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BOOK REVIEW

Robert R. Clewis, *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. pp. xiv + 265. ISBN 9781009209427 (hbk) $99.99

This meticulously argued and tightly structured book follows a recent trend in Kant scholarship by understanding Kant's philosophy as a dynamic whole rather than as a static theory. Clewis' impressive book pays very close attention to Kant's early publications, correspondence, university lectures, and marginalia.

The book consists of eight chapters, four of which are based upon earlier publications and each of which is devoted to a topic that is still relevant to contemporary aesthetic theorising: aesthetic normativity, free (sensible) beauty, adherent (intellectual) beauty, artistic creativity, the fine arts, the sublime, ugliness and disgust, and humour. The overall hypothesis about the development of Kant's aesthetics that the book defends is that Kant's trajectory developed along five main 'arcs' (pp. 13–14): first, due to Kant's growing interest in natural teleology, a shift from art to nature; second, from considering *intellectual* beauty as self-standing beauty to *free* beauty as self-standing; third, from a rationalist conception of aesthetic perfection to a view of beauty as an expression of aesthetic ideas; fourth, concerning the sources and normativity of the pleasure: from being grounded in laws of intuition or sensibility to the free harmonious play of imagination and understanding; and finally, from making merely loose connections between aesthetics and morality to the mature view of beauty and sublimity as aesthetic experiences of freedom (indirectly) supporting morality.

The first three chapters make up the first part of the book and deal with the themes of aesthetic judgement and beauty. Chapter 1 examines the origins and development of Kant's views of aesthetic normativity. As Kant published nothing on aesthetics between his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, of 1764, and his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790, Clewis naturally focuses on Kant's lectures, correspondence, and marginalia in order to offer a detailed scrutiny of his development on the topic of rules of taste. In his early thinking, Kant still makes a strict distinction between the *empirical generality* in matters of beauty and the *a priori universality* in logic and concept application. In the third *Critique*, however, Kant argues that pure aesthetic judgements are based upon a single a priori principle while denying that they are grounded merely in concepts. Referring to Kant's December 1787 letter to Reinhold, Clewis shows that this is due to three factors: 'a "sudden discovery" of an a priori principle for the faculty of the feeling of pleasure and displeasure; his take on the capacities of the mind; and a new vision of a "teleology"' (p. 48). The 'sudden discovery' of an a priori principle forces Kant to change his views considerably. The author rightly points to a tension apparent in Kant's mature theory between, on the one hand, the thought that judgements of taste are grounded in an a priori principle and, on the other, the claim that taste, because it is not determinable by means of concepts, is in need of examples or models. Clewis contends that 'the

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apparent tension can in this case be reconciled', yet unfortunately he does not offer any convincing arguments to substantiate this claim. He merely repeats Kant's view that one cannot appeal to proofs and demonstrations in matters of beauty and that what provides the ground for judgements of taste is the a priori principle of the power of judgement.

Chapter 2 discusses Kant's formalism and free beauty. In Kant's earlier aesthetics, 'form' is understood as spatial figure (in the visual arts) or rhythm with melody and harmony (in music). Clewis sketches the development of Kant's formalism and argues that, according to Kant, free beauty (beauty 'without a concept') is a response to 'form'. Yet what Kant exactly means by 'form' is hardly clear and Kant's formalism has been seriously disputed. Clewis therefore distinguishes between three types of formalism: strong, moderate, and weak formalism. Instead of attempting to decide which is the most viable position, Clewis aims to show that tensions in the third *Critique* are due to remnants of his changing views about this matter. Kant defended a version of strong formalism as early as the 1760s, but the weak version is connected with, and – at least according to Clewis – even 'supported by his growing attention to the role of aesthetic (and moral) ideas in aesthetic experience' (p. 69), which may not be as obvious as the author supposes.

The third chapter focuses on dependent or adherent beauty, the type of beauty that Kant describes as 'self-standing' beauty in a 1772/3 anthropology lecture transcription. In the third *Critique*, however, it is *free* beauty which is deemed to be the self-standing type of beauty. In this intriguing chapter, which contains many fascinating details about the ideas that shaped Kant's early views of 'purpose-based' beauty and the development of the distinction between 'free' and 'adherent' beauty, Clewis shows how the empiricist dispute about the relation between beauty and utility and the rationalist definition of beauty as an intuitive cognition of perfection (established by Leibniz and Wolff) have shaped Kant's views. He argues that the priority Kant gives to free beauty in his mature aesthetics is (at least partly) due to his shifting the focus from art to nature. Nature plays a relatively subordinate role in his early reflections on beauty, but in a draft of an outline of the first part of the third *Critique*, Kant argues that cultivating beauty (and sublimity) in nature is a preparation for moral feeling. Since Kant has become more and more interested in the connection between natural beauty and natural purposiveness (the 'technique of nature'), it has become less of a surprise that Kant now characterises *natural* beauty as self-standing (p. 98).

The second part of the book comprises Chapters 4 and 5 and deals with themes that are connected with genius and art. In Chapter 4, Clewis offers a fine, detailed overview of the development of Kant's views of genius and creativity. He makes an interesting distinction between a 'thin' and 'thick' conception of genius and claims that aspects of both can be found in the third *Critique*. The 'thin' conception defines genius as being able to create nonsense that is original but not exemplary, and conflicts with taste, whereas the 'thick' conception considers genius to be unable to create nonsense that is original but not also exemplary, and thus provides a conception of genius which stands in harmony with, and includes, taste. Chapter 5 offers a wonderfully nuanced discussion of Kant's developing views of the classification of the fine arts. Clewis shows why Kant ranks poetry at the top of the hierarchy and argues that music constantly occupies an ambivalent position in Kant's thought, emphasising music's ability to arouse affects as well as its potential connection to aesthetic ideas. As said,

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this chapter provides a very nuanced discussion of the development of Kant's thoughts on fine art, but the author shuns a sustained critical evaluation of Kant's hierarchy of the arts. This overall reticence to provide a sustained critical evaluation of Kant's views may be a justified methodological option of the author and surely offers coherence to the book as a whole, but might at times prove disappointing to readers who are looking for a more radical questioning mode of inquiry.

The third part, consisting of Chapters 6–8, explores negative and positive states of pleasure. The sixth chapter examines the origins and development of Kant's views of the sublime. Clewis interestingly connects Kant's theory of the sublime with Baumgarten, Burke, and Mendelssohn, and provides an immensely detailed study of Kant's views of sublimity in lecture notes and marginalia. This chapter is one of the better parts of the book and offers a rich overview of Kant's developing thoughts on the sublime. Yet it is a shame that the important question of whether artistic sublimity is possible according to Kant's mature view is not dealt with in more detail. Furthermore, Clewis' claim that scholars who have tried to offer an account of the sublime in terms of aesthetic ideas 'should be recognized as being reconstructive' might not be as obvious as the author seems to suppose (pp. 176–7).

Ugliness and disgust are the two topics mentioned in the title of the seventh chapter, but the focus is clearly more on the former. Commentators disagree on whether Kant considers an aesthetic judgement of ugliness to be possible, and if so, whether it can be pure or must be impure. This is related to the question of whether the notion of a free *disharmonious* play of the faculties is conceivable. The author scrutinises all the main arguments pro/con in this seventh chapter and offers good reasons to deny the possibility of pure aesthetic judgements of ugliness. Besides discussing the possibility of pure judgements of ugliness, he also offers an interesting discussion of the ideas about 'deformity' that inspired Kant's early views. One might have wished to find a more detailed discussion of Mendelssohn, Hume, and especially of Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766), which caused huge controversy in its time and might be more crucial to Kant's (early) views than Clewis seems to suggest.

The eighth and final chapter of the book starts with the sentence 'Kant is no Oscar Wilde'. In a footnote to this sentence, Clewis mentions the utterance 'Immanuel doesn't pun, he Kant', which has been attributed to Oscar Wilde by John Pollack. Clearly, the perhaps rather surprising topic of humour is the central one in this chapter. Clewis discusses the principal theories shaping Kant's thoughts about humour – the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the release theory – and unsurprisingly claims that Kant is first and foremost an incongruity theorist. As is well known, Kant importantly distinguishes between the agreeable arts and the fine arts. One of the agreeable arts he calls the 'arts of laughter' and under this label, he discusses wit, naiveté, and whim (*Laune*). In the context of aesthetics, it is interesting to note, first, that the more intellectual notion of a 'free play' in humour emerges later than the (physiological) release aspect of Kant's thinking, and second, that Kant links whim to genius in the 1770s, a connection that Kant repudiates in the third *Critique*. The final chapter offers a fine discussion of the development of Kant's views of humour and makes plausible the thought-provoking claim that '[p]erhaps his discussions of humor and laughter will even one day be seen as resources that are useful for understanding Kant's aesthetics as a whole' (p. 240).

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This book is an invaluable contribution to the secondary literature on Kant's aesthetics. It has the rigour and clarity of the best work by philosophers writing on Kant while propounding an interpretation that returns to the origins and the development of Kant's core concerns in a way that will hopefully prove exemplary to others.

Bart Vandenabeele
Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
Email: bart.vandenabeele@ugent.be

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