

A Semantic Explanation of Harmony in Kant's Aesthetics

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Immanuel Kant, the author of the “Copernican revolution in philosophy,” won renown for being a pioneer in the epistemic overthrow of the previous ontological epoch. Kant’s studies of various philosophical subjects eventually led him to an analysis of judgment and the beautiful (Ginsborg). Kant’s epistemic analysis of the beautiful, however, led him to an uncomfortable paradox: “How is a judgment possible which, merely from *one’s own* feeling of pleasure in an object, independent of its concept, judges this pleasure, as attached to the representation of the same object *in every other subject*, and does so *a priori*, i.e., without having to wait for the assent of others?” (*Judgment* 168). Kant’s explanation of the paradox is that pleasure in the beautiful depends on the harmony and free play of the faculties of Imagination and Understanding. For various reasons, many scholars have attacked what they believe to be flaws in Kant’s explanation. I believe that the main source of the apparent flaws lies in Kant’s use of the term “harmony” to explicate an epistemic principle. Kant uses the term “harmony” in such a way that it ruptures his epistemic model of judgments of taste. When Kant’s premises and his use of the term “harmony” are translated into a semantic model of judgments of taste, however, the apparent discrepancies and flaws within Kant’s reasoning are resolved.

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To begin, I will explain exactly what I mean by epistemic systems and principles as opposed to semantic systems and principles. Walter Watson describes different philosophical “epochs” in the *Architectonics of Meaning*. Watson says of the current philosophical epoch, “at the present time we tend to view philosophy as what philosophers have *written*. This primacy of the text is characteristic not only of philosophy today, but of all disciplines” (5, italics added). Thus Watson says we are living in a semantic age that is “concerned with the expression of what we know about that which is, or meaning” (5). However, Watson asserts that philosophy has not always been so semantically oriented: “The history of philosophy exhibits a cycle of epochal shifts: from an ontic epoch concerned with that which is, or being, to an epistemic epoch concerned with how we know that which is, or knowing, to a semantic epoch . . . and back again to an ontic epoch concerned with being” (5). Watson believes that Kant’s work was the impetus for a shift from an ontological epoch to an epistemic epoch: “Kant, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, proposes to make metaphysics scientific . . . by supposing not that our knowledge must conform to objects, but that objects must conform to our knowledge” (7). While I agree with Watson that Kant’s work precipitated an epistemic epoch, I believe that in some cases Kant’s insights transcend epistemology and work better in a semantic system. Kant’s use of the term “harmony” is one such insight, and my goal is to show that the term fits better in a semantic system.

I will now delve into the actual mechanics of judgments of cognition and judgments of taste. By comparing and contrasting the two judgments, I will facilitate both an explication of scholars’ arguments against the general relation of the two judgments and the translation of Kant’s model into a semantic system. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant says judgments of cognition are made when the Understanding applies concepts to “the synthesis of the manifold of intuition” generated by the Imagination (465). In other words, the Imagination synthesizes objects encountered in the blooming, buzzing confusion into distinct presentations. These presentations are then referred to the Understanding. The Understanding synthesizes the presentation according to concepts gained through experience. The end result is an experience or judgment of cognition. The process of making judgments of taste is somewhat different: after the Imagination has synthesized the manifold of intuition into a presentation and referred it to the faculty of Understanding, the Understanding does not synthesize the presentation according to concepts as a basis for cognition; rather, the two faculties of Imagination and Understanding stand in a relation of harmony or free play that results in feelings of pleasure.¹

¹ Much of my introduction closely follows Ginsborg and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. At this point I am merely outlining the widely known problems generally associated with Kant’s aesthetics.

Kant's reasoning has become notorious among scholars because the explanation seems to create paradoxes of its own. Scholars such as Meerbote, Allison, and Guyer argue that the free play of the faculties must necessarily be inherent in all cognitive perceptual experiences or in none of them (Ginsborg). Should free play of the faculties be inherent in all cognitive experience, then everything should be beautiful; if it is inherent in no cognitive experience, then nothing could be beautiful (Ginsborg). Scholars also puzzle over other questions: why does harmony of the faculties result in sensations of pleasure; what is the ugly? Some scholars have tried to dismiss Kant's paradoxical explanation altogether by claiming that the philosopher's explication of the judgment of taste and beauty relates only to aesthetic feelings, and therefore has nothing to do with cognition. The Kantian scholar Rudolf Makkreel refutes this, however, when he says that "the judgment of taste is not directly cognitive, but nevertheless relates to 'cognition in general'" (52). The question of how the judgments are related will become paramount in my translation of the epistemic system into a semantic system.

Kant's claim that these two judgments are generally related bothers many scholars. Henry Allison declares Kant's explication of the two judgments to be worthless because:

It proves too much . . . for if, as Kant suggests, the harmony of the faculties constitutes a necessary subjective condition of cognition, which must therefore occur in all cognition, and if the ability to occasion such a harmony is a sufficient condition for judging an object beautiful, then it would seem that every object of possible experience must be judged beautiful, simply in virtue of conforming to this condition. (184)

When grounded in an epistemic system, Allison's critique of Kant's reasoning could be valid. Kant's system does not allow for a difference between conceptual relations and aesthetic relations of the faculties. A semantic system, as we will see later, makes possible both a conceptual and aesthetic relation of the faculties, and thus dissolves Allison's apparent paradox. In *Reflection on Beauty*, Ralf Meerbote also doubts Kant's view of the judgments of cognition and taste because he feels that the two judgments are basically one and the same. He says they both have "a necessary hermeneutic component; in other words, . . . there may be no case of cognition which is completely analysable" (qtd. in Morstein 149). Both Allison and Meerbote argue that there is no inherent difference between the judgments. Another scholar, Rudolf Makkreel, could not disagree more. In *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, Makkreel argues that the two judgments do indeed

differ. I feel that his case ultimately fails, but it does reveal what I believe to be the most fundamental flaw in Kant's argument. I think this flaw is essentially the main—although subtle—source of other scholars' concerns regarding Kant's reasoning.

Makkreel argues that the significant difference between the two judgments lies in synthesis. When a person makes a judgment of cognition, a presentation referred by the Imagination is synthesized by the Understanding according to concepts. Makkreel notes, however,

that in his discussion of taste Kant is speaking of an apprehension without concepts, not a synthesis without concepts. His text supplies no direct evidence for equating the aesthetic apprehension of imagination with the *syntheses* of apprehension and reproduction, for there is no mention of synthesis in his account of aesthetic apprehension without a concept. (50)

Makkreel's observation that Kant never used the term "synthesis" when discussing the judgment of taste is very important. In judgments of cognition, concepts guide the synthesis of the presentation of the Imagination to produce objects. No synthesis in the judgment of taste means that when the Imagination refers a presentation to the Understanding, the Understanding "apprehends" the presentation, but does not synthesize it according to concepts to produce an object. Instead, the two faculties of Imagination and Understanding stand in a harmonious relation that results in pleasure. This is a good attempt on Makkreel's part to explain the difference between the two judgments, but there is a problem. How can two faculties stand in a harmonious relation to one another? What are faculties? And where do faculties stand in terms of time and space?

A brief discussion of Kant's use of the term "harmony" will reveal the significance of these questions. I believe that Kant used the term "harmony" (*harmonie*) in the same sense in which we apply the word to music. Kant said of the harmonization of the faculties, "It involves merely the relation of the representational powers to each other, so far as they are determined by a representation" (qtd. in Allison 125). For there to be harmony in music, two notes must stand in a particular chronological and spatial relation. I will use the musical notes C and E to illustrate the point. A chronological relation between the two notes is necessary for harmony. Harmony will never be achieved if a person merely plucks the note C in succession to the unsustained note E. Even if a pianist plays the notes in rapid succession one after the other again and again, harmony is still impossible. The more subtle spatial relation between the notes is equally important for the creation of harmony. Musicians call the spatial relation between the notes

C and E a major third. When played simultaneously, the spatial relation (the distance between the wavelengths of sound) of the two notes creates a harmony. Thus, space and time are indispensable in the production of musical harmony.

Perhaps one might object that the term “harmony” can also be used in a metaphorical sense as well as a musical sense. For example, different branches of the United States government (at least theoretically) can be said to “work harmoniously together” to further the interests of its citizens. But I argue that even this sense of the word “harmony” necessarily depends on spatial and chronological relations—at least abstractly. Without space, entities like governments couldn’t exist. Another possible objection to my claim that Kant uses the term “harmony” here in the musical sense is that perhaps harmony is not required of judgments of taste because Kant claimed the faculties stand in a relation of harmony *or* free play. If the terms are synonymous then harmony could just as well be called free play. But the terms are not synonymous. Henry Allison tells us that the terms “harmony” and “free play” are not the same and that the disjunction “harmony or free play” is inclusive. Allison says:

Just as there can be a free play without harmony, so there can also be a harmony without free play. This occurs in ordinary cognitive judgments, but particularly in judgments of perfection. For in the latter case, the harmony is based on a determinate concept of the object (of what sort of thing it is supposed to be), which leaves no scope for the free activity of the imagination. (117)

So we are to understand harmony as being separate from free play. I believe that Allison’s assessment of the term “harmony” is astute, and I will show in my semantic construction of Kant’s judgment of the beautiful the important distinction between the two terms.

In Kant’s epistemic system, thoughts are more basic than things or language. For Kant, all things are appearances—including space and time. When discussing aesthetics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says, “All the parts of space, even to infinity, are simultaneous . . . Space is nothing other than merely the form of all appearances of outer sense” (175, 177). When speaking of time Kant says, “It has only one dimension: different times are not simultaneous, but successive (just as different spaces are not successive, but simultaneous) . . . Only in time can both contradictorily opposed determinations in one thing be encountered, namely successively” (*Pure Reason* 179–80). Considering my explication of the nature of harmony, thinking of space and time themselves in such a manner creates problems for Kant’s notion of the harmonization of the faculties. But if

we are to believe Kant when he says that space applies only to “appearances of outer senses” and not to the inner faculties of Imagination and Understanding, and if we are to further believe him that “different times are not simultaneous, but successive,” then how can we believe that there can possibly be a harmonization of the two faculties? The faculties cannot stand in a spatial relation because space is applicable only to appearances of outward senses. The faculties cannot stand in a chronological relation, because different times are not simultaneous, but successive. Thus, there is no easy way to explicate Kant’s metaphor of harmony in his epistemic system. However, I hope that my semantic translation of his system will provide a plausible context for the metaphor of harmony.

It is a synthesis of the Imagination guided by concepts of the Understanding that unites the two faculties and produces an object in judgments of cognition. Except for Makkreel, scholars generally cannot explain the synthesis that occurs in judgments of taste. Nakeeb describes this synthesis of the faculties without concepts to be “a mystical paradox: beauty is that which appears to conform to a law, where there is no law, and possesses a kind of finality, where there is no ‘end’” (612). When Makkreel points out that Kant’s writing does not give evidence of synthesis in the judgment of taste, he severs the connection between the faculties. Admittedly, the Understanding still apprehends the presentation given by the Imagination, but there is no unification; therefore, there can be no harmony. Two people with an argument can apprehend one another’s point of view, but if there is no unification or synthesis of their ideas, then there can be no agreement or harmony. Thus, Makkreel’s observation accidentally makes clear the difficulty of using the term “harmony” to describe an epistemic principle—the unification of two faculties in judgments of taste.

If my hypothesis is true that Kant is mistakenly using the term “harmony” to explain an epistemic principle, then simply translating the epistemic system into a semantic system should dissolve any inherent paradoxes or discrepancies in Kant’s reasoning. I will assume Noam Chomsky’s ideology that the capacity for language in the mind is innate. This famous linguist builds a base for my semantic model when he says, “There is nothing incomprehensible in the view that stimulation provides the occasion for the mind to apply certain innate interpretive principles, certain concepts that proceed from ‘the power of understanding’ itself, from the faculty of thinking rather than from external objects directly” (Chomsky). In explaining the model I will stick to Chomsky’s ideas, but I will use the language and definitions of Kant. Thus, when some object stimulates the mind, “innate interpretive principles” are energized. Let us say that we meet a polar bear on the phenomenal plane. Kant would say that our faculty of Imagination would “synthesize the manifold of intuition” and create a presentation

of the form of the polar bear. Using Chomsky's model, I would say that the Imagination (innate interpretive principles) synthesizes the manifold of intuition and creates a linguistic presentation of the form of the polar bear; that is, the bear is presented in symbols. The mind interprets the qualities of the form of the bear. Should the bear have white fluffy fur, four legs, a certain size, flat ears, and a round head, the mind would create the following semiotic presentation: A(animal);M(mammal);PB(polar bear);w(white);FL(fluffy);LS(large size);RH(round head);FE(flat ears);etc.

Before I go further in my explication, I will explain how the Imagination is equipped to determine forms such as "polar bear" or "animal." Makkreel explains that "in the First Introduction, Kant speaks of 'specifications' . . . in relation to the imaginative presentation involved in reflective judgment. This reflective process is not 'mechanical' . . . like application, but proceeds 'artistically, according to the universal but at the same time indeterminate principle of a purposive, systematic ordering of nature'" (56-57). Kant asserts that the faculty of Imagination has the capability of apprehension (*Auffassung*). The apprehensive capability of the Imagination gives it the power to make "systematic orderings of nature," and so we see that the Imagination is equipped to make systematic judgments of form.

This semantic presentation of the polar bear is then presented or referred to the faculty of Understanding. The Understanding receives the semantic presentation A;M;PB;W;FL;LS;RH;FE;etc., and in cases of judgments of cognition, it synthesizes the presentation with concepts gained from experience. By experiencing many polar bears (from Coca-Cola commercials, trips to the zoo, the Discovery Channel, etc.), the Understanding will have created a semantic presentation of what the form of a polar bear ought to be: A;M;PB;W;FL;LS;RH;PE;etc. The Understanding's linguistic presentation is slightly different from the presentation referred by the Imagination in that the ears are not flat, but pointy. Essentially, the Understanding says that the ears ought to be pointy. The mind then releases a certain amount of energy to guide the synthesis of the presentation of the Imagination (the linguistic interpretation of the synthesis of the manifold of intuition) according to what the polar bear ought to be (the linguistic presentation of the Understanding) in order to determine if the object encountered on the phenomenal plane truly is a polar bear or not. The discrepancies between the two presentations are resolved through concepts, and the end result is a definite object: a polar bear.

Judgments of taste, though somewhat different from judgments of cognition, are still, as Kant says, "generally related." Let's say that once again we meet a polar bear on the plane of experience. The Imagination will again present the semantic form of the object to the Understanding, and the Understanding will apprehend the form. But this time, the form

referred by the Imagination matches up exactly with what the Understanding determines the form of a polar bear ought to be. The result of the referral is the following: A;M;PB;W;FL;LS;RH;PE;etc. is A;M;PB;W;FL;LS;RH;PE;etc. The two statements together create a tautological relation, or the simple conjoining of two equivalent statements. When the two faculties create a tautological relation through apprehension, the result is still cognitive because the mind recognizes the object. But this example transcends a mere judgment of cognition because no concepts are used in making the judgment; no concepts are necessary. Under normal conditions, the mind must guide the synthesis of the Imagination with concepts to remove discrepancies between the form of what is being experienced and what the form of the object being experienced ought to be. But because in this case the form matches exactly with what the Understanding believes the form ought to be, the two faculties can harmonize through mere apprehension, as Kant originally thought. The mind still releases a certain amount of energy, presupposing a need to resolve discrepancies between the two faculties, but because no discrepancies exist, the excess energy is disbursed throughout the body as feelings of pleasure.

The harmony of the faculties occurs because semantic statements can stand in relation to each other—they are inherently capable of harmony. Two or more semantic statements can be related and conjoined. The term “harmony” can function in a semantic system because semantic statements fulfill the necessary chronological and spatial requirements of the term. It might even be said that language is the expression of thought. This paper is the physical presentation of my ideas. Without language, the thoughts would remain both in my mind and unexpressed. My example makes use of tautological relations, but statements can also be related truth functionally and in many other ways. In Kant’s model, the faculties themselves are required to harmonize. For me, this is difficult to understand because the faculties transcend time and space.

My semantic model clears up another problem that critics have had with Kant’s harmonization: what is the ugly, and why do ugly objects give us feelings of displeasure or pain? To answer these questions, I will return, yet again, to my polar bear example. This time, however, suppose that the bear is skinny with thin patches of gray hair. The form presented to the Understanding by the Imagination will yield so many discrepancies that the mind will have to use extra energy to make the cognition. The extra expenditure of energy will result in feelings of displeasure and pain. The bear is ugly; that is, the bear’s form is not a proper bear’s form, and so the mind must work harder to identify it as a polar bear.

It must also be noted that the only objects capable of being considered beautiful are what Kant calls “objects of taste.” A chair, for example,

will never be considered beautiful by a normal person. Even if a chair has a perfect form capable of creating a harmony between the semantic faculties of Imagination and Understanding, it is not an object of taste. Paul Guyer says of objects of taste, "It is easy to draw . . . a definition from Kant's statements: a judgment of taste is a judgment of an *object grounded on a delight* in it which it is without any interest" (167, italics added). Only objects of taste can stimulate the free play of the Imagination, which is essential for judgments of the beautiful. Any object that is not an object of taste but still creates harmony—according to my semantic model—will be, as Allison suggests, a judgment of perfection and not a judgment of beauty. Normal people will have cultivated their judgment of taste to the point of being capable of making aesthetic judgments. People who are not normal will not have experienced enough polar bears to know what the form of the polar bear ought to be. Thus, the semantic faculty of Understanding is deficient, and those persons will be unable to determine what is beautiful.

I believe that the problems many scholars have with Kant's epistemic explication of judgments of taste are largely due to his use of the term "harmony." Harmony necessarily depends on space and time for operation. But Kant himself declared that the components of his model—faculties of Imagination and Understanding—transcend space and time. Fundamental problems with synthesis and the scope of the judgments are dissolved when Kant's assertions are translated into a semantic system. The fact that Kant's harmony of the faculties fit so well into a semantic system is, I believe, compelling evidence supporting the conclusion that Kant's use of the term "harmony" is inappropriate. Thus, a simple but fundamental flaw has been a major source of contention among scholars for many years.

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