory.⁹ In particular, the spoonful helps him to remember something which is initially unknown but which arises a pleasant feeling: 'A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, *without my having any notion of its cause*' (my emphasis, Proust, 2003, p.47). Next, the narrator tries to understand the source of his initial judgement: 'Where could it have come to me from – this powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected to the taste of the tea and the cake, but it went infinitely far beyond it' (2003, p.48). After some reflection, the narrator realises that the madeleine reminded him of his long-forgotten childhood in Combray.

We can immediately see parallels with Kant's description of our aesthetic experience. On the two-act view, the narrator unintentionally engages in free play caused by the madeleine ('*without my having any notion of its cause*') and experiences pleasure in the first act. He reflects on the causes of the initial judgement in the second act.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Kant probably will resist the idea that Proustian moments are JoB. After all, if madeleines can generate a JoB, other types of food and drink should also be able to do so whereas Kant insists that they can only generate judgements of the agreeable (CPJ, §7). Thus, I will now consider several ways, in which he can motivate his objection to Proustian moments.

One strategy is to reduce such moments to a standard judgement of the agreeable,

⁹I will not discuss memory, about which Kant has surprisingly little to say (Pacheco Acosta, 2020, p.105). For brevity, I treat memories as intuitions (or sensations) which can fall under determinate concepts.

¹⁰One can argue that the Proustian moment also exhibits subjective purposiveness. The madeleine seems to the narrator as if it is trying to tell him something.

combined with a specific personal association. I might be regularly consuming a specific brand of wine not only because it please me but also because I associate it with the province I grew up in. When I consume the wine, I only pronounce a judgement of the agreeable with association and not a full-fledged JoB. The wine example, however, seems to be missing the initial element of unexpected harmony that is present in Proustian moments: there is a difference between the *expected* association produced by the wine and the *unexpected* harmony generated initially by the madeleine. To be sure, the intensity of the experience in the Proustian moment will diminish if the narrator has to consume a madeleine every day.¹¹ Nevertheless, when he takes it for the first time after a very long period, there is an unexpected moment of free play that goes beyond the association with his childhood. So, the problem with reducing Proustian moments to judgments of the agreeable with association is that the latter produce an obvious reaction in me and not the unexpected harmony from the novel. This obvious reaction is similar to the response many get from kitsch such as Kinkade's Christmas paintings.

Although Kant's first response fails, he may still object that Proustian moments make no universality claim and so cannot be proper JoB. The narrator does not expect that everybody would have the same experience if consuming a madeleine. There are several problems with this idea. One may question whether our JoB actually involve a claim to universality or whether we have good grounds for demanding that others should also pronounce a JoB.¹² Setting these issues aside, another problem is that Kant actually makes a conditional statement when discussing the claim to universality. What we are demanding is that conditional on certain *ideal circumstances* other people would also find the art work beautiful (Guyer, 1979, p.146).¹³ It is not entirely clear what these ideal circumstances will include. Perhaps, if I had the same childhood memories associated with a madeleine, I would also have the same experiences as the narrator. Even if Kant responds that this understanding of ideal circumstances is too loose, there is a deeper problem:

¹¹He even acknowledges that each subsequent bite of the madeleine diminishes the intensity (Proust, 2003, p.48).

¹²For why these are different demands, see Wenzel (2008, pp.86-87). Also, Cova and Pain (2012) provide experimental evidence to support the idea that we do not claim unvierversality in JoB.

¹³This is just one reading of Kant's idea. See Ginsborg (2019, Section 2.3.4) for other approaches.

while Proustian moment may involve no claim to universality, they might still involve free play. However, Kant often talks about how free play grounds our universality claims (Wenzel, 2008, p.85). In particular, since free play is a mental state which everybody should be able to experience, the resulting JoB should be universally communicable: ‘The animation of both faculties (the imagination and the understanding) (...) is the sensation whose universal communicability is postulated by the judgement of taste’ (CPJ, §9). So, Kant might be uncomfortable about acknowledging that Proustian moment involve free play without a universality claim: this could imply that free play is not required for the universality claims associated with an aesthetic experience.

Thus, the most promising argument, which Kant can give for rejecting that Proustian moments constitute a JoB, would be to show that they involve no free play. If he can support this claim, then Proustian moments will not be JoB because they would lack the most distinctive feature of such judgements, namely free play. One way to make this argument is to point out that Proustian moments actually involve the application a determinate concept to the manifold of intuition generated by the madeleine, i.e., the concept of childhood in Combray. Irrespectively of which interpretation we use, this is not allowed on free play. Nevertheless, on Proust’s description, the feeling of harmony (supposedly generated by free play) comes *before* the reflections on its source and even before the feeling of pleasure. Assuming Proustian moments involve two acts, it does not seem logically contradictory to argue that the narrator experiences free play without a single concept at first and upon subsequent reflection he realises that a determinate concept can rationalise his experience. To illustrate this idea, suppose I am listening to a classical music piece and I do not recognise that it is actually Vivaldi’s ‘Winter’ from the *The Four Seasons*. While listening, my faculties engage in free play and I pronounce a JoB. After some reflection later in the day, I realise that the manifold of intuition generated in me captures very well my feeling of winter and so I attach the determinate concept of winter on the music piece. Similarly, Proustian moments might still involve free play despite the fact that later we apply a particular concept to the experience.

A better approach for the claim that free play is not involved in Proustian moments is

to suggest that what occurs before the feeling of pleasure is not actually free play. Does any of our interpretations of free play allow making this statement? The *precognitive* view will not work: similarly to how no determinate concept can be attached to the manifold of intuition generated by an art work, initially no concept is applied to the manifold of intuition generated by the madeleine. Turning to the *metacognitive* interpretation, the madeleine is fully cognised at first, i.e., the narrator apprehends its shape, color and taste. Analogically to how the *precognitive* view allows for free play without any concepts, Guyer argues that the *metacognitive* view also allows for such free play where no concepts are applied to the manifold of intuition. While things are slightly more complicated on the *metacognitive* view, given that it nests the other two interpretations as special cases, what matters is that it is not restrictive enough to rule out the *precognitive* type of free play.

One reason why both the *precognitive* and the *metacognitive* interpretations do not rule out free play in Proustian moments is that they do not require any concepts in the free play. However, such a free play between concepts is demanded by the *multicognitive* interpretation. In contrast to the free play between different song meanings in ‘Hotel California’, the initial experience of the narrator seems very different: ‘The madeleine has awoken it in me (...) this same testimony which I do not know how to interpret’ (Proust, 2003, p.48). He does not seem to be struggling between applying different concepts but simply to comprehend the harmony generated by the madeleine without referencing any concepts. So, I conclude that only the *multicognitive* view allows Kant to definitively rule out free play in Proustian moments. If free play occurs between different concepts, then a Proustian moment involves no free play.

V Conclusion

Given the aforementioned, we can conclude that concepts play two distinctive roles in Kant’s JoB. Firstly, they can be used to focus our attention on particular characteristics of an art work which renders our JoB impure. Secondly, if we approach the art work without any prior concepts, we can engage in free play between different concepts inspired by that

art work. Thus, concepts can temporally enter our JoB either prior to the aesthetic experience or during free play.

Claiming that concepts have a role in free play presupposes the *multicognitive* interpretation of free play. To support this idea, I have provided an argument for choosing the *multicognitive* view over the *precognitive* and the *metacognitive* views. My argument relies on the application of Kant's aesthetics to Proustian moments. It is not obvious how Kant can claim that Proustian moments do not constitute a JoB, despite his desire to do so. So, I have suggested that the best way for him to support this claim is to show that Proustian moments do not involve free play. Out of the three interpretations, only the *multicognitive* view allows Kant to do this. For this reason, I concluded that this view provides the most convincing interpretation of free play.

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