

A comment on Dietmar Heidemann's account on Kant's Non-Conceptual Aesthetics: Against an active understanding

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to an ongoing and controversial debate about non-conceptuality in Kantian aesthetics. It is a replica on a paper of Dietmar Heidemann in *Con-Textos Kantianos* N.º 12, to which I do consent, but I'd like to give some additional comments on a specific issue: I show in this paper that the problem about whether or not the understanding contributes to aesthetic judgment can be elucidated by means of a revaluation of the imagination's capacity of formal representation and the subsuming activity of the power of reflective judgment. I argue that the understanding is considered by the power of reflective judgment merely in his lawfulness in order to find a universal under which the imagination's particular, the formal representation of the beautiful shape, can be subsumed.

Key words

Aesthetic experience, power of reflective judgment, faculty of imagination, Kantian non-conceptualism, judgment of taste

In this paper I would like to comment on Dietmar Heidemann's *Response to my critics: In defense of Kant's aesthetic non-conceptualism*, which has been published in *CON-*

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More concretely, I want to put pressure on one of Dietmar Heidemann’s statements concerning the controversial topic of the influence of the understanding on the free play of the faculties in judgments of taste. Defending his interpretation of the non-conceptuality of aesthetic representation, which I consider thoroughly well-structured and argued, he points out that making sense of the contribution of the understanding in the free play “remains problematic for conceptualists and non-conceptualists alike.” (Heidemann 2020, p. 180). As Kant makes explicit in the very first pages of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, aesthetic pleasure is universal even though no concept is implied (KU, AA 05: 211–9) – but the understanding is nevertheless mentioned in relation to the imagination in the free play. How is this to be understood?

Without wanting to claim a complete understanding of all the *Third Critique*’s obscure passages, I think that I can advocate for a satisfactory solution concerning the above-mentioned issue. I argue that by emphasising the function of the faculty of imagination and the power of judgment in order to make sense of the formal structure of this free play, one can avoid including an active understanding in aesthetic contemplation. Heidemann advocates for the latter: “For the free play of imagination and understanding is not chaotic but, in some way, formally structured (cf. KU, §§ 10–14) which can only be explained through the understanding being active.” (Heidemann 2020, p. 179). My argument follows three steps: First, I show that the imagination is the faculty that combines the shapes of the intuited and is responsible for structuring the representation. Second, that the aim of the power of reflective judgment is to look for and find a universal under which the particular representation can be subsumed. In a third and final step, that the power of judgment, in the activity of subsumption, establishes a connection to the understanding’s lawfulness, as the formal universal under which the formal representation can be – merely formally and in reflection – subsumed. Thus, no activity of the understanding is needed in *causing* aesthetic pleasure, merely the synchronisation in reflection of its formal aspects.

Before proceeding to my proposal for a solution, a brief outline of the context and theme of the problem is in order. For the non-conceptualist account, it is crucial to demonstrate that pure aesthetic judgement, “xy is beautiful”, is grounded on the famous aesthetic feeling; a feeling that, unlike mere sensation, comes along with an a priori transcendental structure and a peculiar subjective universal validity. Thus, the subject of experience “must believe himself to have grounds for expecting a similar pleasure of everyone” (KU, AA 05: 211). The important distinction lies in the fact that, in contrast to judgments of cognition, this universal validity is not an objective one, as it is not grounded on determinate concepts, but merely subjective: it rests on the subject’s feeling and state of mind (KU, AA 05: 217). Nevertheless, it entails a claim for universal validity because what triggers the feeling is a very special relation among the subject’s cognitive faculties, i.e., the imagination and the understanding, of which every subject is in possession. In

judgments of cognition, these faculties are in accordance with each other: the intuition and the corresponding concept are combined to generate objective cognition. In judgments of taste however, neither a determinable intuition of the perceived object nor a determining concept is central or at issue at all for establishing that correspondence (cf. KU, AA 05: 203 and 217).

Kant stresses more than once that no concept can be involved in the judgment of the beautiful, i.e., that no conceptual content of the representation can be the determinable ground for it.¹ But still, the representation is formally structured, which allows for the pleasing correspondence between imagination and understanding. Heidemann claims that this “can only be explained through the understanding being active” (Heidemann 2020, p. 179) and that this activity of the understanding is the synthesis “of what is given in intuition and since synthesis is possible only according to rules, i.e., categories, categories must be somehow operative in aesthetic cognition, too, although, as Kant says, ‘without a concept of the object’ (KU, AA 05: 217).” (Heidemann 2020, p. 179).

I think that involving the understanding as an actively contributing faculty is problematic with respect to Kant’s account of aesthetic experience. We should not forget the well-known claim about the “free and indeterminately purposive entertainment of the mental powers with what we call beautiful, where the understanding is in the service of the imagination and not vice versa.” (KU, AA 05: 212). I claim that two important points must be considered here in order to elucidate the free play as a mental state which does not contain an active contribution of the understanding: a) the role of the imagination while forming the representation of the beautiful shape (*Gestalt*) and b) the estimating and subsuming procedure of the faculty of reflective judgment.

a) On the aesthetic function of imagination

A very trivial but no less necessary reflection is fundamental: It is the imagination that provides the representation of the beautiful shape. It does so in a different way than for representing an object meant to be determined, i.e., objectively. Representing aesthetically is, as we know, based on a merely formal representation of the shape of anything intuited (KU, AA 05: 240–1), since the aesthetic pleasure of a beautiful representation comes along without interest in any determinable or actual property of an object. Therefore, the faculty responsible for representing, the imagination, needs to be able to refrain or abstract from whatever material quality of the perception there is, in order to represent merely formally:²

¹ As Heidemann shows further this does not suffice for proving the non-conceptuality of the aesthetic representation, but that “in order for mental content to be cognitively relevant it must be representational, phenomenal and intentional” (Heidemann 2020, p. 176). As Heidemann proves in his article, these criteria are met.

² Paul Guyer, too, supports the view that imagination is capable of abstraction. In response to the question of the conditions of mere formal representing, he mentions: “A decision on these questions is impossible without a decision on the scope of our power of abstraction, and thus of the freedom of imagination to create the conditions in which its harmony might occur.” (Guyer 1997, p. 223).

Only the spatio-temporal composition and no relation to anything objective guarantees a pure judgment, and in this case a judgment of taste.³ This way of representing entails further that the power of judgment cannot find a determining concept under which the representation can be subsumed; which, as we know, is the case for aesthetic and reflective judgment (cf. KU, AA 05: 179–181 and 231).

How does the imagination represent merely formally, without the guidance of the understanding?⁴ First, it is of course highly difficult to offer a concrete reading of the imagination’s function in Kant’s work. But we find evidence that the faculty can be seen as a fundamental faculty, a basic power, that is not reducible to any other faculty like sensibility or understanding. Heidemann in *Kants Vermögenmetaphysik* (cf. Heidemann 2017, p. 61–2) argues for such a reading as well. In the A-Deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant lists the imagination as a source of cognition next to sense and apperception (KrV, A 115), each of which are “elements or foundations a priori that make this empirical use itself possible” (KrV, A 115). He continues:

We therefore have a pure imagination, as a fundamental faculty of the human soul, that grounds all cognition *a priori*. By its means we bring into combination the manifold of intuition on the one side and the condition of the necessary unity of apperception on the other. Both extremes, namely sensibility and understanding, must necessarily be connected by means of this transcendental function of the imagination, since otherwise the former would to be sure yield appearances but no objects of an empirical cognition, hence there would be no experience. (KrV, A 124)

The claim that the imagination is a “necessary ingredient of perception” (KrV, A 121, note) reads the same way, because it isn’t sensibility that can give the manifold of

³ „A pure judgment must be based on a pure aspect of objects, and on the theory of the first *Critique* that means it can be determined neither by the sensory qualities of objects themselves nor by the concepts which apply to them, but only by their spatial and temporal forms, their figure and play.“ (Guyer 1997, p. 203).

⁴ Jackson Hoerth advocates as well for a reading of the imagination as an independent and form-bringing capacity (Hoerth 2020). In his article, he implies by means of contextual and systemic considerations that this ability of giving form to what has been intuited is the central function of that faculty. Nevertheless, he does not make explicit how the execution of this activity could be understood. Furthermore, he argues that the imagination itself engages in agreement with the understanding because it recognises harmony while comparing intuitions and concepts (Hoerth 2020, pp. 326–7 and 333). Hoerth even claims that imagination adopts its own principle of purposiveness (Hoerth 2020, p. 334). I think that these considerations go a bit too far and do not uphold the importance of the power of judgment in reflection. I agree that it is *thanks to* the activity of imagination that the representation receives its form and I agree that this is groundlaying for the purposive agreement between the cognitive faculties. But I defend that it is the power of reflective judgment which is responsible for establishing that relation and that purposiveness is its proper principle for comparing what shall be subsumed, for bringing about the agreement, and for judging the relation. The roles for both faculties become sometimes blurred in the Third *Critique* (see Schleich 2020, pp. 117–136 for elucidations and differentiations). Still, I consent that the imagination’s form-giving capacity makes purposiveness applicable.

experience in an intuitable form, the essential function here fore is synthesis, which is, as Kant states, “in general [...] the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.” (KrV, A 78/B 103). These passages allow us to understand the imagination as an a priori, irreducible fundamental faculty, which mediates between sensibility and understanding and is not dependent on either of them. The *Metaphysik Pölitz* and *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy* both offer passages as well that strongly support this reading (cf. V-Met-L1/Pölitz, AA 18: 262 and ÜGTP, AA 08: 180f., note). In the chapter on schematism, which Kant did not alter while revising the first edition, the faculty of imagination is even able to produce a “third thing” (KrV, A 138/B 177) a schema, thanks to which the accordance between sensibility and understanding is made possible (KrV, A 140/B 179). The independence of imagination does not entail that it is in its function not *oriented* towards understanding’s lawfulness. It synthesises in a spatio-temporal structure towards a potential unification of the manifold: It adds partial representations one after the other to result in a completed and for the subject intuitable shape of what has been perceived. The representation of this shape is only possible thanks to its temporally-sequenced structure.

Of course, the revised deduction of the First *Critique* makes the interpretative situation difficult. There, we face the imagination as a faculty working for the understanding, as its synthesis is merely an effect of the understanding’s spontaneity on sensible intuition (KrV, B 152). The following consideration may facilitate the case though: If it is kept in mind that Kant was in the B-Deduction primarily concerned to defend his account on how cognition is possible, i.e., how the categories, as expressions of spontaneous thought, apperception, are able to be applied to sensual perception, the interpretative context is shifted. What we read in the revised Deduction is how objective cognition can be possible, i.e., objective unity in the manifold, but not the possibility of representations as such, including those representations that are not able to be determined by means of concepts.

Still, what we need now to make sense of is the function of the imagination: representing by means of synthesis. I argue, and here I follow the non-conceptualist approach, that the mere combination of partial representations (*Teilvorstellungen*) of the manifold in intuition brings about a representation, which is *as it is* a representation without being sufficient for cognition (KrV, B 103f.). The imagination grounds the intuitability of objects, as it represents what has been perceived in an intuition in a way that it meets the requirements of formal intuition, i.e., space and time (KrV, A 78). This ability to do so describes the central function of the imagination: synthesis. To keep things brief: We need to differentiate between the *synthesis speciosa*, as Kant calls the synthesis of the imagination representing in space and time, and the *synthesis intellectualis*, which, in the B-deduction, is the synthesis of the understanding operating without any meddling of the

imagination.⁵ The latter counts as “unity of the action” (KrV, B 153) which enables cognition: thinking an objective unity in the manifold by means of the categories. And the synthesis of the imagination that shall provide an intuition suitable for cognition has to be oriented on that objectifying ground (cf. Birrer 2017, p. 191). It is this synthesis that is at stake in the context of objective cognition: “Yet to bring this synthesis [the synthesis of the imagination] *to concepts* is a function that pertains to the understanding, and by means of which it first provides cognition in the proper sense” (KrV, A 78/B 103).

Nonetheless, it is possible to advocate for a reading of the imagination’s synthesising function that is not guided by the intellectual synthesis: Birrer talks in this sense about an ‘autonomous and non-intellectual synthesising capacity’ (Birrer 2017, pp. 191–2 and cf. KrV, A 124), Olk calls it the ‘prereflective synthesis’ (Olk 2016, 100f.), which may or may not be in accordance with the categories and which is definitely not executed by means of categorial determination. Hanna describes that function of the imagination as “*sub-rational* or *lower-level* spontaneous” (Hanna 2005, p. 249) but also as „essentially spontaneous, goal oriented, and vital – in a word creative“ with „its own specialized representational faculty and cognitive function“ (Hanna 2001, pp. 39–40).

What interests me here the most is that in the act of combining the imagination connects parts in the representation in a temporally successive way: It combines one part after the other and thereby represents something that is intuitable by us, as we need the spatio-temporal form to intuit at all. Its function is therefore fundamental for anything that can be represented as an intuition (cf. KrV, A 124 and 99f.) – and by this function it lays the ground for, if this were the case, the condition of determination, as determination of an intuition requires the possibility for applying formal time-conditions, categories, on what has been sensibly intuited (cf. KrV, A 139–40/B 179). If now the materialistic elements of what has been perceived are not considered in this connecting activity, all that remains is combining mere shapes in a successive manner: creating a form.

The formal structure of the representation is thus guaranteed by the synthesis of the imagination and grounds the required “lawlikeness”⁶ of the aesthetic kind of representation mentioned by Kant in the Third *Critique* (KU, AA 05: 287). Aesthetic representation is no occasion for irregularity; it allows for a universally communicable, pure judgment of taste if and only if the way of representing meets certain conditions, namely a free and purposive play between imagination and understanding (KU, AA 05: 218). Now, what happens in the case of aesthetic representation is that the process of combination interrupts and switches contexts. The synthesising of the forms in a temporal sequence is what is needed per se to bring about anything representable. But then, the

⁵ I here follow the interpretation of Birrer 2017.

⁶ The Cambridge Edition uses “lawlike” as translation for *gesetzmäßig* and “lawfulness” for *Gesetzmäßigkeit*. I would like to stick to the term lawlikeness in this sentence in order to highlight the ‘likeness’ (the analogical formal structure) of the representation in relation to the lawfulness of the understanding.

imagination abstains from rendering the perceived content of the object determinable, it schematises without a concept, as Kant describes (KU, AA 05: 287): in its reflective freedom, it continues to bundle merely the shapes and creates thus another kind of representation. As we know from the Third *Critique*, imagination can ‘transform experience’ in some special cases:

The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it. We entertain ourselves with it when experience seems too mundane [...]; in this we feel our freedom from the law of association (which applies to the empirical use of that faculty), in accordance with which material can certainly be lent to us by nature, but the latter can be transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature. (KU, AA 05: 314)

The imagination here is not productive (*schöpferisch*) because it relies on what has been perceived – but it is able to bundle it in a different way: it thus creates, by means of this free and extraordinary combination of representational parts, a new representation: a representation that exceeds what could objectively be determined (see also Anth, AA 07: 224) which does not rely on any guidance by or orientation towards understanding.

The preceding aspects had to be considered in order to make sense of the imagination being able to represent aesthetically, independently of any determining or objectifying endeavours. The imagination can thusly be considered “in its freedom” (KU, AA 05: 287), whereas, of course, it needs to be held in mind that this kind of freedom is merely reflective and not to be confused with freedom in the practical sense.⁷ It has been shown that the imagination’s synthesising function allows for the representation’s formal structure. This is, and I will emphasise this in the following, the necessary condition for the fulfilment of reflective judgment’s aim for indeterminate subsumption, for the concept of purposeless purposiveness and, of course, for the pleasure in the beautiful and the judgment of taste. This reading will make explicit why no understanding needs to be *actively* present or contributing to aesthetic representation or judgment. It is nevertheless certain that understanding needs to come somehow ‘into play’ in subsumption, as aesthetic feeling rests on the a priori condition of imagination and understanding being in free accordance, just ‘as if’ it is the case for cognition in general (cf. KU, AA 05: 190). This is what guarantees each: the purposiveness in aesthetics and the universal communicability, same as the claim for universal validity.

⁷ For an extensive analysis of the imagination in the aesthetic context and further considerations concerning reflective freedom see Schleich 2020, esp. chapter 3.5, pp. 158–173. As this is not of central concern here, I will keep it brief: in the case of the aesthetic imagination, its freedom is in reflection only – it has no concrete influence on any possible practical determination or determinability, as a throughout spontaneous and free faculty like reason can have, but only on her own usage (*Vermögensgebrauch*) in representing.

b) Reflective Power of Judgment and Formality

Aesthetic pleasure only arises when the power of *reflective* judgment is successful in finding a particular for subsumption, i.e., when judgment manages to establish an accordance between the particular and the universal – in reflection. As Kant makes explicit from the beginning on, the latter as a concrete concept is missing in aesthetic representation. Therefore, reflective power of judgment must strive for finding a universal under which the particular could be subsumed and thus, to bring imagination and understanding into accordance. The particular that imagination represents in beautiful contemplation is but a shape and nothing concretely determinable. Now Kant states that in case of the beautiful, it is the

subsumption not of intuitions under *concepts*, but of the *faculty* of intuitions or presentations (i.e., of the imagination) under the *faculty* of concepts (i.e., the understanding), insofar as the former *in its freedom* is in harmony with the latter *in its lawfulness*. (KU, AA 05: 287)

The condition of that subsumption is, as the power of judgment's a priori principle of purposiveness tells, that an accordance must be found in order to make something cognitively tangible, purposive, and meaningful for the subject. Subsumption requires "the condition that the understanding *in general* advance from intuition to concept" (KU, AA 05: 287, my emphasis). Kant's statement that "freedom of the imagination consists precisely in the fact that it schematizes without a concept" (KU, AA 05: 287), points out that it is by means of this merely formal schematisation that the representation receives its formal structure. The formal structure of the representation, i.e., the imagination representing merely formally, allows it to meet the conditions that are set for cognition *in general*: the mere possibility of temporal determination. The representation must be given in a temporal structure (successively bundled) to be intuitable. Even though, as is the case in aesthetics, no determination will concretely follow, it is this kind of representation (*Vorstellungsart*) that reflective judgment holds to be what fits the universal (cf. KU, AA 05: 271). And vice versa, even though there is no determining universal available under which the peculiar representation could be subsumed, reflective judgment relates the formal representation with the formal part of the understanding: its lawfulness.

To make my primary claim explicit – that active understanding does not contribute to aesthetic experience (including contemplation and judgment) – I'd like to point explicitly to the function of reflective judgment and free play. In its aim to subsume the particular under the general, judgment needs to establish a relation that respects the principle of purposiveness. This principle is transcendental and subjectively formal: it is assumed by the power of judgment for its own use, and is given by the reflective power of judgment *itself* as its own law (cf. KU, AA 05: 183 and 180). As the necessary regulative principle for subsumption, it says

that what is contingent for human insight in the particular (empirical) laws of nature nevertheless contains a lawful unity, not fathomable by us but still thinkable, in the combination of its manifold into one experience possible in itself. (KU, AA 05: 183–4)

As the faculty itself is giving the principle for itself heautonomously (KU, AA 05: 185–6), neither understanding nor reason can be read as actively commanding it. The indeterminacy and subjectivity of aesthetics remain thoroughly preserved.

To fulfil its aim, the power of judgment therefore needs to find ‘an agreement of nature with our faculty of cognition’, and presupposes this agreement *a priori*, “in behalf of its [the power of judgment’s] reflection on nature in accordance with empirical laws” (KU, AA 05: 185, my emphasis). This is its endeavour to find purposiveness, i.e., to search for a universal enabling the accordance with nature (the particular that needs to be subsumed).⁸

It is thus by means of the power of judgment that the understanding comes into play: In order to reach an agreement between the particular and the universal, it establishes a purposive relation between the imagination (in its freedom as merely formally representing) and the understanding’s lawfulness: “For that apprehension of forms in the imagination can never take place without the reflecting power of judgment, even if unintentionally, at least comparing them to its faculty for relating intuitions to concepts.” (KU, AA 05: 190).

A passage in the *Anthropology* highlights that the formal aspect is central for aesthetic judgment: It relates the *formally* representing imagination (in its freedom) to the *form* of understanding, i.e., its lawfulness (thus not with concrete laws for determination):

The judging of an object through taste is a judgment about the harmony or discord of freedom, in the play of the power of imagination and the lawfulness of understanding, and therefore it is a matter only of judging the form aesthetically (the compatibility of the sense representations), not the generation of products, in which the form is perceived. (Anth, AA 07: 241)

It is important to emphasize that this relation is merely formal, not for the sake of determining the object of experience. What makes the agreement between the faculties possible is grounded on the way the imagination is representing: it combines the *shape* (no

⁸ The domain of *reflective* judgment explains the possibility of fathoming for fitting universals, for establishing ‘as if’ agreements that rest on merely subjective and formal purposiveness: Reflection describes a process of investigation, of retrospection and evaluation. In contrast to the determining process, it is here shifted away from the concrete concern for knowledge, for given concepts or objective determination. This means a kind of independence, which allows representing in reflexive freedom: In reflection, one can proceed formally, without being bound by a purpose or legislation (see KrV, A 260/B 316). The Third *Critique*’s power of judgement, as already mentioned above, looks for the universal, under which the particular can be subsumed.

material properties of the perception) in a temporal sequence, i.e., successively (connecting in time remains formal). This is what lays the ground for a possible accordance with the lawfulness of the understanding, which is the transcendental formal time-condition through the application of the pure concepts, the categories (KrV, A 138–9/B 177–8). This accordance is the *subjective* transcendental condition for judgments in general, only that in taste it is reflective and aesthetic (related to the subject’s state of mind and feeling) and in cognition, it is objective. The reflective judgment is grounded on this formal relation between the cognitive capacities. As it is not determined nor following actual determining rules, it is considered free: a free play between imagination and understanding.

In this reply I have tried to show that it is the power of judgment which initiates the relation to the understanding, i.e., that it does not involve the understanding actively taking part, but that judgment merely reflects upon the understanding’s formal aspect as the possible universal under which the forms of the imagination could be subsumed. As such, it establishes an ‘as if’ relation: a purposive accordance between the formally representing imagination and the lawfulness of the understanding in its lawfulness that triggers aesthetic pleasure. It does not matter if it is but a formal and subjective purposive accordance; we find – unexpectedly – a way to relate nature and intelligibility in representation, to subsume the forms of the manifold under the formal aspects of unification, and this is what causes pleasure. Additionally, these considerations favour of a reevaluation of the function of the imagination: through its ability for aesthetic representation (i.e., synthesising mere forms, abstracting from determinable content and acting independently of external determination), it lays the ground for the subsequent moments: a) it gives a special kind of particular that can only be related in reflection to a merely formal universal, and b) as it represents in its freedom, there cannot be any determination that meddles in this activity. This would contaminate the indeterminacy of pure aesthetic judgment since no free play, no unexpected accordance between the faculties of cognition could take place and thus, no aesthetic pleasure would arise. For the aim of the present argument, it was thus central to prove

- 1) that the synthesising of the imagination happens to shift in the case of aesthetic representation,
- 2) that it is the power of reflective judgment which searches for a universal in order to subsume the particular and that it finds this universal in the formal aspect of the understanding,
- 3) that in creating a relation among imagination and understanding, it reaches its aim of a purposive estimation of the representation. This shows that no active contribution of the understanding is needed to judge aesthetically.

As the aim of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* was to make explicit the possibility and the conditions of “the transition from the domain of the concept of nature to

that of the concept of freedom” (KU, AA 05: 196), I hope that the considerations about reflective judgment and the formally representing imagination in this paper can contribute to understanding the possibility of such a transition by means of a relation established in reflection. Additionally, I think that the reading of the understanding as only passively made present by reflective judgment in aesthetic cognition is a favourable argument for the non-conceptualist account of Kant’s aesthetics.

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