

# **The Dual Role of Kant's Imagination and Nature as Art**

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The status of Kantian aesthetics remains contentious despite renewed attention in recent decades. Of particular concern is the value of aesthetic experience for the judging subject. While answers to this topic vary, one consistent feature is the position that aesthetics is valuable only insofar as it reveals something about the subject's capacities, be it in relation to cognition or some other interpretive capacity.<sup>1</sup> The full value of aesthetic experience, I argue, is not only in relation to the subject; rather, it also reveals a fundamental order in nature independent of our capacities to structure sensibility according to our laws. Nature as independently ordered, or 'nature as art,'<sup>2</sup> achieves the full value of aesthetics within Kant's system.

Recognizing an independent order in nature is critical because the goal of aesthetics for Kant is to provide a bridge between sensible nature and our rational ends. Aesthetics is the proposed way for humanity to become aware of this connection, as if there is an order in nature that makes it amenable to our rational ends. Therefore, I aim to provide an answer to the problem of bridging this gap by demonstrating how aesthetics provides a way for the judging subject to glimpse the order already given in nature. I argue that this can only be achieved by a particular view of the faculty of imagination as it works in the shaping of experience. This particular role is what I call the 'dual role of the imagination.' It represents the imagination's capacity as not only responsible for the sensible content of a judgment, but also its capacity to bring the form, or order, of that judgment as well. This function of the imagination is critical to recognizing the

order already in nature, thereby bridging the gap between nature and reason, and completing the task set for aesthetics within Kantian philosophy.

### THE IMAGINATION IN THE SCHEMATISM

The ‘Schematism’ is offered as a solution to the problem of the actual application of a concept of the understanding to the sensible manifold. Schema are proposed as a ‘third thing’ that is amenable to both sensibility and the understanding.<sup>3</sup> To summarize the solution: schemata contain the sensible conditions for the application of the concept to the object of representation. Kant reiterates a point from the Deduction, namely that sensible intuitions need to be shaped into an amenable form for our conceptual apparatus. The difference being that in the Schematism we are given schemata as the actual features that bridge the gap between represented objects and our concepts. Kant also indicates a procedure, schematism, in which the understanding operates upon a schema of a represented object. Based on the arguments provided in the Deduction, schemata occupy a similar place as the faculty of the imagination, which mediates between the sensible manifold and the understanding in grounding the possibilities of cognition. The difference between the sections is the possibility of applying concepts to the sensible manifold and their actual application to real objects.<sup>4</sup>

That Kant intends the imagination to fulfill a critical role in the actual application of concepts is evinced when Kant specifically names the schema as “always only a product of the imagination.”<sup>5</sup> In the Schematism there is a role for the imagination in the actual application of concept to sensible object. I contend that this role actually goes beyond the picture of the imagination as a merely mediating faculty.<sup>6</sup> That is, even in the Schematism, we can view the imagination in a form creating capacity. In claiming that schemata are the product of the imagination, Kant is pointing towards a productive power of the imagination in its ability to form the order required to make sensible experience translatable to our concepts of the understanding. Another way to put this is that the imagination’s schemata make sensibility governed by rules without the schemata themselves being rules, which can only be concepts of the understanding.<sup>7</sup> Kant indicates that a requirement for the actual application of concepts to sensible objects is harmony, or a ‘condition’ for harmony between the object and our concept.<sup>8</sup> With that harmony offered between sensibility and concept, experience is possible. The faculty responsible for offering the instances of this harmony is the imagination because schemata, as products of the imagination, are the bridge in the first *Critique* for the real application of a concepts to a sensible object. It is in this way that the Schematism represents a formal power of the imagination, albeit a capacity that in the first *Critique* is guided by a concept, or a rule of the understanding.

## REFLECTIVE JUDGMENT AND NATURE AS ART

The Schematism is not the final word on either the capacity of the imagination or the power of judgment. The third *Critique* demonstrates this through Kant's position that judgment itself demonstrates a rule or lawfulness separate from cognition. This rule, Kant writes, "would have to be the concept of a purposiveness of nature in behalf of our faculty for cognizing it."<sup>9</sup> That is, the power of judgment requires that sensibility conform to our conceptual abilities.

Judgment giving its rule to itself assumes this conformity and seeks it in order to ground sensible experience. What is key here is that judgment assumes a lawfulness that is not the result of a rule of the understanding, even in cognition. However, the difficulty, as in the Schematism, is that the process of cognition veils this power of judgment by directing it through the understanding's laws.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, judgment is capable of its own lawfulness in its interaction with nature; and, this lawfulness independent of a conceptual rule will yield a different experience with nature.

While Kant does not explicitly address the imagination in reference to this power of judgment in the First Introduction, I argue that this principle of judgment is ultimately based on the dual role of the imagination. I argue this by carrying over the first *Critique*'s connection between the imagination and judgment. That is, the imagination not only demonstrates the transcendental conditions for uniting sense and concept in the Deduction, but also provides their actual unity in the Schematism. The real conformity of sensibility to our concepts involves the imagination recognizing the points of harmony and then providing the form for their homogeneity. With the principle of judgment in the First Introduction, Kant simply reveals the assumption judgment makes independent of cognition, namely that nature is purposive towards our cognitive faculties. This principle of judgment is the same recognition made by the imagination in the Schematism, only now asserted as a principle of judgment. Therefore, we can view the application of this principle of nature's purposiveness as an act of the imagination's productive dual role. The difference is simply the lack of a guiding concept of the understanding. Now, the imagination through the principle of judgment is capable of shaping a form based on this harmony that remains independent of cognition.

Differentiating this process of judgment from the Schematism, we say that in the new case judgment is reflective, rather than determinate. The difference being that determinate judgment places the particular under a universal, as we see in the process of cognition.

Reflection, however, seeks a universal based on the particular. Reflective judgment, without the guidance of a determinate concept and thereby exercising the concept of nature's purposiveness, provides a different experience of sensible nature. Kant explains the distinction as follows:

The reflecting power of judgment thus proceeds with given appearances, in order to bring them under empirical concepts of determinate natural things, *not schematically*, but **technically**, not as it were merely mechanically, like an instrument, but **artistically**, in accordance with the general but at the same time indeterminate principle of a purposive arrangement of nature in a system, as it were for the benefit of our power of judgment, in the suitability of its particular laws (about which the understanding has nothing to say) for the possibility of experience as a system[.]<sup>11</sup>

Kant differentiates between a view of nature that is schematic and mechanical and one that is technical and artistic. The schematic-mechanical view is the result of sensible nature conforming to the rules of the understanding. It is nature in accordance with *our* order. However, there is a technical-artistic view as well, which is the result of the reflecting power of judgment. This is the view of nature that assumes nature's purposiveness, the harmony between it and our cognitive capacities, but without a concept present. In this way, it is the exercise of the imagination's dual role capacity. Like in the Schematism, the imagination recognizes harmony between sensible nature and a system of order; however, unlike earlier, this harmony is independent of any concept of the understanding. Without the guidance of the concept, the form of its amenability to nature is still recognized and produced. And it is in this reflective activity that we can see the pure power of the imagination's ability to shape not only sensible content, but also the form that unifies the natural order with the human order. This is ultimately that value of aesthetic experience that reveals the power of the imagination to bring nature's independent ordering to our awareness.<sup>12</sup>

### RESPONSE TO THE DIVISION OF THE IMAGINATION

Without the imagination's dual role, we risk concealing the bridge between the natural order and the human order. However, the imagination as a form-bringing faculty is not the only manner in which the imagination has been interpreted. One approach is to take the imagination's schematism capacities as fundamentally separate from the imagination's role in aesthetic judgment, which this approach claims is to provide an interpretive basis for meaning in the realm of politics, history, and culture. I will call this the 'interpretive' view.<sup>13</sup> The interpretive view takes the imagination's role in the schematism as too limiting for the free activity that it demonstrates in aesthetic reflection. Providing the schema that allows for the application of a concept to a sensible object, the imagination serves the understanding in its function to order sensible nature.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, this view argues, any function of the imagination in the Schematism is subsumed by the understanding and not fit for aesthetic consideration. Instead, the capacities of the

imagination demonstrated in the third *Critique* are fully separate from those given in the Schematism because Kant intends the imagination in aesthetic judgment to demonstrate a freedom that, by the interpretive view, is not amenable with the more limited faculty of the first *Critique*.<sup>15</sup>

I argue that this division between the Schematism and aesthetic judgment is too strong. In the Schematism the imagination, admittedly, operates in service of the understanding by providing the form that makes sensible material amenable for conceptual application. However, in the case of reflective judgment, a concept is not necessarily required as the motivating proof of a judgment. A reflective judgment might have a concept present, as in determining that a beautiful rose is, in fact, a rose. But this is not the same as saying that the imagination's formal operations are necessitated by this concept. Rather, aesthetic judgments are differentiated from empirical judgments in that the imagination recognizes another order, independent of our understanding, and shapes the necessary harmonious form for our judgments based on this recognition. The difference being that the imagination is not guided by a rule of the understanding, but a systematic order in nature. Thus, what the imagination brings to aesthetic judgment is not the same as the Schematism; however, it does demonstrate the same *capacity*. Therefore, the strong division of the interpretive view threatens to miss a key feature of aesthetic judgment, nature's independent order, which is only recognizable if we take the imagination as dual role faculty, bringing both form and content to aesthetic judgment.

### THE VALUE OF AESTHETICS

In my final section I would like to go back to nature as art, grounded by the dual role imagination, and its relation to the importance of aesthetics within the Kantian system. I claim that the artistic view of nature is the key to bridging the gap between nature and reason and that the artistic view can only be fully recognized through the dual role of the imagination. Therefore, fully realizing the value that Kant intends for his aesthetics to have within his systematic philosophy depends on adopting the dual role imagination.

In the Introduction of the third *Critique*, Kant claims that reflective judgment is the way in which the gap between nature and reason can be bridged. Now, we can say nature separated from reason is mechanical-schematic nature. What is needed is a bridge that is both grounded in nature and capable of touching reason. Aesthetic judgment, as a form of reflective judgment, fills that role. "The reflecting power of judgment, given its nature," according to Kant, "could not undertake to **classify** the whole of nature according to its empirical differences if it did not presuppose that nature itself **specifies** its transcendental laws in accordance with some principle."<sup>16</sup> Nature cannot be experienced holistically, given its empirical diversity, unless it is assumed that nature itself specifies its own lawfulness

independent of our conceptual ordering. It is the power of judgment that takes the aggregate of nature and forms a systematic picture that makes categorization possible. But, as Kant points out, “such a classification is not a common experience, but an artistic one, nature, to the extent that it is thought of as specifying itself in accordance with such a principle, is also regarded as **art**[.]”<sup>17</sup> This is what Kant terms as the ‘purposiveness of nature,’ and the only way in which we can glimpse anything based on nature’s purposiveness is through this artistic, not mechanistic, view of nature. As nature, it remains rooted in sensibility, yet it also demonstrates, albeit indeterminately to us, its own lawfulness, extending the bridge farther out into the gap between nature and reason. Ultimately, this points to the value of aesthetics for Kant. It is part of how we operate given the assumption that nature operates as a system independent of concepts.

The imagination’s dual role strengthens this claim and returns to an issue raised at the beginning of the paper—the overemphasis on cognition in Kantian aesthetics. The imagination’s dual role brings into question the power of cognition upon aesthetic reflection. After all, the imagination in its dual capacity provides both the sensible content and the formal ordering for aesthetic judgments. The concept of the understanding, while present, only requires that the form of the imagination remain amenable to its own rule. That is, the concept of the understanding is not the force of proof for aesthetic reflection.<sup>18</sup> My position allows for the weakening of the understanding for aesthetic judgment because the imagination, in its dual role, calls upon the ordered unity it discovers in nature – an ordering that is beyond concepts of the understanding, since it cannot interact with nature without the form provided by imagination, schematic or otherwise. That is, the imagination, in its interaction with certain particulars in nature, recognizes a real feature of its systematic ordering. This is what I take to be the power behind my argument and where it is differentiated from competing views of the imagination.<sup>19</sup> Rather than merely reflective upon our own cognitive faculty in general, aesthetic reflection through the dual role of the imagination also reveals a fundamental feature of nature’s own lawful ordering; however, it cannot be demonstrated as a specific law, but only more generally as lawful.

While this claim runs against some statements that appear in the third *Critique*, I believe we can read some of the problematic passages in a more permissible manner, opening room for the benefits of aesthetics given the imagination’s dual role. First, when discussing the purposiveness of nature Kant states, “the end is not posited in the object at all, but strictly in the subject and indeed in its mere capacity for reflecting.”<sup>20</sup> This might appear to rule out my interpretation since I am asserting that aesthetic reflection, which assumes the purposiveness of nature, reveals a glimpse of nature’s order. First, the imagination’s form does not discover nature’s order within an object or experience, by this I mean an intuition that has been schematized and applied a concept. Rather, the imagination, prior to any schematization based on a concept of the understanding, recognizes an order in the

sensible presentation of nature as a whole, represented by the particular, and thereby shapes the form to capture this order. So, the systematicity is not posited to an object, but to the whole of nature, artistically conceived.<sup>21</sup> However, my key position is that the form provided through the dual role of the imagination is not determinate in the same sense as reason or the understanding. Yet, it does reveal an order to nature as a whole, revealed through the particular that exceeds the capacity of cognition alone.

### CONCLUSION

Aesthetics is thus not fully revealed through its connection with cognition. Its full account can only be given through its relationship with nature's purposiveness and its connection with reason. While the link to reason extends beyond the immediate scope of this project, I have demonstrated the grounds for a renewed emphasis on the connection between nature's purposiveness and the imagination's role in providing the form in aesthetic judgment.

Without the consideration of the sensible aspects of aesthetic reflection, we risk missing the imagination's unique power to bring both sensible content and form. Further, this unique capacity of the imagination is the key to the artistic view of nature, which is vital to realizing the role of aesthetics as an avenue for making possible our human and moral ends within the realm of nature. Artistic nature, guided by the principle of purposiveness, is experienced as amenable for our systems of order applied by reason and the understanding. This amenability is the value of aesthetics; however, it is recognized through the dual role of the imagination guided by the ordering of nature, productive in the crafting of forms, and ultimately harmonious with the understanding.

### NOTES

1. In this concern, I find myself in agreement with Lara Ostaric. In "The Free Harmony of the Faculties and the Primacy of Imagination in Kant's Aesthetic Judgment," her related criticism of Kant scholarship states, "Most Kant commenters focus on the epistemological import of Kant's claim and, hence, argue that the question of what it means for aesthetic judgment to have its own a priori principle can best be answered by exploring the connection between aesthetic judgment and cognition" (Ostaric 1376).

2. Wording taken from the 'First Introduction' of Kant's third *Critique*, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

3. Kant at (A139/B178-A140/B179) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* states: "[P]ure concepts *a priori*, in addition to the function of the understanding in the category, must also contain *a priori* formal conditions of sensibility (namely of the inner sense) that contain the general condition under which alone the category can be applied to any object. We will call this formal and pure condition of the sensibility, to which the use of the concept of the understanding is restricted, the **schema** of this concept of the understanding,

and we will call the procedure of the understanding with these schemata the **schematism** of the pure understanding.”

4. I share this view with Sarah Gibbons. In *Kant’s Theory of Imagination*, she writes, “The Schematism turns our focus away from the nature and role of the categories as forms of unity in judgment to the problem of *how* it is possible to apply them to material that is sensibly intuited” (Gibbons 53).

5. Kant, KRV A139/B178-A140/B179.

6. This picture of the imagination is largely due to Kant’s changes to the Deduction in the B-Edition. However, the role of the imagination in the Schematism remains consistent in both versions. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume Kant intended the imagination in the Schematism to be compatible across editions.

7. Kant’s statement is as follows: [I]n addition to the rule... which is given in the pure concept of the understanding, it can at the same time indicate *a priori* the case to which the rule ought to be applied... it must at the same time offer a general but sufficient characterization of the conditions under which objects in harmony with those concepts can be given, for otherwise they would be without all content, and thus mere logical forms and not pure concepts of the understanding. See KDU A135-136/B174-175.

8. Gibbons points out the relationship between the concepts and the given just before the Schematism. She writes, “Schematism, the, specifies not (conceptual) rules, but the conditions for the recognition of *instances*; it does so by specifying the conditions under which the (spatio-temporal) *given* is ‘in harmony’ with the categories” (Gibbons 61).

9. Kant, KdU 20:202.

10. At A141/B180-1 of the Schematism, Kant claims that the form of the schematism of the understanding and appearances can be unveiled only with difficulty. More notably, he writes “We can say only this much: the **image** is a product of the empirical faculty of the productive imagination, the **schema** of sensible concepts (such as figures in space) is a product... of pure *a priori* imagination[.]” The function of the imagination in the schematism remains hidden through its necessary connection with a concept of the understanding.

11. Kant, KdU 20:213-214. Italics added.

12. A potential objection here is that by providing a formal aspect of experience, the imagination demonstrates a particular law strictly reserved for reason and the understanding. The form provided by the imagination in aesthetic judgment is not determinate in the same manner as the law provided in cognition. Rather than legislating order upon sensibility, the imagination is receptive to an independent order found in particular instances of nature and shapes this order to be harmonious with our own manner of ordering sensibility. In this way, the imagination is not legislative in the same sense as reason or the understanding. Further, it does not exclude the understanding as a necessary component for cognition. Instead, the harmony between the imagination’s lawfulness and the understanding in aesthetic judgment point beyond the experience of nature as a mechanism and to an artistic view of nature. To attain the experience of the artistic view of nature, however, we must have a way to differentiate what is given by the rule of the understanding and what is expressed in the lawfulness of the imagination. Ostarc alternatively describes the outcome of aesthetic judgment as, “grasping that the lawfulness of the imagination is consistent with the discursive demands of the understanding... and, moreover, that the connections of the imagination move well beyond those demands”

(Ostarcic 1394).

13. See Rudolph Makkreel's *Interpretation and Imagination in Kant* as a key example of this approach.

14. Makkreel considers the schemata of the imagination in this context as 'semantical rules' for the 'grammatical rules' provided by the understanding in concept application (Makkreel 41).

15. We see evidence of this strong division in Makkreel. He writes, "the extent to which the conditions of the first *Critique* can be transferred to the third *Critique* is limited by the different functions assigned to the imagination in its aesthetic setting" (Makkreel 49). The functions of the imagination in aesthetic judgment make comparison from objective experience to aesthetic experience difficult, by Makkreel's interpretation.

16. Kant, KdU 20:215.

17. Ibid.

18. Here I am in agreement with Ostarcic that "the process of schematization and the rule that governs the and orders the manifold in aesthetic judgment is the imagination's own achievement" (1377).

19. Gibbons, for example, while allowing for some dual capacity of the imagination, will claim the forms of the imagination are expressions of "the reciprocity between conceptual thought and (human) intuition and of the appropriateness, or fittedness, of each to the other" (Gibbons 58). In addition, Ostarcic maintains the connection between the connections of the imagination as "purposive, not for our cognition, but for our cognitive faculty of the understanding" (Ostarcic 1395).

20. Kant, KdU 20:216.

21. Passages that support my more permissive reading of nature viewed artistically are, for example, when Kant writes it is "permissible for us to apply such a special concept as that of purposiveness to nature and its lawfulness, although it cannot of course be an objective concept of nature, but is rather derived merely from the subjective relation of nature to a faculty of the mind" (Kant, KdU 20:218). Kant links nature to the faculty of the mind, not, for example, the general faculty of cognition to another faculty of the mind. This suggests that Kant wants to maintain the connection between aesthetic reflection and nature, rather than move the connection to only subjective connections between the faculties.

## WORKS CITED

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