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Individual Highlights

Immanuel Kant's Critique of
Judgment (Part I) 1

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment (part I)

By
Martin L. Cowen III

This essay recapitulates our first two Fellowship of Reason Sunday school presentations on Immanuel Kant's third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790, about aesthetics, the theory of beauty. More particularly, this essay will: (1) explain why we should care at all to learn about Kant's third critique; (2) provide a mini-biography of Kant; (3) define some important Kantian terms to facilitate our understanding of the text; and (4) state Kant's first "moment" of the judgment of taste. Kant's four "moments" are simply categories of the theory of beauty. Let us begin.

Part I: Why Study Kant?

“What is the beautiful thing to do?” We in the Fellowship of Reason act toward the beautiful (as do most people). When we get up in the morning, we shower, brush our teeth, coif our hair (those of us who have it), and dress finely. Our goal is to beautify ourselves. We drive to work in an orderly fashion, speak, nod or waive greetings to friends and acquaintances we meet, and sit ourselves down at our neatly organized workspaces. Our goal is to act beautifully with others. We execute our work tasks as experts, that is to say, with excellence. We are (by now) all experts. We work beautifully to create beautiful work product. We enjoy entertainments provided by great artists on the radio, on TV, from the Internet, and in person. We enjoy the beautiful. We act, generally, with order, refinement, and grace. On the whole and for the most part, we act toward the beautiful. When we enact The Beautiful, we act morally.

Aristotle brings this insight to us via Joe Sachs' translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Professor Sachs teaches that the Greek phrase “to kalon” or “το καλόν” (the Greek spelling), means The Beautiful. Aristotle, who says that, for example, the goal of the human excellence/virtue of courage is to enact the beautiful, repeatedly uses the phrase “to kalon”. The goal of all ethical action is The Beautiful, according to Aristotle.

Aristotle's ethics is different from the dominant ethics of Western Culture. The dominant ethical systems are *utilitarianism* and *duty ethics*. Utilitarianism

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asserts that moral actions are those actions that produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Duty ethics asserts that moral actions are those that are in accord with rules decreed by an authority—religious, philosophical, or governmental. Jeremy Bentham (English, 1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (English 1806-1873) are utilitarians. Immanuel Kant (German 1724-1804) is a duty ethicist, or a *deontologist*. Deontology comes from the classical Greek word “deon” meaning *that which is binding*. Deontology is the study of that which is ethically binding. Religious ethical systems are deontological, that is, “you must obey God because He says so.” Aristotle’s ethics is sometimes called a virtue ethics. Aristotle asserts that human beings have a number of “excellences” or virtues (ἀρετή in Greek or *arête* in the English spelling). Among human excellences are courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, gentleness, truthfulness, friendliness, and justice. Aristotle’s “excellences” are found at a “mean” on a scale which has for extremes deficiencies and excesses. For instance, courage is a mean of action between a deficiency called cowardice and an excess called rashness. Aristotle’s virtue ethics concerns itself with human action on a daily and continuous basis. Every human action, according to Aristotle, is judged for its beauty. Thus, the second paragraph of this essay describing the quotidian actions of members of the Fellowship of Reason: We act toward The Beautiful.

Modern ethical discussions and classes sometimes concern themselves with “lifeboat situations.” For example, “imagine yourself on a lifeboat, lost at sea for months, accompanied by a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, and an Atheist...” Blah, blah, blah. These lifeboat situations are a class of modern ethical problems epitomized by “the Trolley problem.” Imagine yourself as a by-stander near a switch of a trolley car system. The trolley car is careening out of control toward five innocent pedestrians on the tracks who will be killed unless you, the by-stander, operate the switch control to change the trajectory of the trolley car to another track on which there is only one innocent pedestrian who will be killed instead. Do you fail to act and let five die, or do you act and kill one? There are many variations on the problem. For example, suppose you are the one who will be killed or suppose the one to be killed is your child, *ad nauseam*. The problem is simple for a utilitarian: the utilitarian will save the five and kill the one. The problem has a theatrical counterpart in episode 18, season 3, of the television series “24” first broadcast on April 18, 2004. Jack Bauer, the protagonist, is working with the United States President to thwart a terrorist attack via biological weapon, a lethal virus. The terrorist demands that the President kill the Regional Director of CTU (counter terrorism unit), Ryan Chappelle, in exchange for the terrorist not releasing the virus and killing large numbers of innocent civilians. The President orders Jack Bauer to kill Agent Chappelle, which Jack Bauer dutifully does. The utilitarian calculates that one man’s murder is worth less than death by terrorist of some larger number of innocent victims. The deontologist is just following orders. Clearly, Jack Bauer’s actions are not beautiful, but rather quite ugly. The entire television series was sullied by this episode. A virtue ethicist would calculate that Jack Bauer’s murder of a

About the name “The Eudaimonist”

A eudaimonist (pronounced “yoo-DIE-mon-ist”) is one who believes that the highest ethical goal is individual happiness and personal well-being. The term derives from the ancient Greek word eudaimonia, which means, roughly, “well-being.”



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Fellowship of Reason
P.O. Box 28891
Atlanta, Georgia 30358
(770) 471-9800

E-mail
info@fellowshipofreason.com

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colleague is ugly/immoral on aesthetic/virtue ethical grounds.

While “lifeboat situations” are fun parlor games, they miss the main point of ethics which is “what ought one do with one’s life on a moment by moment basis?” Aristotle advises: “Act toward The Beautiful.” An objection to the parlor game is that the players (students of philosophy) assume that somehow the actor within the problem might survive the problem, both physically and psychologically. Lifeboat victims sometimes do not survive physically. Lifeboat victims may not survive psychologically even if they live to get off the lifeboat. In the trolley car problem, the by-stander is going to be psychologically damaged with either choice. He will regret killing the one, if he chooses that course. He will regret allowing the five to die, if he chooses that course. He will have PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, in either case. He might even commit suicide as some many war veteran PTSD sufferers do these days.

Certainly, there are many imaginable situations that one will not survive whole or at all, but, fortunately, those situations are as rare as winning a (negative) lottery. (What would you do if you won the 100 million dollar lottery prize is also a fun (positive) parlor game.) “Lifeboat situations” should not be the core of ethics or of ethical studies.

Therefore, our ethical options are utilitarianism, duty ethics, or virtue ethics. Virtue ethics addresses, not the fortunately rare survival situations, but rather daily living. Eudaimonists choose Aristotle over Mill, Bentham, or Kant.

Acting toward The Beautiful in our daily lives is what we do.

The subject of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is, precisely, The Beautiful.

Concluding the first part of this essay, the reason we are interested in Immanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment* is this: The subject of Kant’s third *Critique* is The Beautiful. The understanding of The Beautiful is crucial in analyzing why and how we act toward The Beautiful in our daily lives.

Part II: Kant's mini-biography

We now proceed to the second part of this essay, a mini-biography of Immanuel Kant.

Kant was born in Königsberg, Prussia (now Germany), on April 22, 1724. He died in Königsberg on February 12, 1804 (Kant is almost 80 years old upon his death). He was a university professor at the University of Königsberg. His most famous works are the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant lived during a crucial time in the intellectual history of the West. The American Revolution

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commences on July 4, 1776 (Kant is 52 years old), with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. The French Revolution commences on July 14, 1789 (Kant is 65 years old), with the storming of the Bastille. These two great revolutions have different origins. The American Revolution is rooted in the Age of Enlightenment and thinkers like John Locke (English philosopher 1632-1704) and Adam Smith (Scottish philosopher 1732-1790). The French Revolution is rooted in the thinking of Jean Jacques Rousseau (French philosopher 1712-1778). The “general will” is Rousseau’s contribution to modern political philosophy and is the foundation of all modern totalitarian states. The “general will” cannot, according to Rousseau, err. The “general will” unleashed itself in France in the form of The Terror (1793-1794) during which over 16,000 people were executed by guillotine in France and another 25,000 people summarily executed (without the formality of the guillotine). Rousseau’s conception of the “General Will” is operative in Western Culture today and especially in America, viz.: the infallibility of the electorate and our enthusiasm for polls. The contrasting view is the doctrine of Individual Rights, which often opposes the “General Will,” a/k/a (also known as) the lynch mob. Individual Rights is a conception of the Age of Enlightenment.

Immanuel Kant was a chief spokesman for the Age of Enlightenment and among his works is a famous, and relatively easy-to-read, essay entitled: *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784). The defining phrase of the Age of Enlightenment was, according to Kant, “dare to be wise.”

As an aside, discussing Kant is risky for two reasons. Reason one, Kant is difficult to read (he writes poorly) and to understand (his insights are highly abstract). Reason two, some of my readers are students of Ayn Rand and, as one writer puts it, Kant is Ayn Rand’s Moriarty (Professor James Moriarty, the nemesis of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s (1859-1930) Sherlock Holmes). Ayn Rand wrote: “On every fundamental issue, Kant’s philosophy is the exact opposite of Objectivism.” *The Objectivist*, September 1971. *Au contraire!* The second formulation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative is this: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the time as an end.” To treat other individuals always as ends and never merely as means is a glorious statement of individualism. Understanding Objectivism as I do, Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative is consistent therewith. Therefore, *prima facie*, Ayn Rand is incorrect in her assessment of Kant, at least in this grand detail. Granted that Ayn Rand was a genius, nevertheless, we will want to see for ourselves whether Kant is worth studying. As Kant says: *Sapere aude*, “Dare to be wise.”

Kant says: *Sapere aude*, “Dare to be wise.”

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Part III: Defining some terms

We now proceed to the third part of this essay, defining some important Kantian terms to assist our understanding of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Terms 1: The chart

Part of the problem with reading Kant is his use (and the use by his translators) of terms that do not translate well from 18th Century German to the 21st Century English. Many will have experienced this type of problem when reading Shakespeare (1564-1616) written in 16th Century English! There are useful books rendering Shakespeare's plays on facing pages with the original text on the left page and the "translation" on the right. The purpose of this part of the present essay is to provide a "translation" of the translations of some Kantian terms.

Kant's "Introduction" to *The Critique of Judgment*, divided into nine short sections, provides much needed guidance. The last entry in his "Introduction" is a useful table, reproduced below.

	<i>All the faculties of the mind</i>	
Cognitive faculties	Feeling of pleasure and pain	Faculties of desire
	<i>Cognitive faculties</i>	
Understanding	Judgement (<i>sic</i>)	Reason
	<i>A priori principles</i>	
Conformity to law	Purposiveness	Final Purpose
	<i>Application to</i>	
Nature	Art	Freedom

The chart is rendered without amendment from the translation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment (sic)* by J. H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised) (London: Macmillan, 1914)

An example of poor writing is evident in this table by the use of "Cognitive faculties" as one of the three instances of "All the faculties of mind" and its use again as a separate category subsuming three "Cognitive faculties" which are "Understanding," "Judgement," and "Reason." The first use of the phrase "Cognitive faculties" might be better rendered by the phrase "thinking faculties." The related "faculties of the mind" are, as you see in the table, "Feeling of pleasure and pain" and "Faculties of desire." We might consent, by introspection, that our mental "furniture" does in fact consist in these three categories: thinking, feeling, and desiring. Are there others? Kant thinks not.

Contact Information

To talk to somebody about Fellowship of Reason call:

Martin at 770-471-9800
Susan at 678-358-8415

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We might reorder the chart, simply by inverting it from top to bottom, and “translating” the row headings as follows:

	<i>Three Great Domains</i>	
Nature	Art	Freedom
	<i>Defining characteristic</i>	
Conformity to law	Purposiveness	Final Purpose
	<i>Name of mental faculty</i>	
Understanding	Judgment	Reason
	<i>Related function</i>	
Thinking	Feelings of pleasure and pain	Desire

These three great domains are appealing because they conform to standard American values. Most Americans believe that there is “Nature” that conforms to the laws of physics, like Newton’s laws and Einstein’s laws. Most Americans believe that there is the domain of “Freedom,” that is to say, the domain of morality that is not governed by the laws of physics. “We have free will.” Among some philosopher/science types (there are such types among us) this viewpoint is controverted. Some of us are determinists, believing that all existents (inanimate and animate) are determined by physical laws and that if we knew the correct formulas we could predict with certainty all outcomes inanimate and animate. However, this is not the common American viewpoint. Without Freedom, there is no Morality and Ethics is pointless. According to Kant, there is a third domain and that is the domain of Art in which questions of The Beautiful and The Sublime are pertinent. Therefore, there are three great domains: Thinking, Freedom, and Art.

The domain of Nature is characterized by “conformity to law,” that is, the laws of Newton and Einstein. (Note that Newton and Einstein are only two examples of many sources of scientific laws of nature.) The name of the mental faculty that ponders “Nature” is, according to Kant, the “Understanding.” The task of the “Understanding” is simply to determine what is out there. The name of the function of the mental faculty is “thinking,” in our “translation” of the translation. (Recall that Kant’s lame phrase is “cognitive faculties.”) Kant’s famous writing on this subject is his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant’s subject is how the human mind thinks about Nature, which is governed by scientific laws. This is Kant’s “Natural Philosophy.”

The domain of Freedom is characterized by “Final Purpose.” We always act morally toward goals. For Eudaimonists our “Final Purpose” is well-being, or as translators of Aristotle have it, “happiness.” The name of the mental faculty that ponders “Freedom,” that is, moral questions, is “Reason.” Thus, we have the Fellowship of Reason. The name of the function of the mental faculty is “Desire.” Kant’s famous writing on this subject is his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Kant’s subject is how the human mind reasons to goals of action, thus *practical* reason, or reason for practice/action. This is Kant’s “Moral Philosophy.”

The domain of Art is characterized by “Purposiveness.” The name of the mental faculty is “Judgment.” The name of the function of the mental faculty is “Feeling of pleasure and pain.” We hope to understand the domain of Art in the course of Fellowship of Reason Sunday school. Kant’s famous writing on this subject is his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant’s subject is The Beautiful and The Sublime. This is Kant’s “Aesthetics.”

Thus, we can see that Kant claims to have covered the entire domain of human thought with his “Transcendental Philosophy.” Here is another Kantian term, “Transcendental Philosophy,” that is difficult for modern Americans to understand. Our modern definition of “transcendental” is “of or pertaining to a spiritual or non-material realm.” That is not Kant’s 17th Century meaning. He means, simply, a philosophy about

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thinking, feeling, and desiring, or *thinking about thinking*. What are the contents of consciousness? How do we know stuff? What are the categories of thought, e.g. thinking, feeling, desiring. Kant's philosophy is not, as the modern connotation would have us infer, about spiritual or mystical matters. As we have seen above, Modern Philosophy is about whether that by-stander should throw the Trolley switch. Boring!

Kant has another book that we are not presently studying entitled *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), published 26 years before *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). In this book, *Observations* Kant introspects and discovers and categorizes feelings of enjoyment. Kant finds two types of feeling (among others), the feeling of The Sublime and the feeling of The Beautiful. There are several sub-categories. While a study of this book would doubtless be rewarding, the point in referencing the work now is to suggest that Kant's work on The Beautiful and The Sublime stretched across many decades. Few of us can claim a minute (much less decades) of introspection for identifying the contents our consciousness, much less, the contents of our consciousness in the specific area of feelings related to The Beautiful and The Sublime. Most of us have never considered the subject at all.

Terms 2: A priori and a posteriori

A priori (Latin: from what comes before) and *a posteriori* (Latin: from what comes later) are two famous Kantian terms. *A priori* means, simply, from the beginning and without reference to experience. Kant uses the term to express knowledge that is known without experience. *A posteriori* means, simply, after the fact or after receiving evidence. Kant uses the term to express knowledge that is known after experience or after receiving evidence.

Terms 3: Understanding, feeling, desiring

An explanation of the interaction of Kant's mental faculties is provided by our translator, J. H. Bernard, in his "Editor's Introduction." The "Understanding" assimilates the general principles of nature. Our "Judgment" "sees" that a particular is an instance of the general. Our "Reason" reaches a conclusion. Bernard observes that we perceive and know (come to understand) the object (this is thinking), we feel about it (pleasure or pain), we desire (or not) the object.

Terms 4: The Thing in Itself and the Phenomenon

Kant makes a distinction between "phenomenon" and "the thing in itself." According to Kant, we can only experience the "phenomenon" and not "the thing in itself." We are only presented with those aspects of an existent that our senses or understanding can detect. A beautiful example of this occurs in the movie *Avatar* (2009). When the marine Jack Sully (the Englishman John Smith of the Pocahontas tale) first goes to the planet Pandora (Jamestown, Virginia of the Pocahontas tale), he is separated from his companions and night falls. He takes his



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flashlight in order to see his way around in the dark and great difficulties follow. When Neytiri (the alien Pocahontas) saves him, she destroys his flashlight and slowly the night world about him comes into view. All is luminescent and beautiful without the flashlight. Jack Sully's first experience with the flashlight of night on Pandora was the world as "phenomenon." Without the flashlight, he experiences the world more towards "the thing in itself." In the case of each "phenomenon," which according to Kant is all we can know, we assume that aspects of the thing in itself remain unknown and perhaps unknowable to us.

Terms 5: The Will

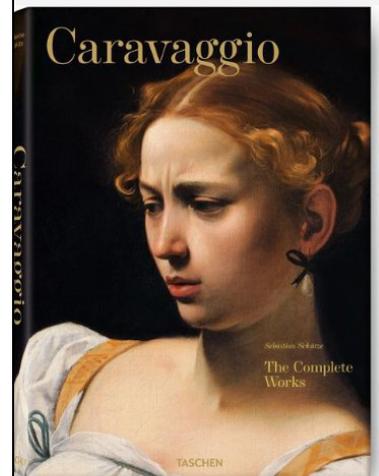
The "Will," according to Kant, is the faculty of desire and is "one of the many natural causes in the world." *Eureka!* (Ayn Rand makes this statement: "Volition is not an exception to the Law of Causality; it is a type of causation." Ayn Rand either (1) learned this from Kant; or (2) identified it herself independently. I vote for option 1. So much for Ayn Rand's claim that Kant is "*Satan!*") The "Will" according to Kant, is "that cause which acts in accordance with concepts."

Terms 6: The Sensible Realm vs. the Supersensible Realm

Kant identifies the sensible realm of Nature. The domain of Nature is characterized by conformity to law. Another Kantian domain is the supersensible (beyond the senses) realm of Freedom. The domain of Freedom is characterized by purposiveness. Kant entertains the idea that there might be no connection between the sensible realm and the supersensible realm. Stated in modern terms, how is it that an idea (something mental) can cause an effect in the physical world (something physical)? What is the connection between consciousness and the outside world? What is the connection between the mental and the physical? Kant says: "The [supersensible realm] is *meant* to have an influence upon the [sensible realm]." Emphasis in the original. And, of course, it does in the common experience of every human being. Determinist must struggle to avoid this experiential reality, by calling the apparent relationship between thinking and acting an illusion. Kant says: "The concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the world of sense [the natural world] the purpose proposed by its [Freedom's] laws, and consequently nature must be so thought that the conformity to law of its [Nature's] form, at least harmonizes with the possibility of the purposes to be effected in according to laws of freedom." In modern English, there must be some way that thinking expresses itself in reality. One plans to build a guitar. A guitar appears. How does this happen? How does thought create real objects? Kant claims for his *Critique of Judgment* the task of uniting the sensible (nature) and supersensible (freedom) realms.

Terms 7: Purposiveness of Nature

According to Kant, judgment is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the Universal. Now this is a simple idea. We modern Americans can easily comprehend this activity. My three-year-old son beheld an object far from a perfect



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triangle and recognized within the perception the presence of the three-side geometrical shape, the triangle. My son made a "judgment" that this object was like the Universal triangle. The ability to recognize patterns in a complex whole is an exercise of Judgment in the Kantian sense.

Important for our purposes and illustrative of the complexity and depth of Kant's thinking, Kant identifies two types of Judgment, determinant and reflective. A determinant Judgment is one where the universal (rule, principle, law) is known and the judgment subsumes the particular under the universal, *e.g.* the case of my son and his triangle above. A reflective Judgment is a case where only the particular is given and the universal is yet to be found. "There must be a principle to this thing! What is it?" Kant observes, "The forms of nature are so manifold." Kant simply means that there are many forms in nature. Kant supposes that this "manifold" or many faceted nature has a "unity." Kant supposes that this "unity" can or might be understood by the Understanding and rendered into Universal rules, principles or laws. This feature of reality, our assumption that everything can be subsumed under some universal rule, principle, or law, is what Kant calls "the purposiveness of nature in its manifoldness." Kant says: "The purposiveness of nature is therefore a particular concept, *a priori*, which has its origin solely in the reflective Judgment." "*A priori*" means here that we did not learn this by experienced, rather, we noodled it out. In modern American English: We have an intuition that the things in the world are governed by scientific laws, even if in a particular case we do not yet know those laws. This is a Western banality. "It's obvious."

Therefore, "purposiveness" is simply this idea that things in the world have some scientific explanation, even if we do not get it yet. Someday we will? Reflective Judgment "sees" such things.

Terms 8: Taste

Taste is the faculty of judging the beautiful.

Terms 9: Imagination

Imagination is the faculty of mind that converts sensory inputs into objects or percepts or "representations" in Kant's terminology. A sensory input is a light or movement or blur or a mush of color (visual) or sound (auditory) or taste (gustatory) or odor (olfactory) or feeling of touch (tactile). Undifferentiated sensory inputs are integrated by the mind into a percept. Ayn Rand uses the word "percepts" and Kant uses the word "representations" for the same phenomenon. Percepts are cognized (according to Kant) or abstracted (according to Ayn Rand) into concepts (names) according to both Kant and Ayn Rand.

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