

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the Pleasure Principle: A Kantian Aesthetics of Autonomy

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Aesthetic hedonism is the view that to be aesthetically good is to please. For most aesthetic hedonists, aesthetic normativity is hedonic normativity. This paper argues that Kant's third *Critique* contains resources for a nonhedonic account of aesthetic normativity as sourced in autonomy as self-legislation. A case is made that the account is also Kant's because it ties his aesthetics into a key theme of his larger philosophy.

Keywords: aesthetic; autonomy; beauty; Kant; normativity; pleasure

You should appreciate the Plumen 001 light bulb. Why? Well, it is beautiful. A theory of aesthetic normativity should answer a further question: Why does any item's being beautiful lend weight to the proposition that you should appreciate it? Until recently, the further question has rarely been made explicit. Its answer is too obvious, given the default theory of aesthetic value, aesthetic hedonism. According to aesthetic hedonism, to be beautiful is, roughly, to have properties that ground pleasure in suitable conditions.¹ An aesthetic hedonist may easily add that an item's grounding pleasure lends weight to the proposition that you should appreciate it simply because anyone has reason to get pleasure. As obvious as it may be, some nevertheless dissent from the hedonic theory of aesthetic normativity.² This paper argues that resources are to be found in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* for a distinctively Kantian, nonhedonic theory of aesthetic normativity, one on which the source of aesthetic normativity is autonomy, or self-legislation.

I. The Scope of Aesthetic Normativity

Establishing the thesis that resources are to be found in the third *Critique* for a distinctively Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity stops short of attributing the theory to Kant himself. A case can be made that the Kantian theory is Kant's. Blackletter text backs it up; it meshes

¹ Servaas van der Berg, 'Aesthetic Hedonism and Its Critics', *Philosophy Compass* 15 (2020): 1–15.

² For example, K. C. Bhattacharyya, 'The Concept of Rasa' (1930), in *Indian Philosophy in English: From Renaissance to Independence*, ed. Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 195–206; Dominic Mclver Lopes, *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); 'Feeling for Freedom: K. C. Bhattacharyya on Rasa', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59 (2019): 465–77; Robbie Kubala, 'Grounding Aesthetic Obligations', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (2018): 271–85; Samantha Matherne and Nick Riggle, 'Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Value: Part II', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61 (2021): 17–40.

well with recent work by Alix Cohen, Melissa Merritt, and Samantha Matherne on Kant's appeal to 'common sense';³ and it reveals a deep continuity between Kant's aesthetics and the rest of his philosophy, especially as his project has been understood by Onora O'Neill, among others.⁴ These are all good reasons to attribute the theory to Kant. However, there are countervailing reasons too. Some are textual and will be addressed as the argument develops below, but one requires immediate attention. With the exception of Rachel Zuckert,⁵ Kant's interpreters do not read him as addressing the question that calls for the theory of aesthetic normativity of which the distinctively Kantian theory is an example. Kant is concerned with aesthetic normativity in a different sense. If most interpreters are correct, the theory sketched below is distinctively Kantian, in as much as its elements are laid out in the third *Critique*, though their being available in the text sheds little or no light on Kant's project.

The elements of the distinctively Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity come together in the 'Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments' in § 30 to § 40, especially in light of the two introductions. The aim of the deduction is to show that what Kant calls pure judgements of taste have certain features that he attributes to them in §§ 1–22, the 'Analytic of the Beautiful'.

The 'Analytic' opens by defining 'aesthetic judgements' as those involving a 'feeling of pleasure or displeasure'.⁶ A subset of aesthetic judgements Kant calls 'judgements of taste', which are the judgements we typically express by calling things beautiful (*CJ*, 5:210; see also 5:223). Notice that Kant's 'aesthetic judgements' are what we would now call 'hedonic judgements', and his 'judgements of taste' are what we now call 'aesthetic judgements'. When doing aesthetics, it is hard not to use 'aesthetic' in the usual, contemporary sense, which clashes with Kant's idiom. Henceforth, in this paper, let 'aesthetic judgement' name those judgements typically expressed by calling things beautiful.⁷

Four features demarcate aesthetic judgements from other hedonic judgements. First, a judgement, this is beautiful, involves disinterested pleasure. Other hedonic judgements bear 'a relation to the faculty of desire' (*CJ*, 5:209); they amount either to a gratification of the inclinations or to taking satisfaction in the goodness of a means to an end or in the goodness of an end itself. In aesthetic judgement, pleasure is not felt because an object satisfies a need or fulfils an aim, or because an end is finally worthy. Second, aesthetic judgements are universally valid. Someone who judges that an item is beautiful takes the judgement to apply not just to herself, but to everyone (*CJ*, 5:212). Third, aesthetic judgement is an awareness of formal purposiveness in the item judged beautiful and also in the operation of the judge's cognitive powers in the process of aesthetic judgement (*CJ*, 5:220, 5:222). More on this below. Finally, the 'Analytic' culminates in the claim that a judgement that this is beautiful represents the item as 'the object of a necessary satisfaction' (*CJ*, 5:240). The modality Kant intends is normative. Aesthetic judgements 'lay claim to necessity and say, not that everyone does so judge [...]

³ Alix Cohen, 'Kant on the Ethics of Belief', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 114 (2014): 317–34; 'Kant on Science and Normativity', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 71 (2018): 6–12; Melissa Merritt, *Kant on Reflection and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Samantha Matherne, 'Kant on Aesthetic Autonomy and Common Sense', *Philosophers' Imprint* 19 (2019): 1–22.

⁴ Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵ Rachel Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the 'Critique of Judgment'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:204; see also 5:214. Hereafter: *CJ* (page references follow the Akademie Ausgabe pagination).

⁷ A bad habit of recent philosophy is to interchange 'aesthetic' and 'artistic'. This article is principally concerned with aesthetic judgement and aesthetic normativity.

but that everyone ought to so judge' (*CJ*, 20:239). Hence, 'whoever declares something to be beautiful wishes that everyone should approve of the object in question and similarly declare it to be beautiful' (*CJ*, 5:237; see also 5:239).⁸

Interpreters agree that the task of the deduction is to demonstrate that aesthetic judgements are 'legitimate' in the sense that they do indeed have the four features. For most interpreters, to demonstrate that they do have the four features is just to 'ground the normativity of [aesthetic] judgements', in the words of Henry Allison.⁹ On this approach, a theory of aesthetic normativity is just a theory that answers the following question: How can a judgement that is subjective nevertheless involve disinterested pleasure and demand that everyone should share in it? Alternatively, how can we go wrong, and fail to judge as we should, when aesthetic judgements are pleasures and when beauty is not a property in any object?

Without doubt, these are core questions of Kant's aesthetics, and they do concern aesthetic normativity, but they do not exhaust the phenomenon. Return to appreciating the Plumen 001. According to Kant, appreciation is making the aesthetic judgement, this is beautiful. Now take two cases. Arsineh is visiting the Cooper Hewitt Museum, has chanced upon the light bulb, and is judging it to be beautiful. In judging it to be beautiful, she is making the judgement that anyone should make. By contrast, Fionn is in the next room and has never seen the Plumen 001. He should also judge it to be beautiful: he should look at it and make an aesthetic judgement. So, he should go to the light bulb display and position himself to judge it to be beautiful. A theory that explains why Arsineh's judgement is one that anyone should make is not automatically a theory that explains why Fionn should position himself to make the same judgement. In particular, a theory that justifies Arsineh's judgement as having the four features that demarcate it from other hedonic judgements is not a theory that answers the question, why should Fionn put himself in the same position as Arsineh?

Fionn heads for the museum café, and Arsineh intercepts him:

A: You should go next door see the light bulb display!

F: Why?

A: They have the Plumen 001. It's beautiful.

F: So what?

A: When you see it, you will take a disinterested pleasure in formal purposiveness, and anyone should take that pleasure.

F: I have excellent taste; I grant that if I see it, I will take the pleasure that anyone should take. So what?

He is in a caffeine-deprived snit, but if the final 'So what?' is a question with an answer, then there is more to aesthetic normativity than is explained by a demonstration that there are judgements with the four features attributed to aesthetic judgements in the 'Analytic'. A failure to do as one should when one is in conditions to make an aesthetic judgement is not the same as a failure to do as one should by getting into those conditions.

Mary Mothersill and Jerrold Levinson brilliantly argued that key features of Hume's aesthetics remain hidden from view until we read him as concerned with how Arsineh should

⁸ As Kant insists, the aesthetic should or ought is not moral or epistemic (*CJ*, 5:236–37).

⁹ Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 160; see also 164–66 and Donald W. Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 26–28; Hannah Ginsborg, 'In Defence of the One-Act View: Reply to Guyer', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 421–35; Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 107, 228–29.

answer Fionn.¹⁰ One might go further: no aesthetic theory can be fully adequate as long as it lacks resources to help Arsineh answer Fionn. It will have nothing to say about why we should send our children to music lessons, why we should allocate state resources to the arts, or why we should make the arduous hike to Machu Picchu. It will satisfy us only on the question why we judge as we should when we judge aesthetically. We also want theory that explains why we should ever judge aesthetically.

If no aesthetic theory is fully adequate unless it answers Fionn, and if there are resources in the third *Critique* for a distinctively Kantian theory that answers Fionn, then it is worth taking seriously the proposal that the distinctively Kantian theory is also Kant's theory. Possibly, Kant is not interested in a theory of aesthetic normativity that answers Fionn. If the distinctively Kantian theory is not Kant's, then it is nonetheless worth serious attention as a distinctively Kantian theory.

II. Criteria for a Kantian Theory

Writing on the deduction, Zuckert distinguishes three questions with which she sees Kant as grappling, through which he articulates progressively stronger conceptions of aesthetic normativity.¹¹ First, why is it the case that all are able to judge aesthetically? Second, why must it be the case that all are able to judge aesthetically? Third, why should all judge aesthetically? These three questions lay out a road map to a distinctively Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity.

An answer to the first question will point to a principle whose operation is constitutive of aesthetic judgement and that is part of our cognitive endowment. We are all able to judge aesthetically because the capacity for aesthetic judgement comes with our capacity to judge empirically.

In answer to the second question, the operation of this principle turns out to be necessary for having any experience at all – not just aesthetic experience. Hence, as long as we have a capacity to experience the world at all, we must also have the capacity for aesthetic judgement.

Question three requests a theory of aesthetic normativity that answers Fionn. An explanation, in answer to the second question, of why we must all be equipped with such cognitive powers as enable us to make aesthetic judgements does not explain why we should ever use the equipment we must have.

Zuckert's three questions also hint at a pair of conditions that must be met by a distinctively Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity. A theory is distinctively Kantian only if it is a product of the reasoning in the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' and the 'Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgements'. That is, first, it had better explain aesthetic normativity by appeal to the features that demarcate aesthetic judgement from other kinds of hedonic judgement. Call this the 'demarcation condition'. Second, a distinctively Kantian theory had better tap the ambition of the 'Deduction', explaining aesthetic normativity using the special apparatus of a transcendental deduction that appeals to a priori principles that are needed for any kind of experience (*CJ*, 20:239, 5:280–81, 5:288). Call this the 'deduction condition'. Together the demarcation and deduction conditions tell us when a theory of aesthetic normativity is not merely in the text of the third *Critique* but is a product of the philosophical project of the text.

¹⁰ Mary Mothersill, 'Hume and the Paradox of Taste', in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie, Richard Sclafani, and Ronald Roblin (New York: St Martin's, 1989), 269–86, and Jerrold Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 227–38.

¹¹ Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty*, 335; see also 346, 360, and 366–67.

III. Hedonic and Super-Hedonic Normativity

Before turning to Zuckert's theory and then the autonomy-based theory, here are two obvious theories of aesthetic normativity that are not distinctively Kantian. Seeing where these theories go wrong for Kant illustrates how the reasoning in the 'Analytic' and the 'Deduction' points to a distinctively Kantian approach.

Aesthetic hedonists hold roughly that to be beautiful is to have properties that ground pleasure. From aesthetic hedonism it is a short step to a hedonic theory of aesthetic normativity. Fionn admits that if he visits the Plumen 001, he will take the pleasure in it that anyone should take in it, but then wonders why he should visit it. Many will regard Arsineh's reply as obvious: anyone always has reason to get pleasure. His having reason to get pleasure lends weight to the proposition that he should see the light bulb. Explanations of normativity bottom out at pleasure: the correct answer to 'What is so great about pleasure?' is a shrug.

Even if Kant is not an aesthetic hedonist, one might think he could adopt a hedonic theory of aesthetic normativity. According to Kant, something in an item together with the operations of cognition in response to the item grounds an aesthetic judgement; aesthetic judgement is awareness of 'the subjective purposiveness of that form for the power of judgment' (*CJ*, 5:290). So long as what gets grounded is aesthetic judgement rather than beauty, Kant is not strictly speaking an aesthetic hedonist.¹² All the same, if seeing the Plumen 001 grounds aesthetic judgement and aesthetic judgement implicates pleasure, then one might think that the reason why Fionn should go judge the light bulb to be beautiful is that anyone always has reason to go get pleasure. The correct answer to 'What is so great about aesthetic judgement?' is 'It is pleasing', followed by a shrug.

Call this the 'simple hedonic theory' of aesthetic normativity. The hypothesis that the simple hedonic theory is in fact Kant's would have the virtue of explaining why Kant does not make explicit the resources he has to answer Fionn. The simple hedonic theory's answer is too obvious to need spelling out; it can be taken for granted.

However, the simple hedonic theory is not a distinctively Kantian theory, because it satisfies neither the demarcation nor the deduction condition. According to Kant, aesthetic normativity is not plain hedonic normativity; it is grounded in some demarcating feature of aesthetic judgement in a way that requires a deduction.

The failure of the simple hedonic theory to satisfy the demarcation condition suggests another, more Kantian, hedonic theory of aesthetic normativity. We ask whether we can answer Fionn by latching onto a demarcating feature of aesthetic judgement – its being disinterested or universal, or its involving awareness of formal purposiveness.

Universality is the eminently eligible candidate. Someone who judges that an item is beautiful takes the judgement to apply not just to themselves, but to everyone (*CJ*, 5:212). Moreover, in as much as aesthetic judgements are universally valid, they are grounds for sharing. According to the 'super-hedonic theory' of aesthetic normativity, Fionn has reason to go judge the Plumen 001 beautiful because anyone has special reason to take pleasure in

¹² The matter is hardly straightforward. Kant denies that beauty is an objective property of an item, one attributable on the basis of a rule, or concept (for example, *CJ*, 5:280–84, 5:337–41, 5:346–50). Contemporary aesthetic hedonists agree. They say that the grounds of pleasure in an item constitute beauty only in relation to a subjective response. 'Beauty,' as Kant writes, 'is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject' (*CJ*, 5:218). Accordingly, aesthetic judgement 'consists precisely in the fact that it calls a thing beautiful only in accordance with that quality in [the item] by means of which [the item] corresponds with our way of receiving it' (*CJ*, 5:282). For contemporary aesthetic hedonists, such assertions suffice to endorse their view of what beauty is. See also Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty*, chap. 5; Brian Watkins, 'The Subjective Basis of Kant's Judgment of Taste', *Inquiry* 54 (2011): 315–36. At any rate, one need not be an aesthetic hedonist in order to adopt a hedonic theory of aesthetic normativity.

what pleases everyone else. When pleasures are shared, their being shared is special reason to undergo them. Hume beautifully observes how

everyone has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages. We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy'd a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable.¹³

Kant agrees that human beings naturally tend to sociability and are often not 'content with an object if [they] cannot feel [their] satisfaction in it in community with others' (*CJ*, 5:297). Indeed, sociability causes a refinement of pleasure, so that

sensations have value only to the extent that they may be universally communicated; at that point, even though the pleasure that each has in such an object is merely inconsiderable and has in itself no noticeable interest, nevertheless the idea of its universal communicability almost infinitely increases its value. (*CJ*, 5:297)

Here Kant confesses a deep appreciation of how aesthetic judgement contributes to social life. Surely the importance of social life can ground an answer to Fionn. Arseneh can say, 'look, we have come here to be together and, as you have just admitted, sharing in an aesthetic judgement is a way of being together'.

Alas, the super-hedonic theory (partly) satisfies the demarcation condition but not the deduction condition. Kant is adamant on the point. Our interest in sociability and in aesthetic judgement as promoting sociability is 'empirical'. Hence, 'it is of no importance for us here, for we must find that importance only in what may be related to the judgment of taste *a priori*, even if only indirectly' (*CJ*, 5:297; see also 5:218). A distinctively Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity is not merely one that answers to anthropological truths; it must be established through a transcendental deduction that invokes a priori principles needed for any kind of experience.

Seeing why the hedonic and super-hedonic theories of aesthetic normativity are neither Kant's theories nor distinctively Kantian theories displays the kinds of resources we should seek within the third *Critique* to assemble a Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity.

IV. Cognitive Normativity

As we saw, Zuckert reads Kant as cumulatively answering three questions. First, why is it the case that all are able to judge aesthetically? Second, why must it be the case that all are able to judge aesthetically? Third, why should all judge aesthetically? Kant's answer to the third question combines the answer to the second with a commitment that animates his larger project.

In outline, the reasoning is that anyone should go judge the Plumen 001 to be beautiful because,

- C1. aesthetic judgement is awareness of formal purposiveness,
- C2. so, aesthetic judgement is awareness of the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding, and

¹³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. P. H. Nidditch. 3rd ed. (1777; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 363; see also Paul Guyer, 'The Standard of Taste and the "Most Ardent Desire of Society"', in *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 37–74; Andy Egan, 'Disputing about Taste', in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 247–92.

- C3. the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding provides for conceptual amelioration, and
 C4. anyone always has reason to do what provides for conceptual amelioration.

Aesthetic normativity is cognitive normativity.

Notice how the theory meets the demarcation condition: it is anchored in the claim that aesthetic judgement is awareness of purposiveness. Kant introduces formal purposiveness as a twofold phenomenon. On one hand, an aesthetic judgement is an awareness of formal purposiveness in the item judged (*CJ*, 5:279). On the other hand, an aesthetic judgement is also an awareness of formal purposiveness in the operation of our own cognitive faculties: it 'bring[s] to our attention [...] the purposive form in the determination of the powers of representation that are occupied with [the item]' (*CJ*, 5:228). The two folds integrate as an awareness of how formal purposiveness in the item 'suits' formal purposiveness in the operation of the faculties (*CJ*, 5:189–90, 5:194, 5:279, 5:292).

The transition from (C1) to (C2) ties awareness of formal purposiveness to the harmonious free play of the imagination and understanding. Kant contrasts the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding in aesthetic judgement with their harmonious relation in empirical judgement. Aesthetic judgement

accompanies the common apprehension of an object by the imagination, as a faculty of intuition, in relation to the understanding, as a faculty of concepts, by means of a procedure of the power of judgment, which it must also exercise for the sake of the most common experience: only in the latter case it is compelled to do for the sake of an empirical objective concept, while in the former case (in the aesthetic judging) it is merely for the sake of perceiving the suitability of the representation for the harmonious (subjectively purposive) occupation of both cognitive faculties in their freedom, i.e., to sense the representational state with pleasure. (*CJ*, 5:292)

In seeing an item as a flower, imagination supplies a structured sense impression, understanding supplies a concept, and the faculty of judgement subsumes the structured sense impression under the concept of a flower. Stable equilibrium is achieved, and the play of imagination and understanding halts. By contrast, aesthetic judgements work as follows. You see an item. Imagination structures sense impressions, while understanding delivers concepts, but no stable equilibrium is achieved. Rather, you are confronted with how the item is suitable for both imagination and understanding to keep on operating in free or dynamic equilibrium, both 'enlivened through mutual agreement' (*CJ*, 5:219). Aesthetic judgement is 'consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers' (*CJ*, 5:222).¹⁴

Now to the deduction condition. Nature is diverse, and no experience is possible unless the faculty of judgement deploys a scheme of empirical concepts that find order and interconnection in nature's diversity. The principle of purposiveness is an a priori principle necessary for any experience, for it enjoins that the faculty of judgement find such order and

¹⁴ Alternatively, for consistency with 'two-act' interpretations, the claim can be restated to say that aesthetic judgement is grounded in awareness of the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. See Paul Guyer, 'One Act or Two? Hannah Ginsborg on Aesthetic Judgement', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 407–19; comp. Hannah Ginsborg, 'Kant on Aesthetic and Biological Purposiveness', in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, ed. Andrews Reath, Barbara Herman, and Christine Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 329–60; 'In Defence of the One-Act View'.

interconnection in the diversity of nature as can make experience possible (*CJ*, 5:180, 5:183–86, 5:193–94). However, many schemes of empirical concepts are possible, and some capture more order and interconnection than others. We should therefore check to see whether we can ameliorate our scheme of empirical concepts. To do this, we rely on the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. When imagination and understanding are in harmonious free play, we ‘glimpse sensibly given objects as more fully determined than our conceptual apparatus allows us to see’.¹⁵ Hence, aesthetic judgement is ‘a microcosmic, sensible, unconceptualized image of the unity among the contingent, heterogeneous aspects of nature to which we aspire in empirical cognition’.¹⁶ Our aspiring to conceptual amelioration is reason for us to put ourselves in conditions where imagination and understanding are in harmonious free play.

What about (C4)? The assumption that anyone always has reason to do what serves conceptual amelioration is a general commitment of Kant’s philosophy. Zuckert’s proposal is a good model of a theory of aesthetic normativity that satisfies the demarcation and deduction conditions and that relies on an assumption about a source of nonhedonic normativity at the centre of Kant’s project.

V. Autonomy-Based Normativity

Why can all judge aesthetically? Why must it be that all can judge aesthetically? Why should all judge aesthetically? This paper locates resources for an answer to the third question by combining the answer to the second question with the commitment to autonomy as self-legislation that animates Kant’s larger project. The resulting theory of aesthetic normativity also meets the demarcation and deduction conditions.

In outline, the reasoning is that anyone should go judge the Plumen 001 to be beautiful because,

- A1. aesthetic judgement is awareness of formal purposiveness,
- A2. so, aesthetic judgement is awareness of the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding,
- A3. so, aesthetic judgement is autonomous and
- A4. anyone always has reason to go judge autonomously.

Aesthetic normativity is sourced in the normativity of autonomy.

The idea is not to equate autonomy with freedom in the play of imagination and understanding.¹⁷ That facile idea satisfies neither the demarcation nor the deduction conditions, and it caricatures Kant’s conception of autonomy. To cash out the proposal, we need to examine the details of (A1) to (A4), especially (A3), the key claim. Section IV addressed (A1) and (A2). Following a few words about (A4), this section traces two routes to (A3) that meet the demarcation and deduction conditions.

V.1. Autonomy

Suppose that (A3) is true and aesthetic judgement is autonomous. From this it follows that anyone should go judge the Plumen 001 to be beautiful only given (A4), the claim that anyone always has reason to go judge autonomously.

¹⁵ Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty*, 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁷ See also Karl Ameriks, ‘On the Many Senses of “Self-Determination”’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 92 (2018): 258–83.

Commentators agree that, for Kant, anyone has reason to act and think autonomously, but they disagree about why. For some, Kant regards autonomy as an ultimate source of normativity: it is primitive that we have reason to act and think in ways that express autonomy.¹⁸ The correct answer to 'Why act autonomously?' is a shrug. For others, autonomy is reason-giving because it comprises having a good will,¹⁹ or because it confers dignity,²⁰ or because it realizes our humanity and rational nature.²¹

The jury remains out, and it is beyond the jurisdiction of this paper to issue new instructions from the bench. Different positions on what makes autonomy a source of normativity might put some spin on the autonomy-based theory of aesthetic normativity, but the possibility must remain speculative until the theory is on the table.

More pressing is what constitutes autonomy in the first place, rather than its normativity. Obviously, no interpretation of Kant's aesthetics should be saddled with a conception of autonomy as moral autonomy, or freedom of the will. Just as it is a mistake to conflate the aesthetic ought with a moral ought, it is also a mistake to conflate autonomy in appreciation with moral autonomy. Again, Kant is explicit: aesthetic pleasure is not produced by the determination 'of the higher faculty of desire through pure reason' (*CJ*, 5:190, see also 20:225, 5:176–77, 5:196–97).

Presumably, aesthetic and moral autonomy are species of a broader phenomenon. The consensus among commentators is that autonomy is, broadly speaking, self-legislation.²² Yet, these same commentators disagree about the details. In as much as the present task is to put the autonomy-based theory of aesthetic normativity on the table, let us defer to another day any inquiry into whether the autonomy-based theory is subtly affected by varying accounts of autonomy as self-legislation.

Making do with a broad conception of autonomy as self-legislation does not leave us bereft of detail, for Kant may be read as articulating two conceptions of autonomy in the third *Critique*. Self-legislation occurs twice in Kant's aesthetics, once at the level of the principles by which the faculties operate, and then again at the level of what Kant calls 'common sense', which has to do with the policies that individuals should adopt. Each of the next two subsections makes a case for (A3): one at the level of principles and the other at the level of policies.

V.2. Autonomy at the Level of Principles: Purposiveness

Kant defines the higher faculties as those that 'contain an autonomy' (*CJ*, 5:177–78, 5:196–97). Each higher faculty operates by means of a constitutive principle that is unique to it but that is determined by the higher faculties. In one sense, self-legislation just is the condition wherein the constitutive principle of a higher faculty is determined by the higher faculties. Reason gives the rule to desire. That is moral autonomy. Understanding gives the rule to cognition. That is epistemic autonomy. Judgement gives its constitutive principle to itself. That

¹⁸ O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*; Robert N. Johnson, 'Value and Autonomy in Kantian Ethics', in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 2007), 133–48; Oliver Sensen, 'The Moral Importance of Autonomy', in *Kant on Moral Autonomy*, ed. Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 262–81.

¹⁹ Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Paul Guyer, 'The Value of Reason and the Value of Freedom', *Ethics* 109 (1998): 30–35.

²¹ Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²² Thomas E. Hill, Jr., 'The Kantian Conception of Autonomy', in *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy*, ed. John Christman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 91–105; O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 53–59; Sensen, 'Moral Importance of Autonomy', 267–70; Ameriks, 'On the Many Senses of "Self-Determination"'.

is aesthetic autonomy, or 'heautonomy', the special case where a faculty gives a principle to itself (*CJ*, 20:225).

The principle constitutive of the faculty of judgement and given by judgement to itself is the principle of purposiveness. Moreover, the principle is needed for any experience to be possible. As we saw, nature is diverse, and no experience is possible unless the faculty of judgement deploys a scheme of empirical concepts that find order and interconnection in nature's diversity. So, the faculty of judgement enjoins itself to find such order and interconnection in the diversity of nature as can make experience possible (*CJ*, 5:180, 5:184–85, 5:193). It is, as it were, baked into the faculty of judgement that it prepares itself to find nature ready to fit its apprehension.

Now the link to aesthetic judgement. All can judge aesthetically, and all must have a capacity for aesthetic judgement. Why? Kant answers that the principle of purposiveness so structures cognition that it must be the case that everyone can be aware of 'reciprocally animating' imagination and understanding in harmonious free play (*CJ*, 5:287). In other words, the principle of aesthetic judgement is the principle constitutive of the faculty of judgement (*CJ*, 5:286).

Aesthetic judgement is, as we know, an awareness of how purposiveness in the item suits purposiveness in the operation of the cognition. Here awareness of purposiveness is subjective, not determined by any concept or end, because it is what is apprehended in the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding (*CJ*, 5:194, 5:287).²³ So, aesthetic judgement, being an awareness of how purposiveness in the item suits purposiveness in the operation of the cognition, amounts to awareness of how cognition is structured to find nature ready to fit its apprehension. Some awareness of how cognition is so structured might lurk in the background of an ordinary empirical judgement, such as the judgement that this is a flower. However, in ordinary empirical judgement, awareness of how cognition is so structured is awareness of imagination and understanding harmoniously operating to actually find some bit of nature actually fitting its apprehension. In aesthetic judgement, we are not aware of that. An aesthetic judgement is an exemplary instance of a general awareness of nothing but cognition having been set up in accordance with the principle of purposiveness. Aesthetic judgement is entirely determined by cognition as structured by the principle of purposiveness.

The case for (A3) comprises three claims. First, the principle of purposiveness is legislated by the faculty of judgement to itself. Second, aesthetic judgement is entirely determined by cognition as structured by the principle of purposiveness. Third, aesthetic judgement is autonomous when it is entirely determined by cognition as structured by the principle of purposiveness. Therefore, aesthetic judgement is autonomous. As Kant explains in the first introduction, aesthetic judgement is grounded 'not merely in the feeling of pleasure and displeasure in itself alone, but at the same time [...] in the rule of the power of judgement, which is thus legislative with regard to the conditions of reflection *a priori*, and demonstrates autonomy' (*CJ*, 20:225).

Recall Arsineh judging the Plumen 001 to be beautiful. Her judgement is one that she should make. In making it, she judges that she is, in that very judgement, judging the light bulb as it should be judged.²⁴ Now to Fionn. He grants that if he judges it to be beautiful, then he will judge that he is, in that very judgement, judging it as it should be judged. Yet he

²³ The role of the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding in awareness of subjective, formal purposiveness also explains why the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding is a pleasure. However, the present task is not to explain why an aesthetic judgement is a pleasure; the task is to pinpoint a nonhedonic reason to go judge aesthetically.

²⁴ Ginsborg, 'Kant on Aesthetic and Biological Purposiveness', 349.

wonders why he should go view the light bulb and judge it to be beautiful. He asks Zuckert's third question. The reply to him is that, by going to judge the light bulb beautiful, he will be making a judgement that is entirely determined by the faculty of judgement operating as it has legislated to itself to operate, to do that is to judge autonomously, entirely on the basis of self-legislation, and anyone always has reason to think and act autonomously.

V.3. Autonomy at the Level of Policies: Common Sense

In as much as the faculties operate on principles that are constitutive, hence not learned and not ones that we can choose to abrogate, autonomy at the level of the principles is not agentic. Yet Kant's aesthetics also accommodates agentic autonomy.²⁵ Someone presented with a beautiful light bulb might nevertheless fail to find it beautiful because they fail to proceed in ways wherein their cognitive capacities operate according to design spec. They fail to exercise 'common sense'.

Common sense first appears in § 20 to § 22 of the 'Analytic', where Kant articulates the normative claim about aesthetic judgement. It appears that, unless what goes for you goes for all, your judgement that this light bulb is beautiful cannot say that anyone but you should appreciate it. We must assume some common sense 'to justify judgements that contain a "should"' (*CJ*, 5:239; see also 5:235). Given the task of the deduction, which is to vindicate aesthetic normativity subject to the demarcation condition, it is no surprise that Kant returns to common sense, in § 40, at the close of the 'Deduction'.²⁶

For an individual to exercise common sense, they must learn and follow certain policies – Kant calls them 'maxims' and 'ways of thinking' (*CJ*, 5:294–95).²⁷ First, think for yourself. So doing mitigates prejudice. Second, think in the position of everyone else, broad-mindedly. So doing mitigates the effect of 'subjective private conditions' on judgement. Third, think consistently. All three policies appear together at several places in the oeuvre, from the early works onwards, and they articulate Kant's picture of the best use of our faculties in epistemic, moral, and aesthetic contexts alike.²⁸ So, not only do we share the same faculties, but we also share policies of thought that equip us to take advantage of the capacity for the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding.

Incidentally, correctly understanding the three policies of common sense guards against a reading of Kant, especially §§ 31–32, that headlines in the recent, heated debates about aesthetic acquaintance. According to what Richard Wollheim called the 'acquaintance principle', 'aesthetic judgements [...] must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another'.²⁹ In the debate over this principle, Kant is often enlisted on Wollheim's side.³⁰ He is rou-

²⁵ See also Sensen, 'Moral Importance of Autonomy', 268–70.

²⁶ See also Jennifer Kirchmyer Dobe, 'Kant's Common Sense and the Strategy for a Deduction', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 47–60.

²⁷ See also O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 25–26; Rudolf A. Makkreel, 'Reflection, Reflective Judgment, and Aesthetic Exemplarity', in *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Kukla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 223–44; Merritt, *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*, chap. 2.

²⁸ Cohen, 'Kant on the Ethics of Belief', 328–31; 'Kant on Science and Normativity'; Merritt, *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*, chap. 2.

²⁹ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 233.

³⁰ Robert Hopkins, 'Beauty and Testimony', in *Philosophy, the Good, the True, the Beautiful*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209–36; 'Kant, Quasi-Realism, and the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement', *European Journal of Philosophy* 9 (2001): 166–89; 'How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony', *Journal of Philosophy* 108 (2011): 138–57; Cain Todd, 'Quasi-Realism, Acquaintance, and the Normative Claims of Aesthetic Judgement', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 277–96; Andrew McGonigal, 'The Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 331–48; Keren Gorodeisky, 'A New Look at

tinely quoted as insisting that, in matters aesthetic, each is to 'judge for himself, without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others' and that 'if someone does not find a building, a view, or a poem beautiful, then [...] he does not allow approval to be internally imposed upon himself by a hundred voices who all praise it highly' (*CJ*, 5:282 and 5:284). In the acquaintance debate, such statements as these are said to express Kant's commitment to aesthetic 'autonomy', the claim that aesthetic testimony is always weak or inapt.

Obviously, this is not autonomy in the sense of self-legislation, and Matherne argues that the emphasis on the oft-quoted passages (and the story of the young poet) distorts Kant's message about common sense.³¹ To begin with, we must not only think for ourselves; we must also place ourselves in the position of everyone else. In addition, the point of thinking for ourselves is to mitigate prejudice. O'Neill puts it well: to think for oneself 'demands only that there be a plurality of parties to any debate, whose thinking and judging are to some extent independent'.³² Kant recommends adopting all three of the policies of common sense in order to unlock the capacity for aesthetic response.

So, autonomy is not identical to the policy, think for yourself. Rather, it is self-legislation.³³

How does common sense implicate autonomy as self-legislation? Cohen argues that it falls to reason to legislate for a thinker that they adopt the policies of common sense, and since the legislation of reason is self-legislation and since self-legislation is autonomy, adopting the policies expresses autonomy at an agentive level.³⁴ She concludes that 'autonomy is the principle that grounds epistemic normativity as well as moral normativity. Contrary to what is often assumed, it is not just the remit of morality. Our capacity for self-legislation also underlies our cognitive activity.'³⁵

Matherne extends Cohen's point to aesthetic judgement: we adopt and conform to the policies of common sense, which smooth the path to the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. In this way, our capacity for self-legislation shapes our aesthetic activity.³⁶ The minute we bend the rules and violate the policies of common sense, we risk failing to engage in a harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. In Cohen's metaphor, 'our mind stops being its own guide'.³⁷

Here is the second case for (A3). First, individuals 'legislate' for themselves that they adopt the policies of common sense. Second, the policies of common sense facilitate the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding. So, it follows that to adopt the policies of common sense in making aesthetic judgements is to act autonomously. If (A4) is true and anyone always has reason to go judge autonomously, then Arsineh has a second autonomy-based answer to Fionn.

Kant's View of Aesthetic Testimony', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 53–70; Eileen John, 'Beauty, Interest, and Autonomy', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 193–202; Amir Konigsberg, 'The Acquaintance Principle, Aesthetic Autonomy, and Aesthetic Appreciation', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2013): 153–68.

³¹ Matherne, 'Kant on Aesthetic Testimony'.

³² O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 46.

³³ In addition, autonomy is not the same as the suspension of private interests and inclinations, though the exercises of moral, epistemic, and aesthetic autonomy all effect such a suspension. We have reason to act and judge just because in doing so we act or judge out of principles or policies that are self-legislated. We do not have reason to act or judge just because in doing so we act or judge disinterestedly.

³⁴ Cohen, 'Kant on Science and Normativity', 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*; see also O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*.

³⁶ Matherne, 'Kant on Aesthetic Autonomy'.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

V.4. *Two Theories, or One?*

The hedonic and super-hedonic theories of aesthetic normativity are not distinctively Kantian, for the hedonic theory fails to satisfy the demarcation condition and both fail to satisfy the deduction condition. Zuckert's proposal has legs. What lends weight to the proposition that Fionn should go judge the Plumen 001 to be beautiful is that aesthetic judgement puts imagination and understanding into a harmonious free play that ultimately serves conceptual amelioration. Presumably, anyone always has reason to do what serves conceptual amelioration. Aesthetic normativity is cognitive. This section has made a case for the proposal that aesthetic normativity is sourced in autonomy, given that anyone always has reason to think and act autonomously. Is the new proposal in competition with Zuckert's? That depends. They complement each other, if they bring Kant's aesthetics in line with a deep aspiration of his overall philosophy.

Philosophers nowadays place cognitive and autonomy-based normativity in separate envelopes, but the work of O'Neill suggests caution in projecting this recent way of thinking onto Kant's critical project.³⁸ She argues that it is a mistake to read the first *Critique* as grounding epistemic normativity in the authority of reason and to read the *Groundwork* as grounding practical normativity in the authority of autonomy. The great ambition of the critical project, taken as a whole, is to close the gap between reason and autonomy. Reason grounds epistemic normativity because 'only autonomous, self-disciplining beings can act on principles that we have ground to call principles of reason' and 'nothing counts as reason except the principles of self-discipline or autonomy that cannot be wholly dispensed with in thinking or acting'.³⁹

If O'Neill is correct, then aesthetic judgement is a site where reason and autonomy interact in a distinctive manner. Although the two introductions trumpet the theme of autonomy as self-legislation, the theme somewhat recedes elsewhere in the third *Critique*, so it is natural to ally the principle of purposiveness to the authority of reason. But the principle's alliance with the authority of reason is consistent with its ultimate allegiance to the authority of autonomy. Why does anyone always have reason to judge in a way that promotes conceptual amelioration? An answer can be that, by so doing, we act as autonomous, self-disciplined beings, where anyone always has reason to act autonomously.

O'Neill highlights parallels between Kant's thinking about reason and politics.⁴⁰ 'Reason and justice are,' she writes, 'two aspects to the solution of the problems that arise when an uncoordinated plurality of agents is to share a possible world.'⁴¹ Just as justice requires principles adopted by free agents, the rational authority that brings us in line with one another is attainable only by those 'capable of autonomy in the strict Kantian sense'.⁴² Strictly speaking, autonomy is seated in self-legislation and the policies of common sense. So, reflecting the political metaphor back out from reason and onto aesthetics, we can see the aesthetic domain as one where we act in ways that generate shared pleasures because aesthetic judgement involves the mind working under its own guidance and because it involves each of us doing our best to use common sense, to think for ourselves while putting ourselves in others' shoes. O'Neill regards it as Kant's deepest insight that 'beings who share a world [...] cannot base this sharing on adopting unsharable principles'.⁴³

³⁸ O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, chap. 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57 and 64.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

VI. A Kantian Theory, or Kant's?

Grant that the autonomy-based theory of aesthetic normativity is Kantian, for it answers Zuckert's third question, or Fionn's question to Arsineh, in a way that meets the demarcation and deduction conditions. So far the argument has been that passages of text lend it weight, as does its good fit with recent interpretations of the role of common sense and the tie between reason and autonomy in Kant's larger project. The theory also spotlights some otherwise recessive features of the third *Critique*, knitting it into his larger philosophical project. Nevertheless, is the Kantian theory Kant's theory? Our feeling the need to answer Fionn does not bind Kant, obviously, and maybe he does not address Zuckert's third question. The price of taking this line will be that Kant's theory does not, in the end, answer all the questions we want a theory to answer. Is there reason to pay the price? Here are a couple of considerations that seem to distance Kant from the Kantian theory, with tentative replies.⁴⁴

As was noted above, the theme of autonomy as self-legislation features prominently in the two introductions, but recedes elsewhere in the third *Critique*, and the same goes for the self-legislated principle itself, the principle of purposiveness (esp. *CJ*, 20:226, 20:229, 20:232–33, 20:255, 5:169, 5:191). One of this paper's readers remarked that Kant 'forgets about it altogether' in the 'Analytic' and the 'Deduction'. This undercuts the argument to (A3), the claim that aesthetic judgement is autonomous, from the claim that the principle of purposiveness is self-legislated. Only the argument from common sense is left standing. A pair of observations might soften the blow.

For a start, the introductions may be seen as making an essential contribution that is not repeated in the main text because the contribution is one that specifically ties the aesthetics into the larger philosophical project. Thus both introductions end with tables listing the faculties of the mind with their distinct constitutive principles, this division being reflected in the main divisions of Kant's philosophy. What are the chances this was not front and centre for Kant as he worked through his aesthetics?

Turning to the text, Kant's discussions of the principle of purposiveness in the introductions come in the context of the thought that aesthetic judgements are 'subject to a critique with regard to their possibility' (*CJ*, 5:191), which will require the deduction of an a priori principle, the same principle as is constitutive of teleological judgement (*CJ*, 5:169). The same thought recurs in § 36 of the 'Deduction'. Aesthetic judgement 'must be grounded in something as an a priori principle' and so 'requires a deduction' (*CJ*, 5:288). The task of the deduction 'concerns the a priori principles of the pure power of judgment in aesthetic judgments' (*ibid.*). What else could it be but the principle of purposiveness that Kant has in mind here?

A second consideration that seems to distance Kant from the Kantian theory is that the autonomy-based theory of aesthetic normativity ultimately unravels what appears to be Kant's keen interest in demarcating aesthetic judgement. Cases of empirical cognition, such as the judgement that this is a rose, are also products of cognition structured by the principle of purposiveness, and they are often products of cognition guided by the policies of common sense. Yet empirical judgement is not aesthetic judgement. The problem is that neither the principle of purposiveness nor the policies of common sense are distinctively aesthetic. Kant surely would not contemplate a theory of aesthetic normativity that compromises his theory of aesthetic judgement.

⁴⁴ A third concern is that Kant's doctrine of aesthetic ideas is needed for an explanation of how harmonious free play of imagination and understanding can be self-sustaining, and that explanation is incompatible with appeal to the principle of purposiveness. A close look at the compatibility of the Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity with the doctrine of aesthetic ideas requires another paper. My thanks to Zoltán Papp for pressing this point and the considerations that seem to distance Kant from the Kantian theory.

In fact, Kant does think that empirical judgement can involve pleasure, sometimes 'a very noticeable pleasure' (*CJ*, 5:187). When pleasure in empirical judgement is no longer noticeable, it was once there, and, to feel it again, 'it requires study to make us attentive to the purposiveness of nature for our understanding in our judging of it' (*CJ*, 5:187–88). This pleasure is not aesthetic judgement, though, because it arises from the harmonious relation of the imagination and understanding rather than their harmonious free play. Only in aesthetic judgement is the autonomy of the faculty of judgement manifest in the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding and in the application of the generic policies of common sense to promote their harmonious free play. In meeting the demarcation condition, the Kantian theory of aesthetic normativity sources aesthetic normativity in a specifically aesthetic form of autonomy.

These replies are tentative because, in the end, the debate is about Kant's core commitments. Perhaps it is a virtue of the autonomy-based theory that it compels a closer look at the commitments animating his aesthetics. Aesthetic judgements in the wild are rarely disinterested or universal.⁴⁵ What if Kant's core commitment in aesthetics is to source aesthetic normativity in autonomy? Something like autonomy does seem to us to be expressed in the free play of our faculties and in the exercise of common sense.

Kant's aesthetics is not a live option in philosophy or art studies.⁴⁶ Some blame certainly goes to caricatured readings of the third *Critique*. Zeroing in on the central commitment to the aesthetic as a domain of autonomy as self-legislation might help to undo some of the damage. The third *Critique* has something important to say that has not come through clearly enough.

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⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Richard Moran, 'Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty', *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2012): 298–329; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Nick Riggall, 'On the Interest in Beauty and Disinterest', *Philosophers' Imprint* 16 (2016): 1–14.

⁴⁶ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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