

Massive Suggestiveness: A Neo-Kantian Theory of Beauty

Sharon Berry

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1 Introduction

In this paper I will propose both an interpretation of Kant's theory of beauty, and a slightly modified neo-Kantian theory.

According to both these theories, the experience of beauty is a reaction to three things: a) descriptive facts about the beautiful object, b) suggestiveness facts about how it interacts with shared human faculties of intellect and imagination, c) and facts about epistemic normativity: what is *ceterus paribus* evidence for what.

In a beautiful object, descriptive facts are particularly suggestive (i.e. fit with the human faculties of intellect and imagination in an unusual way), in a way that gives *prima facie* evidence for teleological explanations - e.g. this line is this way partly in order to remind the reader of Marvel, to raise questions about the ethics of independence. Now, insofar as an object does this, it just generates an experience of purposiveness. But when following out these facts leads to massive amounts of back and forth reinforcement (e.g. you are prompted to ask a question, and then find such a suggestive/tidy/surprising answer you that you are prompted to ask another) from many directions, this gives us *ceterus paribus* evidence that each particular list L of the overall ends which give would give rise to all the purposive aspects of the work we have found so far, is likely inadequate. Note that there might actually be some list L which is fully adequate: we might actually have found all 347 teleological explanations suggested by the artwork, but if they are different enough from each other this may give us *prima facie* reason to expect that there are more which we haven't found. Objects of this kind generate the experience of purposiveness without purpose (i.e. the work gives evidence in favor of different purposive explanations, but these are so many and varied that it constitutes *c.p.* evidence against each particular overall combination of purposive explanations) - these are beautiful.

This experience is pleasurable because (for Kant) getting what you want is always pleasurable, and each link in these chain involves wanting to imagine something, find out some further descriptive fact, find a new purposive explanation, and the descriptive properties of the beautiful object are such as to allow this.

2 Kantian[/Neo-Kantian] Theory

X is a **beautiful object** iff it interacts with the human faculties of intellect and imagination[/objectively suggestive] in such a way as to give ceterus paribus evidence for many different purposive explanations, but these are so varied as to give ceterus paribus evidence against any particular overall purposive explanation (i.e. an explanation that links).

What we need for this explanation:

Ceterus paribus evidence - The fact that there's smoke can be evidence for fire even if there is actually no fire. [ignore the deep phil science puzzles here]

Common human faculties of intellect and imagination OR objective suggestiveness facts - There's enough agreement between people that this is reasonably well defined. Kant would say that different people's faculties of imagination work the same way insofar as they aren't interfered with. But this seems wrong insofar as different things are symbols in different cultures.

Hence, the neo-Kantian theory I want to propose as true differs in one way from the one I propose Kant himself accepted. It's enough to say there we seem to have enough commonality to get a notion of suggestiveness going, in the same sense that we have a notion of edibility (cf. psychology studies, historical studies of symbolism in different cultures). Also, fortunately, the descriptive fact that an object has a property A which was suggestive of B to culture X (especially if X is where the object was produced), is itself a link of suggestiveness that leads us to go indirectly from seeing that the object has A to thinking about B.

So we can have a relatively well defined notion (though there will be vagueness):

A is objectively suggestive of B iff thinking about A makes one inclined to consider B, once the possibility that B has been pointed out in connection with A.

Note the last clause is important. Contrast the vast agreement in what logical inferences we are disposed to make *if* they are pointed out, with the wild divergence in what inferences what logical inferences people are disposed to spontaneously draw when presented with a proposition A.

3 Interpretative problems this solves

What can purposiveness without purpose be?: the property of giving evidence for so many different teleological explanations that this is evidence against there being one overall encompassing one.

Expectation of agreement: insofar as you are judging something beautiful you are making a judgment about what descriptive facts provide ceterus paribus evidence for what. so there's as much of a right answer as anywhere else. and we can expect to find the same amount of agreement as in science (e.g. substantial agreement, and even more agreement in what we treat as an argument for/against).

Judgements of beauty don't derive that something is beautiful from application of other concepts: no descriptive property is known to be equivalent to this complex epistemically normative property.

A beautiful object looks like nature not art: insofar as human purposive explanations link all means to some overall ends that the person has in making the object.

Kant's weird formalism that says enjoying purple isn't aesthetic enjoyment: this pleasure doesn't come from the pleasure of looking for and then finding explanation, but from contingent connections between particular descriptive properties and the senses.

Judge for yourself: in the same sense that you should judge a proof for yourself, though presumably you can take testimony in advance of checking, and use this as a reason to recheck. if you get the wrong answer you are disagreeing about what's objectively suggestive, someone is not responding to c.p. evidence, or someone is getting pleasure from some other source than chains of thought and misdiagnosing it.

Connection to science: in both cases we are following out notions of what's evidence for what/suggestive of what, in cases where this is not a matter of logical necessity.

What is ugliness on Kant's theory?: if most or all chain of thought possible for the object involve transitions that are not genuinely suggested (e.g. would probably not be accepted as plausible readings in a lit) then it lacks beauty. obviously there will be a matter of degree here.

4 General aesthetics this serves

This Neo-Kantian theory also serves a lot of intuitive desiderata for a theory. It nicely accounts for a lot of platitudes/common claims about descriptive features which are correlated with beauty. It explains why we might bother to have an institution of literary criticism. And it provides an attractively moderate answer to philosophical questions about a what normativity is associated with beauty, and the relationship between art, morality and truth.

4.1 The platitudes

The neo-kantian theory nicely explains why certain descriptive features which are typically thought to correlate with beauty should so correlate.

- Psychological realism - if some character just randomly does something which seems flatly psychologically implausible (i.e. you can't fill in the details to make it seem likely that someone in that situation would so behave), this decreases your temptation to find out explanations for how other actions of characters are really likely or plausible. Hence, *ceteris paribus*, psychological unrealism is bad. BUT If however the unrealistic psychology persists through the novel, and all seems related, like maybe the extreme reactions of Dostoevsky characters, then this doesn't tempt

you to just give up on psychological explanations, all together, but rather to seek different ones than you normally would. And ditto if the story has something else going on where you are tempted to explain the behavior in terms of that instead e.g. in terms of symbolism, or in terms of how a person's actions can *seem* to a different person. (maybe Kafka stories are an example of this, but im not sure)

- “Organic unity”- Obviously, ‘unity’ here doesn’t mean that the art has to be all the same color, or the same events over and over again. Rather, I propose the idea is one has to be tempted to explain why any one piece/aspect of the artwork is the way it is, in terms of other features of the artwork e.g. this thing happens at this part of the novel to contrast with this that thing at the beginning of the novel. A very natural way to make sure there are lots of chains of thought suggested by a single chunk of text would be to put the reader in a state where they think there might well be an interesting relationship between each piece/aspect of text and each other one. In contrast, if an artwork seems NOT unified, then this means that you won’t go looking for relationships between the different parts, so it thereby has that much less of a tendency to spark chains of thought.
- Open-endedness of great art e.g. metaphors that (seems to) allow indefinitely much unpacking- insofar as a metaphor appears to allow indefinitely much unpacking, it gives some (weak) ceterus paribus evidence for the idea that the metaphor was phrased that way because it suggests claim C1, C2 etc. (Though obviously, we might have overall reason to reject this combination of claims)

The theory fits also why certain features should be anti-correlated:

- cliché - Insofar as the work suggests that most of its features are entirely to be explained by the fact that these features are conventional/copied from some earlier work, this either suggests disunity, or that the whole work is to be explained by the overall end of copying. Note that people forgive clichéd adherence to genre conventions when they think this serves some larger aesthetic purpose i.e. that it suggests purposive explanations which go beyond appeal to the aim of producing a western, horror novel etc.
- ‘moralizing’- Insofar the work suggests that an overall purpose of getting the observer to accept some moral claim, this is incompatible with it giving evidence against each hypothesis of an overall purpose. Note that this allows that beautiful artworks can, among other things, suggest an aim of getting someone to consider some moral question, but this must not seem like the only thing the art was designed to do.

And, of course, this neo-Kantian theory fits (comically) well with the platitude that ‘great art makes you think’.

4.2 Literary Criticism

The neo-Kantian theory also explains nicely why we might bother having English departments, and why people might do many of the things they do in them.

Firstly, it explains why we might want something like literary scholarship. According to the neo-Kantian theory, the experience of beauty involves following chains of objective suggestiveness, which we recognize when pointed out, but can have a hard time spontaneously coming up with. So, if we want to have the experience of beauty- then we can get help from other people who are more practiced in following these chains. These more practiced readers draw our attention to certain descriptive facts about the work which are highly objectively suggestive (or demonstrate some chain of suggestive facts) and thereby kick-start our own inclinations to think about the work. [Note that on this view the object of literary scholarship will not be facts about beauty directly, but rather facts about what is suggestive of what e.g. what ‘readings’ are possible/motivated. This seems to square with actual current practice.]

Secondly, the neo-Kantian theory can (partly) explain the kind of distinctive things that literary scholars (as opposed to historians or linguists) tend to point out about a work. Features of a work like allusion, foreshadowing, having a certain recurring theme, and raising tension, or certain expectations in the reader, are features which we are particularly inclined to give purposive explanations for, which appeal to the effect this name would have on a reader. This makes sense if literary criticism (often) aims to produce experiences of beauty in the neo-Kantian sense - i.e. experiences of getting apparent evidence for a purposive explanation, without having evidence for an overall purpose.

4.3 Philosophical Merits

Objective merit without obligation to engage: The neo-Kantian view gives us (the possibility of) objective aesthetic difference between Joyce and Woodhouse, without any implausible claim that e.g. busy scientists who don’t have time to research all the allusions ought to be spending their time reading Joyce rather than Woodhouse. Great books are the ones that are most objectively suggestive, but what objective suggestiveness you can follow will depend on your info, state of attention etc. So what promotes the best aesthetic engagement for a person may not be what’s most objectively suggestive, but what’s most objectively suggestive in ways they can easily access. This fits with Kant’s idea that you can judge something without wishing it to exist/to interact with it.

Relationship of art to learning/morals: Obviously interaction with art can obviously lead to bad actions (Werther) or false beliefs (the song of Ossian), in the same way as anything else. But specifically aesthetic engagement with art doesn’t require taking on questionable/unsupported moral or factual beliefs, only considering them. In this way, art will be conducive to learning and dangerous in the same way as reading philosophy arguments is - both just encourage you to think about certain things more, consider certain questions in a certain

order.