

Commentary on Ostaric's *Critique of Judgment and the Unity of Kant's System*

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In my commentary, I focus on Ostaric's account of the relation between the faculty of reflective judgment and empirical reality. She emphasizes, correctly, that the purposiveness at issue in the third Critique is a purposiveness of nature. I consider whether Ostaric's "moral image realism" can connect reflective judgment to nature in a truly realist fashion, and argue that it cannot.

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In *The Critique of Judgment and the Unity of Kant's Critical System*, Lara Ostaric lays out an original reading of the third *Critique* and of Kant's philosophy as a whole. Ostaric starts from the premise of the unity of reason: speculative reason and practical reason are the same reason, differently employed. But of the two uses of reason, the practical is preeminent for Kant (Ostaric 2025: 55, see also Ostaric 2009: 156–157). Ostaric accordingly traces Kant's writings on the systematic unity of nature with an eye on the connection between the speculative interest in systematicity and the practical interest in setting goals for action. She argues convincingly, for example, that the latter part of the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, titled "On the Final Aim of the Natural Dialectic of Human Reason," "prepares the ground" for the Canon of Pure Reason, a later section in the *Critique* in which Kant argues that the "strenuous efforts of reason" are best directed at its practical use (A796/B824).¹ Similarly, in the Introduction to the *Cri-*

¹ References to Kant's work indicate the volume number in the Akademie-Ausgabe and the page number in the volume, except in the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where I follow the standard practice of referring to the first and second editions with A and B respectively. The English rendering of the *Critique of Pure Reason* follows the translation of Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Kant 1997); for the *Critique of Judgment* I follow Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Kant 2000).

tique of Judgment, Ostaric gives priority to the transition problem—the question whether there are grounds for thinking that our practical goals can be achieved. The presentation of this problem in the Introduction anticipates, Ostaric says, the doctrine of practical faith Kant presents in the last sections of the “Critique of Teleological Judgment.” It is here, in §§76–81, that Ostaric finds the completion of the third Critique’s task of grounding reflective judgment. Because nature’s laws are independent of us, and our motivation to follow the moral law is often weak, we are justified in believing in God as the cause of moral order in the world (Ostaric 2023: 96–97). Thus the transition problem is solved, and the unity of the critical system assured.

Among all the ideas in this wide-ranging book, the one I will focus on here is the close attention Ostaric gives to the relation between reflective judgment and empirical reality. She takes very seriously the fact that the principle of reflective judgment is a claim about *nature’s* purposiveness, and yet at the same time is a subjective principle that reflective judgment gives itself. She addresses this tension in her discussion of the relation of the third *Critique* to the second. In the latter work, Kant seeks to demonstrate the “objective reality” of the idea of absolute freedom as a “fact,” but we cognize this fact only “from the practical point of view” (Ostaric 2023: 5). Whatever precisely we take this qualification to mean, it is Ostaric’s view that “reason’s determination is the one of a real and *given* object” (Ostaric 2023: 3, emphasis added). In the *Critique of Judgment*, she says, Kant maintains that

it is not sufficient that the object of the Idea of the highest good... is something that is normatively necessary for us to conceive intellectually. In the third *Critique*, the object of the Idea of the highest good as the final end of nature is something that must be *given* to us in sensibility. (Ostaric 2023: 6, emphasis added)

So it seems that Kant needs to find a way to present purposiveness as something determined from a practical point of view but also given in sensibility.

Ostaric’s solution to this problem is what she calls “moral image realism,” borrowing the term of art ‘moral image’ from Dieter Henrich (1992). In order that our moral striving will not seem futile, we must think that our moral goals are achievable. Ostaric’s thought is that reflective judgment’s contribution to transcendental philosophy is to represent nature as suited to our goals by forming “schema-analogues,” that is, representations of nature “as if” it were purposive. Here is her initial presentation of this central idea:

My aim in this book... is to show that reflective judgments do not merely satisfy reason’s minimal ends, that is, they do not merely make possible the determination of some forms and objects in nature, but they also serve reason’s final ends. On a meta-aesthetic and meta-teleological level, they generate schema-analogues of the Idea of the highest good together with the conditions of its realization and thereby they facilitate “practical cognition.”

(5:475) [...] With reflective judgment, the objects practical reason demands that we conceive as real are represented as if obtaining in nature.

Crucially, Ostaric seems committed to showing that for Kant, reasoning about our moral goals and obligations entails not only that we must (in a moral sense of 'must') believe that the world is suited to our moral projects, but that it is *true* that it is so suited. I say 'seems to' because here and elsewhere she says that by means of schema-analogues we represent objects "as if," rather than 'as,' obtaining in nature.

In my view, Ostaric is quite right to emphasize the unity of Kant's reason and the primacy of the practical. There is no question that, along with completing Kant's system of cognitive faculties, the goal of the third *Critique* is to provide grounds for believing in the achievability of goals set by practical reason. She is also right to see the *Critique of Judgment* as concerned with issues emerging from the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Most crucially, she is also to see that Kant's problem here concerns the purposiveness of nature, understood as in some sense independent of our thought. However, I do not agree with her that the task of the *Critique of Judgment* is completed in the "Critique of Teleological Judgment" rather than the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment." What is missing from Ostaric's reading is the connection between reflective judgment and the feeling of pleasure and displeasure (hereafter simply 'feeling of pleasure'). For Kant the connection of purposiveness to feeling is essential for treating judgment as a power for cognition of *nature* without elevating its principle to a condition of the possibility of experience.² The phenomenon of natural beauty offers a feeling of pleasure that represents the givenness, and thus the contingency, of nature's purposiveness. In this way, beauty supplies the connection of pleasure to purposiveness, and consequently the principle of reflective judgment. Consequently, I think that we must look to the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" rather than the "Critique of Teleological Judgment" for the principle of reflective judgment. To show this, I will first briefly lay out the essential elements of Kant's own presentation of the task of the work, and then explain (again briefly) how I think this task is carried out in the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment." I will conclude by giving reasons for thinking that Ostaric's moral image realism falls short.

In order to weigh how the body of the *Critique of Judgment* fulfills its task, we must first make clear just what that task is. In the work's introduction Kant presents the third *Critique* as addressing a problem about the relationship between understanding and reason. Understanding seeks laws of nature, and the power of judgment seeks to organize these laws in a hierarchical system. Note that Kant here is assigning to understanding the task he gave to speculative reason in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. These laws are empirical, rather than *a priori* like the categories,

² See especially §V, 5:187–8.

so what laws there are and how they are to be arrayed systematically cannot be known in advance of the relevant scientific research. The claim that empirical cognition can be systematized is not itself an empirical cognition. Our options, then, are to give up on finding a rational basis for the project of systematization, or to regard purposiveness as a transcendental principle of the power of judgment, which is of course what Kant is proposing here. But being a transcendental principle does not, it turns out, mean that the principle of nature's purposiveness is a condition of the possibility of experience like the categories. Instead, purposiveness is a "maxim" that reflective judgment uses in its search for systematic order among empirical laws.

I am re-covering this familiar ground in order to bring out two important points. First, the systematic unity of empirical cognition is something we seek, but cannot know in advance we will find. To put it simply, the pleasure of purposiveness is the result of finding order in nature unexpectedly—a pleasant surprise. It functions as a 'nod' from nature regarding this purposiveness. Second, the principle of nature's purposiveness, being neither an empirical cognition nor a category, sits in a murky middle ground between knowledge in the fullest sense and mere conjecture. It requires a grounding—Kant even refers to this grounding as a "transcendental deduction"—but it is not immediately clear what that grounding will amount to.

The problematic status of the grounding is an important point of continuity between the third *Critique* and the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the first. In the Appendix, Kant focuses on the ideas of pure reason as concepts in need of justification, rather than on purposiveness as in the *Critique of Judgment*. Ideas, for Kant, represent objects, such as God, that transcend possible experience (A320/B377) but that belief in which helps reason bring about "the *systematic* in cognition, i.e. its interconnection based on one principle." (A645/B673) Accordingly, our use of ideas is not constitutive, "so that the concepts of certain objects would thereby be given, but rather merely regulative, "namely that of directing understanding to a certain goal." (A644/B672) It is therefore important for reason to ascertain that the ideas "have a good and consequently *immanent* use. (A643/B671; emphasis in original) Thus in the section "On the Final Aim of the Natural Dialectic of Human Reason," Kant offers a "transcendental deduction" for the ideas of pure reason:

"[I]f one can show... that all rules of the empirical use of reason under the presupposition of such an *object in the idea* lead to systematic unity, always extending the cognition of experience but never going contrary to experience, then it is a necessary *maxim* of reason to proceed in accordance with such ideas. (A671/B699; emphasis in original)

Kant's thought seems to be that the merely regulative status of the ideas lightens his burden of proof almost entirely. This is puzzling, though, because in just the previous chapter he observes (correctly, I

think) that it is perfectly conceivable that empirical phenomena might turn out to be not systematizable, in which case “we would have no reason, and without that, no coherent use of the understanding, and, lacking that, no sufficient mark of empirical truth.” (A651/B679) Given the high cognitive stakes, in order to justify the use of ideas, it cannot be enough merely to show that their use is beneficial and non-contradictory.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, the terms have (mostly) changed, but the epistemological situation (mostly) has not. The principle of the purposiveness of nature is a transcendental rather than a metaphysical principle, that is, one that “represents the *a priori* condition under which alone objects whose concept must be given empirically can be further determined *a priori*.” (5:181) In §V of the Introduction, Kant is at pains to explain how the principle of purposiveness differs both from empirical judgments and also from other *a priori* propositions: It is a “subjective principle” or “maxim” of the power of judgment, because it “attributes nothing at all to the object (of nature), but rather only represents the unique way in which we must proceed in reflection on the objects of nature.” (5:184) The principle of nature’s purposiveness, then, is a statement *about* objects in nature, but not one that is objectively valid, at least not in the sense in which the categories are objectively valid.

Kant’s solution is to offer the feeling of pleasure or displeasure (hereafter simply feeling of pleasure) as a sign of nature’s purposiveness. The achievement of any goal, Kant tells us in §VI of the Introduction, is accompanied by a feeling of pleasure. This includes cognitive goals, such as bringing “empirically heterogeneous laws under a principle that comprehends them both.” (5:187) Though admittedly we no longer feel a noticeable pleasure when we find unity among our perceptions, “it must certainly have been there in its time”; on the other hand,

a representation of nature that foretold that even in the most minor investigation of the most common experience we would stumble on a heterogeneity in its laws that would make the unification of its particular laws under universal empirical ones impossible for our understanding would displease us. (5:188)

This pleasure serves as a sign that in the context in which we feel it nature is conforming to our goal of systematic unification. Nevertheless, pleasure itself cannot be a cognition. As he puts it a bit later, pleasure is “the subjective aspect in a representation *which cannot become a cognition at all*.” (5:189; emphasis in original) Through the pleasure I associate with a representation, Kant says in §VII, “I cognize nothing in the object of the representation, although it can well be the effect of some cognition or other.” (5:189) Thus on Kant’s view pleasure can be subjective while nevertheless being connected causally to something objective. The grounding of the principle of nature’s purposiveness depends on this connection between pleasure and cognition.

As I read the *Critique of Judgment*, the connection between pleasure and cognition is made in the account of aesthetic judgment in the “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment.” Kant argues there that the pleasure felt in a (positive) judgment of taste has the same “determining ground” as “cognition in general,” even though it is not itself a cognition. (5:217) Kant carefully distinguishes the pleasure involved in pure aesthetic judgment from moral and sensory pleasure. Even though the “determining ground” [*Bestimmungsgrund*] of the pure judgment of taste is a subjective feeling of pleasure we nevertheless expect (in a normative sense) others to agree with our judgments, “as if it were objective.” (5:281) Judgments of taste, Kant says, are “universally communicable,” by which he means intersubjectively valid. (5:293) Now, “nothing... can be universally communicated except cognition and representation so far as it belongs to cognition.” Therefore, he reasons, judgments of taste must have the same determining ground as “cognition in general [*Erkenntnis überhaupt*]” (5:215) I have argued elsewhere (Kinnaman 2024) that the best way to understand the idea of “cognition in general” is to take it to refer to the task of systematizing empirical laws. Reading it this way makes sense of the connection between the Introduction to the third *Critique* and the aesthetic theory, in particular §9, which Kant calls the “key to the critique of taste.” It also clarifies how Kant intends to ground the normativity of judgments of taste, namely by, as it were, borrowing the normativity of cognition, but without making beauty a determinate concept.

Near the end of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” in §35, Kant declares that “the principle of taste is the subjective principle of judgment in general [*Urteilkraft überhaupt*].” What is this principle of taste? Kant has already shown that it cannot be an objective principle, so that we could deduce the beauty of a particular object from a rule. Rather, in pure aesthetic judgment I must “immediately feel pleasure in the representation”—feeling being opposed to objectivity. (5:285) So the principle of taste, rather than subsuming particular objects under (determinate) concepts instead “[brings] under rules the reciprocal relation of the imagination and imagination to each other.” (5:286) The judgment of taste therefore “is grounded only on the subjective formal condition of a judgment in general.” (5:287) Kant proposes to represent this grounding as “a 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).” (5:287) It is, Kant says, the business of “transcendental critique” to “develop and justify the subjective principle of taste as an *a priori* principle of the power of judgment.” (5:286) I take Kant here to be connecting his account of taste to the task of grounding the principle of nature’s purposiveness.

Now, for an interpretation of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” such as mine, it is essential to square the subjectivity of taste with its connection to objects in nature. The transcendental principle of the

power of judgment is the principle of the purposiveness of *nature*. It is a regulative principle, to be sure, but nevertheless it affirms something of the empirical world. Judgments of taste, however, are subjective in important ways. Their determining ground is the feeling of pleasure, and "cannot be other than subjective." (5:203) Furthermore, they involve the application (depending on which passage we look at) of either no concept at all or an indeterminate concept. Either way, judgments of taste cannot be supported by appealing to a rule, as Kant had argued in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a necessary condition for giving our representations reference to an object. In this connection, we must note that, for all their subjective aspects, judgments of taste are nevertheless *about* objects. Kant says this unambiguously the Analytic of the Sublime. "We express ourselves," he says there, "on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature sublime, though we can quite correctly call very many of them beautiful." (5:245) This passage is not an anomaly; in §VII of the Introduction, "On the aesthetic representation of the purposiveness of nature," Kant repeatedly, without apparent irony or reservations, refers to objects as beautiful. Even in explaining the view that the pleasure underlying the judgment of taste "cannot become an element of cognition at all," he concludes that "the object is therefore called purposive." (5:189) He continues by explaining that in aesthetic judgment "pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension of the form of an object of intuition without relation of this to a concept for a determinate cognition." In such a case, he says, "the object is then called beautiful, and the faculty for judging through such a pleasure... is called taste." (5:190) There are many more examples of this throughout the text. Simply, but a bit anachronistically put, judgments of taste successfully refer to objects. If 'successfully refer' seems redundant, it is worth noting that Kant is not offering an error theory of taste, according to which we *think* we refer to natural objects in our judgments of taste but in fact fail to do so. He makes no suggestion whatsoever to this possibility. Indeed, on close reading, when Kant explains the precise nature of the subjectivity of taste, he emphasizes the subjectivity of the *evidence* we give for judgments of taste. This is clear, for example, when he presents his view that the concept of beauty is an indeterminate one, by which he means a concept "from which... nothing can be cognized and proved with regard to the object." (5:340) This is quite compatible with holding that the judgments are nevertheless about objects.

To sum up: The task of the *Critique of Judgment* is to provide warrant for the principle of nature's purposiveness. As Ostaric rightly observes, this principle expresses a claim about nature. But it is neither an empirical claim nor a claim about the conditions of the possibility of any experience. Kant says in §VI that it is through the feeling of pleasure that reflective judgment connects to nature. My question about Ostaric's moral image realism is whether it can provide the needed

connection. Ostaric clearly recognizes the importance of explaining the relation of reflective judgment to nature. But it is not clear to me that schema-analogues explain this relation, and thus also not clear that they can play the important role in the third *Critique* that Ostaric envisions. She notes the place in §VIII of the Introduction, which I have already quoted, where Kant says that the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” but not the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” “belongs essentially” to the *Critique of Judgment*. Here is the passage in full:

In the critique of the power of judgment the part that contains the aesthetic power of judgment is essential, since this alone contains a principle that the power of judgment lays at the basis of its reflection on nature entirely *a priori*, namely that of a formal purposiveness in accordance with its particular (empirical) laws for our faculty of cognition, without which the understanding could not find itself in it; whereas no *a priori* ground at all can be given why there must be objective ends of nature. (5:193)

Ostaric glosses this passage by referring to Kant’s claim that the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” provides the power of judgment with an *a priori* principle, but I think that it is important to understand Kant’s claim in its context. §VIII is where Kant introduces the power of teleological judgment, having already presented the power of aesthetic judgment. His explanation for the seeming privilege of the analysis of aesthetic judgment does not stop at the quoted passage. In the next paragraph, Kant explains that

[t]he fundamental transcendental principle, however, for representing a purposiveness of nature... leaves it to the *aesthetic* power of judgment to make out, in taste, the suitability of the thing (of its form) to our cognitive faculties (insofar as these decide not through concepts but through feeling). By contrast, the teleologically employed power of judgment provides the determinate conditions under which something (e.g. an organized body) is to be judged in accordance with the idea of an end of nature. (5:194)

The distinction Kant draws here is somewhat unclear. What is the significance of the fact that teleological judgment “provides the determinate conditions” for judging something to be purposive? Notice that Kant emphasizes the contingency of the purposiveness at issue—some but not necessarily all objects in nature are beautiful—and furthermore connects this fact to the role of the feeling of pleasure in aesthetic judgment. I think that Kant here is summarizing his earlier (§V) connection of the role of pleasure to the special problem of establishing the principle of nature’s purposiveness as a transcendental principle. There he says that the particular problem about systematic unity is that the laws that make up the system of nature “bring necessity” with them, but “given the constitution and limits of our faculty of cognition we have no insight at all into this necessity.” So although “such a unity must necessarily be presupposed,” what is presupposed is “a thoroughgoing connection of empirical cognitions,” but *not* “specifically, as such and such particular beings in nature.” (5:183) Elsewhere, in §VI, he emphasizes that the “presupposition” of nature’s purposiveness

is “indeterminate on the question of how far that ideal purposiveness of nature for our faculty of cognition should be extended.” (5:188) This indeterminacy represents the contingency of the purposiveness at issue: Our pleasure at encountering purposive unity is possible only if it awaits the (unpredicted) appearance of the unity. This is crucial for completing the task of the *Critique of Judgment*, which concerns our justification for affirming nature’s purposiveness. It is not enough, for this purpose, to represent nature as purposive; that could, after all, be a self-delusion of reason. The contingency of nature’s purposiveness requires word-to-world fit: the power of judgment must react to, rather than, so to speak, anticipate purposiveness’s appearance. But certain aspects of what Ostaric has to say on this, however, make me think that schema-analogues are not sufficiently responsive to the in principle unpredictable appearance of purposiveness. For example, she writes that schema-analogues are something the power of judgment “makes,” and calls them “products of reason’s *poiesis*, its creation or production” (Ostaric 2023: 7). She also says that in conceiving, for example, of God, “[t]hat which practical reason demands that we intellectually conceive as possible... *receives its object* from reflective judgment in response to the needs of theoretical reason” (Ostaric 2023: 95). To me, at least, this suggests that schema-analogues are not responses to stimuli from the world, but rather created by judgment in response to reason’s own needs.

To put it simply, Kant defines the problem of the *Critique of Judgment* so that the solution to the problem depends on making room in transcendental philosophy for sensitivity to empirical discovery—for the givenness of purposiveness in nature. My question about Lara Ostaric’s excellent interpretation is whether it can accommodate that sensitivity.

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