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AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

Beautiful or Agreeable? Humour and Wit in *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore what Robert Clewis, in *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*, suggests is an 'analogy' between humour and beauty. I do this by focusing on Kant's concept of wit (*Witz*), which is central to both reflective judgement and humour. By exploring the concept of *Witz* as a distinctive kind of cognitive activity, I believe a case can be made that the origin of Kant's mature aesthetic theory in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* and his discovery of the principle of taste were, in part, a result of Kant's thinking about *Witz.* I therefore share Clewis's puzzlement about why, in the third *Critique*, humour, arguably the art of *Witz*, is not considered to be a beautiful art. I conclude by suggesting a possible reason why Kant thought that a judgement of humour is different from a judgement of beauty.

Keywords: aesthetic judgement; humour; reflective judgement; temporality; *Witz*

1. Introduction

In *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge 2023, henceforth cited only by page number), Robert Clewis provides the historical background to many of Kant's ideas in the third *Critique* and other writings by Kant on aesthetics and also relates these ideas to contemporary debates in aesthetic theory. *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics* deepens our understanding of Kant's aesthetics and provides much new material that will certainly inspire further work in aesthetics. Clewis's book is thus a very welcome addition to the current first-rate scholarship on Kant's aesthetics.

One theme in the book is that many of the ideas in the third *Critique* are the result of Kant's grappling with competing views held by his rationalist and empiricist predecessors. In this essay, I will discuss Clewis's explication of these tensions in his chapter on humour. Clewis writes that in understanding Kant's discussion of humour in the third *Critique*, one can focus on the physiological side of humour as the release of the 'vital forces', or one can focus on the intellectual side and Kant's discussion of the free play of the faculties. According to Clewis, if we took the second route, we could say that for Kant appreciating humour is similar to making a judgement of beauty. In fact, Clewis writes, 'while the aesthetic play (with aesthetic ideas) in humor and the play in beauty are not identical, they are analogous' (p. 7). Still, Clewis notes, 'Kant holds back and does not call the play in response to humor a kind of aesthetic judging' (p. 238).

I would like to explore further what Clewis suggests is an 'analogy' between humour and beauty, which would emphasise the rationalist aspect of Kant's view of humour. I will do this by focusing on Kant's concept of wit (*Witz*), which is central to both reflective judgement and humour. By exploring the concept of *Witz* as a distinctive kind of cognitive activity, I believe a case can be made that the origin of Kant's mature aesthetic theory in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, and his discovery of an a priori principle of taste, was, in part, a result of his thinking about *Witz*. Indeed, in the context of a discussion of the 'origins of Kant's aesthetics', it is arguable that *Witz* plays a central role in Kant's discovery of the principle of taste. I, therefore, share Clewis's puzzlement about why, in the third *Critique*, humour, arguably the art of *Witz*, is not itself considered to be a beautiful art, but is rather what Kant calls an agreeable art.[1] What distinguishes the *Witz* involved in judgements of beauty from the *Witz* of humour? And why does Kant 'hold back' from identifying the two?

2. Reflective judgement and *Witz*

In a 1787 letter to Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Kant indicates that he had 'discovered a new sort of *a priori* principles . . . ' (Br, 10: 513–16)[2] and was beginning work on a 'critique of taste'. According to Paul Guyer, it is likely that what Kant discovered that persuaded him that a third *Critique* was possible and necessary was his discovery of a 'hitherto unrecognized kind of judgment' (Guyer 2000: xx), namely, reflective judgement. In what follows, I will argue that for Kant reflective judgement is closely connected to what, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he calls mother wit, and later in the *Anthropology*, he calls wit (*Witz* [*ingenium*]). Generally stated, *Witz* is that capacity, or talent, in judging something, to 'get it right' without having to follow a rule.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that the power of judgement is the faculty of subsuming under rules, i.e. of distinguishing whether something does or does not come under a given rule (A132/B171). To use an example from medicine, it is the faculty by which a talented doctor would judge that a particular symptom falls under the category of one disease rather than another that a textbook might also suggest. It is a 'special talent that cannot at all be taught but can only be exercised' (A133/B172). This power of judgement cannot itself judge by following any rule, since it is precisely the role of the power of judgement to see if this particular thing falls under some rule in the first place. The power of judgement is thus a talent for making the right and fitting judgement – that, for example, this symptom is of some disease – without appealing to a rule.

Kant writes that because this talent of judgement cannot be taught and cannot follow any rule, it belongs to 'what is specific to the so-called mother wit' (A133/B172). What Kant means by 'mother wit' (*Mutterwitz*) is a kind of intelligence. It is the ability to 'get it right' in judging a particular case, without having to match it to some category by following a rule. It is my view that this is the same kind of intelligence that is exercised by what, in the third *Critique*, Kant argues is the pure power of judgement, that is, reflective judgement, the faculty whose a priori principle he newly discovers and which he considers to also be the principle of taste (Zinkin 2024: 72).

In the third *Critique*, Kant distinguishes reflective judgement from determining judgement as follows:

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> The power of judgment in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of judgment, which subsumes the particular under it … is **determining**. If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely reflecting. (KU, 5: 179)

We use determining judgement to judge what something is according to a concept we already possess. Reflective judgement, by contrast, is what we use when we try to come up with a concept for something new and figure out what it is. In the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant calls this same capacity 'wit'. He writes, 'Just as the faculty for discovering the particular for the universal (the rule) is the *power of judgment*, so the faculty of thinking up the universal for the particular is *wit* [*Witz*] (*ingenium*)' (Anth, 7: 201; see Clewis, p. 225).

It is precisely this special kind of intelligence involved in 'getting it right' which, in both the *Anthropology* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant calls *Witz*, whose principle it is Kant's aim to explicate in the third *Critique* – but there under the title of reflective judgement. Furthermore, in the third *Critique*, the principle of reflective judgement is also the principle of aesthetic judgements of taste. Kant writes, 'in a critique of the power of judgment the part that contains the aesthetic power of judgment is essential, since this alone contains a principle that the power of judgment lays at the basis of its reflection on nature entirely a priori' (KU, 5: 193). For Kant, the mental activity involved in finding the universal for the particular is the very same kind of mental activity involved in making a judgement of taste. If reflective judgement is the same as *Witz*, and the 'basis' of reflective judgement is the principle of aesthetic judgement, then it would seem that the a priori principle of aesthetic judgement, and of judgements of beauty, must also be an a priori principle for the art of jokes and humour, that is, *Witz*, which, Clewis notes, 'is the driving force behind the three jokes that Kant tells in the third *Critique*' (p. 225).

Let us look at the principle of aesthetic judgement in order to see how this principle of reflective judgement (or *Witz*) could also be the principle of humour (or *Witz*). Kant calls this the principle of purposiveness. The principle of purposiveness states that there must be some universal to be found for a particular. It therefore authorises us, in judging, to seek the universal for the particular. Kant writes that the principle of reflective judgement is the principle 'of a formal purposiveness of nature in accordance with its particular (empirical) laws for our faculty of cognition, without which the understanding could not find itself in it' (KU, 5: 193). In other words, the principle states that we must see nature as purposive for our judgement – as something that is meant to be judged by us. To see nature this way is to see its particular objects as subsumable under a universal concept and thus as something we can think about and judge. Without such a principle, we would not be able cognitively to engage with nature. To 'see' something this way is to see it from a standpoint of reflection where one compares it with others in order to come up with some universal for it (see EEKU, 20: 211).

The reason why this principle of reflective judgement is 'essentially' the principle of aesthetic judgement is because Kant considers taste to be the pure instance of this kind of purposive judging. When we judge something to be beautiful, our mind is

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engaged in the pure form of the reflective activity of 'thinking up' a universal for this particular. As Kant describes it, our mind is engaged in a play of the faculties of imagination and understanding. This play involves the activity of the productive imagination in trying to come up with a schema for some particular object on its own, without being determined by a concept of the understanding. But it also involves the faculty of understanding which, in this case, is subservient to the imagination and tries to come up with a universal for the schema produced by the imagination, rather than determining the imagination to produce a schema in accordance with a given concept, as in the case of determining judgement (see KU, 5: 242). Moreover, this play of the imagination and the understanding in a judgement of taste is pleasurable. This feeling of pleasure is the feeling of the rightness or fittingness of our mental activity in reflecting, a 'rightness' that we are aware that we share with all other rational beings who possess the same cognitive faculties. It is this pleasure in the rightness of our own reflective mental activity that constitutes the judgement of taste.

3. Wit and humour

It is easy to see how *Witz*, understood as the capacity to 'think up the universal for the particular', could be related to Kant's account of humour and jokes, that is, with a work that makes us laugh. Kant writes,

> in everything that is to provide a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction). **Laughter is an affect resulting from a sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing.** (KU, 5: 332)

For Kant, in a joke, one is made to expect something, but then what one is anticipating does not happen and is suddenly replaced with nothing. Moreover, what is described in the joke is something that from the perspective of the understanding appears to be nonsensical and to go against what one expects – it is transformed into nothing – and hence cannot be the object of a determining judgement. As Clewis points out, Kant's view of humour is primarily that defined by the 'incongruity theory'. According to this theory, 'people are amused by humour because they enjoy a mismatch between whatever is perceived and their ordinary expectations, norms, or concepts' (p. 213). What makes such jokes funny and pleasurable is that somehow the mismatch still makes sense and the joke thus makes us see something in a new way.

What, then, does this have to do with reflective judgement and our capacity to 'think up' a universal for the particular? Here we see that just as in the case of an empirical particular for which we do not know under what universal concept it is to be judged, and for which our mind engages in play in trying to come up with a concept for it, so, with a joke in which one's expectation is transformed into nothing, a space is then opened up for coming up with a new understanding of the thing at issue. What is pleasurable about a joke is that when we 'get it' we see how a new, alternative, explanation can make sense. The pleasure we feel is in the exercise of our own talent for judgement in seeing the universal meaning in what is at first nonsensical.

The pleasure we feel when we 'get' a joke is therefore very similar to the pleasure of taste. It is a pleasure in the 'rightness' of the activity of our judgement.[3] This feeling

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of rightness can be explained by saying that our cognitive faculties feel pleasure in engaging in the kind of activity that it is meant to engage in: the activity of reflection and of seeking a universal for a particular. Similarly, one can say that the feeling of pleasure in 'getting' a joke is a feeling of rightness in the judgement in seeing how what is seemingly 'nonsensical' can also make sense. Like an aesthetic judgement, getting a joke involves reflective judgement in which the understanding is not in charge but is in the 'service of the imagination' as it tries to find a universal for the schemas the imagination comes up with. Indeed, this intellectual aspect of the pleasure in humour explains how, like the pleasure in judgements of taste, it is a feeling of its own universal communicability. When I get a joke, what I 'get' is something I am aware others ought to get as well.

From what I have said above, it would seem that the intellectual activity involved in the *Witz* of humour represents well the activity of reflective judgement, which is the activity of finding the universal for the particular. It would therefore seem that humour, as an aesthetic judgement that involves a feeling of pleasure, would qualify as an exemplary instance of such judgement, and hence as a judgement of taste, since it is the feeling of pleasure in the 'rightness' of one's judgement of an unusual particular. I, therefore, agree with Clewis that Kant's discovery of an a priori principle of judgement 'had the potential to affect Kant's thoughts on humor, but it seems that he did not make the connection' (p. 239). Why, then, did Kant not count humour among the beautiful arts (not to mention consider it exemplary of them) and instead included it among the agreeable arts? Answering this question can help us to make a finer distinction within reflective judgement and to see what Kant values most about this intellectual activity.

Clewis indicates two possible explanations for why the wit of humour would not be considered by Kant to be beautiful art. One is that the pleasure in jokes involves the body, whereas beautiful art does not. Another is that jokes can be immoral whereas beautiful art cannot. Another explanation is that jokes have closure whereas beautiful art does not. It is not clear, however, how conclusive these points of distinction are. Nevertheless, there is another point of distinction that might explain the difference more accurately.

4. Why Kant thought humour was an agreeable art

Clewis suggests that one reason Kant 'held back' from calling humour a beautiful art is that his early physiological theory still had a strong hold on him (p. 239). Indeed, Kant's discussion of humour in the third *Critique* occurs in a Remark right after his discussion of the beautiful arts in which he contrasts 'that which pleases merely in the judging' with that which 'gratifies (pleases in the sensation)' (KU, 5: 330). According to Kant, there is an 'essential difference' between the two: 'The latter is something that one cannot, like the former, require of everyone.' This is because 'Gratification (even if its cause may lie in ideas) always seems to consist in a feeling of the promotion of the total life of the human being, consequently also of bodily well-being, i.e., of health' (KU, 5: 330–1).

For Kant, what merely gratifies cannot be 'required of everyone' and be the object of a universal satisfaction, since different people are gratified by different things. Only that which pleases with regard to what we have in common, which Kant here clearly considers to be 'the subjective conditions of the power of judgment' (KU, 5: 291) can be

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an object of taste. In other words, only that which pleases us cognitively, given the intellectual faculties we all necessarily share by virtue of being rational beings, can be judged to be beautiful. In the case of humour, Kant seems to assume that because jokes gratify us by promoting our bodily health, our finding something to be funny cannot be required of everyone.[4]

However, in the case of humour, I would argue that the promotion of my health is not a kind of gratification that is particular just to me. Since we all have bodies, it is arguable that the particular kind of gratification that occurs with humour, namely the promotion of our health, *can* be required of everyone. What is motivating Kant's argument against humour is not that it is not the object of a universal satisfaction, but that it involves the body. Moreover, Kant himself calls the pleasure in judgements of taste the 'feeling of life' (KU, 5: 205). So, the fact that humour involves a living, bodily pleasure does not in itself argue against it being a beautiful art that can make a claim to universal agreement. Indeed, here one can also ask why, in the case of humour, Kant chooses to emphasise the bodily aspect of the feeling of pleasure – the matter of the feeling – but not its form. To say that this emphasis is a holdover from views he developed earlier does not address other reasons Kant might have for this view. Clewis himself admits that Kant's choice here remains a mystery. He writes, 'In the work of 1790, *for whatever reason*, Kant focuses on laughter's physiological aspects' (p. 237, italics mine).

Clewis notes that another reason why humour might not be considered to be a beautiful art is that humour is not serious and thus lacks a connection to morality (p. 239). Jokes are often at someone else's expense and thus the pleasure that we take in them can be categorised as expressing judgements in which we take a particular interest and hence as agreeable. Still, it seems, there can be a kind of disinterested laughter with regard to the formal properties of the incongruity of the joke itself. So the moral objection might not be able to rule out the possibility that some jokes can be beautiful art. Kant might reply, in a way analogous to his discussion of art whose content arouses loathing (KU, 5: 312), that if the content of a joke involves making fun of someone, then there cannot be any disinterested aesthetic satisfaction in the joke. But it is still conceivable that there are jokes that are free of moral, or immoral, content.

Finally, it seems jokes have 'punch lines' that one 'gets', whereas the pleasure of beauty is in the harmonious play of the cognitive faculties. The pleasure in a joke is thus ultimately in the closure of what has first been opened up by the incongruity between what one is made to expect and the reality that is presented. This makes it different from the beautiful, which, while it includes a feeling of 'rightness' in the judging, also sustains an openness and purposiveness without a purpose (KU, 5: 236). Kant writes that the beautiful art of poetry, for example, 'give(s) the imagination impetus to think more, although in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended in a concept, and hence in a determinate linguistic expression' (KU, 5: 315). Kant might therefore disagree with Clewis, who considers the aesthetic play in humour and in judgements of beauty to be analogous. Still, one could argue that, like poetry, jokes do open up to us new ways of seeing something.

5. Conclusion

I have suggested some ways in which one might explain why Kant thought that humour was not a beautiful art like poetry. I conclude by briefly offering a suggestion

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as to how Kant might still regard humour as essentially involving an activity of the intellect. That is, there is a way for Kant to make the distinction between the kind of intelligence which is the *Witz* involved in humour and that which is the *Witz* of the reflective judgement of beauty. This would be to make a distinction that is not based on physiology or morality or closure, although the distinction I have in mind is likely related to these (as either a cause or an effect – I do not have the space to discuss this here). Instead, one could say that for Kant what distinguishes the *Witz* of humour from the *Witz* of reflective judgement is their different temporal mode of cognition. Kant writes that humour involves a 'sudden' shift of the mind, whereas 'we linger over the contemplation of the beautiful' (KU, 5: 222). And indeed, we call the wit of humour 'quick' and 'sharp', whereas reflection is the kind of intellectual activity that is slow and thoughtful.[5] Although the intelligence required in turning from the particular to the universal can be either quick or slow, in the third *Critique,* Kant places a higher value on the kind of intelligence that is slow. The slow, enduring nature of the reflection is what makes it *more* intellectual than *Witz*, and closer to the systematic activity of pure reason. As Clewis notes, 'profound wit is more enduring because it appeals to reason' (p. 225). He refers to Kant's writings on anthropology where he distinguishes between superficial and profound wit (pp. 225–6). Profound wit, like some satires, makes one think more deeply about 'true and important principles' (Anth, 7: 222) and hence engage our faculty of reason and require time to fully comprehend and appreciate. Superficial, or quick, wit, by contrast, we appreciate right away, although it still involves its own kind of genius.[6]

As should be clear from these comments, Clewis's excellent book provides rich material for new ways to think about central issues in Kant's aesthetics.

Notes

1 For an interesting discussion of the central role of laughter in the third *Critique*, see Giamario (2017).
2 Except for the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998), cited in the usual A/B format, citations from Kant refer to volume:page in the *Akademie* edition of his writings (Kant 1900). Abbreviations: Anth=*Anthropology* (in Kant 2007b), Br=*Briefe* (in Kant 1999), EEKU=First Introduction to the *Critique of Judgement* (in Kant 2007a), KU=*Critique of the Power of Judgement* (in Kant 2007a).
3 See Ginsborg (2014: 45).
4 Kant writes that material for laughter is a kind of play with aesthetic ideas ... by which (it is) evident that the animation is merely corporeal although it is aroused by ideas of the mind, and that the feeling of health resulting from a movement of the viscera corresponding to that play constitutes the whole gratification in a lively party' (KU, 5: 332). Here, Kant writes that 'one discovers that one can get at the body even through the soul and use the latter as a doctor for the former' (KU, 5: 332).
5 See Makkai (2020: 67): Wit 'has to do with a sharpness of mind manifesting discernment and insight, and a quickness or readiness to make illuminating connections'.
6 Kant's example is Voltaire. See Anth, 7: 222; cited in Clewis, p. 226.

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