

THE ARTWORK'S JUDGE: THE LEGACY OF KANT AND HUME THROUGH THE LENS OF EMPIRICAL AESTHETICS

An Interdisciplinary Debate on The Judgement of Beauty

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Abstract Recent advances in neuroscientific and psychological research demand a re-evaluation of Hume's and Kant's philosophical accounts of aesthetic judgement. While Hume emphasises the role of art experts in establishing a standard of taste, Kant advocates a personal judgement of beauty based on a disinterested feeling of pleasure. Little research has been conducted on the direct empirical support for these theories. Through studying aesthetic judgement, this paper explores the interdisciplinary nexus of empirical philosophy, which seeks to integrate insights of empirical aesthetics to advance the philosophical debate on aesthetic judgement. Empirical findings not only highlight the distinctly separate judgement of beauty of experts and non-experts, but also build on the Kantian legacy, emphasising the role emotion and intuition play in aesthetic judgement.

Keywords: Aesthetic judgement, Hume's standard of taste, Kant's concept of disinterested pleasure, Empirical philosophy, Neuropsychology of aesthetics

I. Aesthetic Judgement

As we celebrate Kant's 300th anniversary, the debate on aesthetic judgement between Kant and Hume has resurfaced. Both thinkers offer contrasting views on how to judge the beauty of an artwork. Hume (1910) suggested that only qualified art experts can judge beauty. In contrast, Kant (1987), who developed his theory of aesthetic judgement in response to Hume, claimed that beauty should be based on the autonomy of the individual. Their seemingly opposing views sparked a debate on the role of knowledge and expertise in the judgement of beauty, which continues to this date (Marino & Terzi, 2021).

Since Kant and Hume significantly shaped the debate on aesthetic judgement in the 18th century, it has been expanded by an empirical dimension through the investigation of the psychological and neural processes underlying aesthetic judgements. While these two research streams of philosophy and empirical aesthetics have coexisted, only in recent years have there been attempts to integrate these debates (Jon & Currie, 2022; Nadal & Oshin, 2022). At question is how these empirical insights inform the philosophical debate on aesthetic judgement according to Kant and Hume. Considering the novel approaches to studying aesthetics, the empirical perspective calls for a re-evaluation of Hume and Kant's legacy. This study is guided by the question: To what extent does empirical aesthetics advance the debate of how to judge the beauty of an artwork? This study argues that integrating empirical insights into the discussion on aesthetic judgement not only deepens the understanding of perceptual experience but also enriches the discussion on normative aesthetic standards. Empirical findings not only highlight the greatly diverging judgement of beauty between experts and non-experts, but also build on the Kantian legacy, emphasising the role of emotion and intuition in judgement. While aesthetics encompasses more than judgements of beauty, this widely-studied category, which was debated at length by Hume and Kant, will be the central focus in this discussion of aesthetic judgement. The scope of this paper will not discuss the necessity of beauty in art or the demarcation of art from non-art. An artwork is here considered a visual representation such as a painting, sculpture or architecture (Britannica, 2015). In this essay, an overview of Hume and Kant's account of aesthetic judgement will be contrasted with the empirical foundation of these claims, followed by a discussion on how the empirical evidence influences the philosophical debate on aesthetic judgement.

2. Theoretical Framework

The philosophy of aesthetics focuses on exploring concepts of beauty and the sublime (Burke, 1998), defining art and its demarcation from non-art, investigating the experience of perceiving and judging art, as well as reflecting on the influence of cultural, social and historical contexts on aesthetic values (Jacobsen et al., 2010). Aesthetic judgement is a phenomenon widely studied in this context. Aesthetic judgement is a perfect area of study for Liberal Arts, as it cannot be studied in isolation but demands for an interdisciplinary investigation. It is subject to complex interdependencies between the personal experiences and knowledge of the perceiver, the emotional state and context, as well as neuronal processes that influence the judgement of an artwork.

Reflecting on the judgement of beauty from a philosophical and neuropsychological perspective led to the emergence of empirical philosophy, with the aim of informing philosophical debates through empirical data. The attempt to advance the understanding of philosophy of aesthetics through empirical approaches is not new. The term “empirical aesthetics” was coined by Fechner (1876) and has its roots in the late 19th century. Initially, the focus was on defining universal aesthetic qualities in works of art, such as symmetry or composition that induce appreciation. The contemporary focus today lies more on studying the neural and psychological basis of aesthetic experiences and how they are influenced by factors such as prior knowledge or the emotional state (Jacobsen, 2010; Seeley, 2014). Today, there is increased awareness of the crucial role empirical sciences can play in understanding aesthetic experiences (Cova et al., 2015; Nüsslein-Volhard, 2019).

2.1 Resolving Tensions within Empirical Philosophy

Tensions, however, arise in the connection of these two disciplines. The philosophy of aesthetics aims to describe the normative role of aesthetic judgement in what *ought to be*—meaning how we *should* judge an artwork; whereas empirical aesthetics aims to understand what *is*, by investigating the mechanisms underlying an aesthetic judgement (Seeley, 2014; Cova et al., 2015). Empirical aesthetics is an umbrella term for experimental and observational approaches studying aesthetic judgement, such as the neural processes (neuroaesthetics) and emotional responses (psychology of aesthetics) active when someone appreciates an artwork. Combining these two fields into experimental philosophy of aesthetics seems contradictory, primarily due to the different methodologies used and different definitions of aesthetics (Seeley, 2014). The normative and ontological questions relevant to the philosophy of aesthetics cannot purely be informed by empirical aesthetics. Additionally, empirical aesthetics alone does not succeed in capturing

the subjective experience of an observer in lab-based experiments (Dorsch, 2014; Silvia, 2011). The richness of experience underlying an aesthetic judgement cannot be reduced to neuronal activity in the brain, nor can it be captured by asking participants to fill out questionnaires. These limitations have to be considered when interpreting empirical data. Despite these epistemic difficulties of integrating empirical aesthetics and the philosophy of aesthetics, we should not dismiss this approach entirely. Instead, there is a need to cautiously investigate how such an integration could be possible. While aesthetic experience entails more than measurable aspects, the neurological, cognitive and psychological insights into underlying processes of such judgement should not be ignored. Seeley (2014) suggests a rapprochement model to establish a profound understanding of the role of psychological and philosophical theories in explaining aesthetic judgement, as well as an understanding of their limitations. This study addresses this research gap by exploring the concrete limitations that arise from discussing the question of aesthetic judgement from a philosophical and empirical perspective.

2.2 Two Criteria for the Evaluation of Theory

Two criteria will be used to evaluate the theories of aesthetic judgement in through the lens of empirical aesthetics: (1) autonomy and (2) intuition. Autonomy in aesthetic judgement here denotes that the judgement of beauty should not be based on the injunction of others but on the personal appreciation of an artwork. This leads to the second requirement, as autonomy in the judgement of beauty requires everyone to be able to judge beauty independently. Beauty is a concept that cannot be grasped by rational criteria, so to understand the beauty of an artwork, we must rely on intuition. As this essay will demonstrate, both philosophers impose restrictions on these two criteria. While Kantian aesthetics allow for greater autonomy in judgement, the restrictions imposed on intuition are in tension with the research on empirical aesthetics. Integrating Humean aesthetics into the debate is therefore necessary to understand the role of prior knowledge, experience and expert opinion influencing the intuitive nature of aesthetic judgement. Using the criteria of autonomy and intuition, this essay presents how findings in empirical aesthetics can guide the philosophical debate on aesthetic judgement.

3. Hume: Relying on Experts to Judge Beauty

For the subsequent analysis of the philosophical and empirical implications of Hume's view, this section serves as a brief introduction to his argument. Hume believes that beauty is not a quality that objects have in themselves: "Objects have

absolutely no worth or value in themselves. They derive their worth merely from the passion” (Hume, 1739, p. 166). In this sense, beauty resides in the sentiment we develop in response to an object (Hume, 1910, p. 7). For Hume, sentiment is not merely an emotional response, but rather develops after a complex evaluation of an artwork. However, when two individuals assess an artwork based on subjective sentiment, their evaluations often differ. Hume acknowledges this and proposes two options. Either we can conclude that all judgements of taste are right, or some judgements of taste are objectively wrong (Hume, 1910, pp. 7-8). Hume chooses the second option. He explains that some people’s sentiments are so absurd that no one will value their judgement (Hume, 1910, p. 8). So, then how is it possible to determine good or bad taste? Hume (1910) suggests that we follow a standard of taste. To establish this standard, we must refer to experts. These experts – who Hume calls “true judges” – must have five specific characteristics: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison and cleared of all prejudice” (Hume, 1910, p. 23). The standard of beauty is established by their joint verdict, i.e., their collective judgement (Hume, 1910, p. 23). According to Hume, the beauty of an artwork can be judged by following the opinion of the joint verdict.

3.1 Empirical Perspective on the Standard of Taste

The empirical perspective on the standard of taste reveals distinct neuropsychological differences in the aesthetic experiences of experts versus novices, highlighting the influence of knowledge and experience on aesthetic judgement. When an expert and a non-expert consider a painting beautiful, they might base their judgement on very different aspects of the painting, making the resulting judgement of beauty incomparable. Eye-tracking studies and neuropsychological studies indicate that art experts, such as artists, art teachers and art historians, evaluate paintings in a different way to non-experts (Francuz et al., 2018). Studies tracking the eye movements of experts, have found they fixate less on narrative elements, instead letting their eye wander over the painting to study the background, composition and other art-specific classifications in detail (Pihko et al., 2011; Tallon et al., 2021; Vogt and Magnussen, 2007). In contrast, the eyes of non-experts linger on the primary narrative features in the foreground. Additionally, knowledge and familiarity with a painting style have shown to increase the appreciation of an artwork (Song et al., 2021). Experts, when viewing a painting, exhibit greater involvement of neural processes associated with memory than non-experts (van Paasschen et al., 2015), indicating that their judgement relies more on stored information. These neural processes require increased attention and lead to the activation of brain areas associated with reward and emotion (Kirk

et al., 2009). These studies highlight the differences in the judgement of beauty between experts and non-experts and suggest that expert judges engage in distinct aesthetic processing.

3.2 Implications for Philosophical Debate on Experts

Evidence of the differences in aesthetic processing between experts and non-experts fails to establish the superiority of expert judgement in determining beauty. The empirical evidence does not necessarily help to advance the normative component of aesthetic judgement, i.e. the question of how one *should* judge. However, it does give insight into the extent to which the judgements are incomparable. Even if an expert and a non-expert come to the same judgement of beauty, they base the judgement on different concepts and frameworks. With the deeper understanding of the role of knowledge and experience influencing an aesthetic judgement by empirical aesthetics, the normative component of aesthetic judgement can be established by a philosophical reflection using the criteria of autonomy and intuition.

Firstly, integrating Hume's perspective into the discussion on intuition shows the multifaceted processes influencing an intuitive judgement. Studies contrasting the judgements of experts and non-experts show that a judgement of beauty does not occur in an isolated space, but that an intuition might be influenced by prior knowledge and experience. However, Hume's demand for experts fails to quantify beauty through criteria. The evidence does not directly support the conclusion that an expert's judgement of beauty is superior to that of a non-expert. As the empirical data demonstrates, experts and non-experts' judgements of beauty are based on very different frameworks. For experts, the judgement of beauty is informed by experience and might be influenced by the profound knowledge of the historical era of an artist. However, these external characteristics do not directly quantify beauty. The acquisition of new knowledge in aesthetics reflects aesthetic norms rather than beauty itself. Through "social conditioning" (Smith, 1988, p. 30), experts have learned and been trained that a depiction adheres to aesthetic norms and that specific judgements of art are socially accepted. Yet, parameters such as symmetry, composition and contrast do not help to quantify beauty, but to evaluate characteristics of a painting. Experts are provided with rules as a framework to evaluate an artwork (Grant, 2011). This contradicts the statement that beauty is not inherent in the object, as the attempt to quantify beauty and improve an aesthetic judgement assumes that there are specific features in the object that make it beautiful. Experts are not more readily able to make an objective judgement of beauty than non-experts, but instead display an acquired, profound understanding of aesthetic norms.

Secondly, Hume's demand for expert judgement shifts responsibility away from the individual and devalues the personal, autonomous judgement of beauty. In Kant's view, Hume's demand promotes immaturity. According to Kant: "Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another" (Kant, 1784, p. 1). Basing one's evaluation of beauty on the opinions of others, would therefore be deemed both immature and a failure of personal autonomy (Kant, 1987, p. 144). Kant explains, the "universal validity [of a judgement of taste] is not to be established by gathering votes and asking other people what kind of sensation they are having; but it must rest, as it were, on the autonomy of the subject who is making a judgement about the feeling of pleasure" (Kant, 1987, p. 144). In this sense, Kant proposed a theory that relies more on the individual when judging beauty.

4. Kant: Relying on Disinterested Pleasure to Judge Beauty

To address the role of knowledge and experts in aesthetic judgement, Kant's solution is different to Hume's. This essay will focus on two key concepts of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment. Firstly, that a judgement of beauty is based on disinterested pleasure, and secondly how taste can have universal validity. Both Kant and Hume agree that the evaluation of beauty is a subjective matter (Kant, 1987, p. 44). Consequently, they both acknowledge that the judgement of taste varies widely between people. However, Kant believes that when evaluating the beauty of an artwork, the viewer should base their judgement solely on the feeling of pleasure experienced (Kant, 1987, p. 44). The judgement of taste must be free from desires and other influences. It should, instead, be disinterested (Kant, 1987, p. 45). To illustrate his point, Kant gives the example of a palace: when asked if a palace is beautiful, a person should consider not whether they value its existence, necessity or efficiency as a palace, but only if it pleases them (Kant, 1987, p. 45). From this claim follows Kant's second important conclusion: if beauty is judged solely based on pleasure, rather than other desires and biases, then the judgement resulting from such pleasure will have universal validity (*Allgemeingültigkeit*). That is, the judgement will be intersubjectively valid since people "ought" to judge in a similar way (Kant, 1987, p. 140). Therefore, for Kant, the judgement of beauty is based solely on pleasure, and only on that basis can it have universal validity.

4.1 Empirical Perspective on Disinterested Pleasure

Kant himself was critical of the empirical study of aesthetics, as his theory is very much focused on the subjective experience of the individual (Grant, 2011). In-

deed, an external viewpoint can only give limited insights into these subjective, personal judgements. However, in his theory he points to mental capacities that everyone shares. These shared mental capacities have a strong empirical basis that can be studied from a neuropsychological perspective. The following section of this paper will investigate to what extent the empirical evidence can inform Kantian concepts of disinterest and pleasure.

In parallel with the Kantian concept of pleasure, emotions appear to play a central role in aesthetic judgements. Positive emotions such as empathy (Markovic, 2012; Chuan-Peng et al., 2020; Higuera-Trujillo et al., 2021) and affection (Markovic, 2012) have been shown to play an essential role during aesthetic appreciation. Negative emotions such as disgust, anger and sadness have also been identified as a forming part of the aesthetic experience, with calls for further research in this area (Silvia, 2011). However, in the case of judgements of beauty, there seems to be consensus about the significance of positive emotions (Yeh & Peng, 2018). On a neuronal level, research participants who were shown a painting they appreciated experienced increased activity in areas of the brain associated with the processing of emotions and reward, such as the medial orbitofrontal cortex (mORC), compared to those that were shown paintings they did not appreciate (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2016; Yang et al., 2022). In this sense, Kant's understanding of pleasure can also be supported from a neuroscientific and psychological perspective, based on the role positive emotions play in aesthetic judgement.

The concept of disinterestedness is in tension with the empirical evidence pointing to the diverse range of factors influencing an aesthetic judgement, such as the setting and context of the experience (e.g., whether it takes place in a museum, at home or in a laboratory setting), cultural influences (Vessel et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019), familiarity with the painting style (Jacobsen & Beudt, 2017) and even the personality (Swami & Furnham, 2020) and mood of the observer (Egermann & Reuben, 2020; Jacobsen & Beudt, 2017). In this sense, the interpretation of an artwork does not occur in an isolated space (see also Pombo et al., 2023). For Kant, as explained previously, disinterestedness describes a judgement that is free of any other influences. No other desires or knowledge about the artwork should be considered in a judgement of beauty. Given these various factors of influence, the extent to which a judgement of beauty can actually be disinterested is questionable, as will be discussed in the following section.

4.2 Implications for Philosophical Debate: High Demands on Pleasure

While Hume suggests a standard to identify beautiful artworks based on expertise, Kant seems to suggest a more intuitive and autonomous approach to judging beauty. By basing the judgement of beauty on pleasure, a person can identify the

beauty of an artwork not only by external validation, but also by grasping the meaning they assign to it independently. Every individual can develop their own judgement of the artwork based on pleasure. However, two aspects of this theory lack clarity in their application.

The first challenge pertains to the idea of disinterestedness. Taking into consideration the various factors influencing a judgement of beauty, is it possible to judge it in a disinterested way? Kant demands disinterestedness in such an evaluation, focusing solely on pleasure would appear impossible. This can also be approached neuroscientifically. When visual information is processed in the brain, feedback mechanisms immediately integrate prior knowledge and experiences into it. Besides the information integrated during visual processing, it might be difficult for an individual to isolate pleasure from other feelings and associations they are experiencing. As Katz (2016) explains, pleasure is closely linked to the satisfaction of desire and other motivations. For example, when I stand in front of the painting “The Kiss” by Gustav Klimt, I get a feeling of warmth and excitedness from the gold and the portrayal of intimacy. But additionally, it reminds me of a poem I read about love and rejection. Even if I could ignore this other association, it would still influence my feeling of pleasure. This criticism can be taken even further: not only is it impossible to entirely isolate pleasure, pleasure itself can also be considered a desire (Zangwill, 2021). So, when observing “The Kiss”, the desire to feel pleasure in the beauty might in turn influence how I perceive this painting. As feelings can be influenced and are difficult to isolate, the requirement of disinterested pleasure might be nearly impossible to achieve.

The second challenge pertains to Kant’s ideal of universal validity. Even if a person was able to isolate pleasure from all other influences, it is still debatable whether their judgement would then have “universal validity” (Kant, 1987, p. 141). Firstly, even disinterested pleasure is not universal. As Hume notes, the feeling of pleasure is dependent on character traits, “custom [and] caprice” (Hume, 1910, pp. 16 & 29). This claim is supported by a neuroscientific perspective showing that there is strong variance between individuals (Pombo et al., 2023). Consequently, the feeling of pleasure will differ between individuals. Some people will react strongly to a beautiful painting, while others might be neutral at the sight of the same artwork. Secondly, it is not possible to compare the pleasure felt by two different people observing the same object: one person will never be able to feel the pleasure of the other. The incommensurability of the feeling of pleasure makes it impossible to test the claim to universal validity. Universal validity cannot therefore be studied by an empirical account, but only by a philosophical stance.

5. Conclusion

Aesthetic judgement can be framed in many ways. As shown in this paper, the philosophical discussions on aesthetic judgement initiated by Kant and Hume can be complemented by a neuropsychological understanding. While these two research framings initially seem incompatible, the methodological gap can be bridged by focusing on the common aim of developing a holistic understanding of aesthetic judgement. Both perspectives are necessary. The philosophical account uses examples of singular experiences and thought experiments to support and evaluate the logical consistency in the argument, while the empirical perspective alone might only advance a reductionist conception of the judgement of beauty by studying only the measurable aspects of personal judgement. Only by connecting both accounts, can the empirical soundness and normative basis of an aesthetic judgement be investigated. Empirical evidence helped to establish a deeper account of the differences in visual processing between experts and non-experts and to shed light on the difficulty of judging art based on the Kantian ideal of disinterested pleasure. This discussion highlights the importance of establishing an interdisciplinary account of aesthetic judgement and advocates for further development of the field of empirical philosophy of aesthetics. As explained by Cova et al. (2015), a possible next step is to move from the integration of empirical evidence into the philosophical debate, to philosophers running their own experiments. This would lead to the creation of the discipline of experimental philosophy of aesthetics with the direct aim of detailing the empirical side of aesthetic judgement.

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