

Book Review: Hannah Ginsborg's *The Normativity of Nature*

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In the Introduction to the third *Critique*, Kant offers the following description of a distinctive sort of pleasure that he thinks obtains in our scientific investigation of nature:

the discovered unifiability of two or more empirically heterogeneous laws of nature under a principle that comprehends them both is the ground of a very noticeable pleasure, often indeed of admiration, even of one which does not cease though one is already sufficiently familiar with its object (KU 5:187).¹

Though Hannah Ginsborg's book, *The Normativity of Nature*, is not a scientific treatise, nevertheless when reading it one can feel something very much like the pleasure and admiration that Kant describes here. For what Ginsborg offers is a way to conceive of the unity of two familiar but seemingly disjoint objects: the first and third *Critiques*. Resisting the tendency to read the former as the heart of Kant's theoretical philosophy and the latter as concerned only with specialized issues in aesthetics and biology, Ginsborg argues that these two *Critiques* are of a piece because they both make an invaluable contribution to Kant's theory of cognition. It is, in particular, Kant's analysis of the reflecting power of judgment in the third *Critique* that, Ginsborg claims, bridges the gap between the two *Critiques* and that augments his account of cognition in significant ways. The fourteen collected essays in *The Normativity of Nature* represent Ginsborg's efforts over the past 25 years to defend this more encompassing approach to Kant's theory of cognition and to clarify his account of reflecting judgment and the role it plays not just in cognition, but in aesthetics and teleology as well.

A centerpiece of Ginsborg's interpretation is the idea that, for Kant, reflecting judgment involves what she calls 'primitive normativity'. According to Ginsborg, on Kant's view our cognitive, aesthetic, and teleological judgments all involve an element of normativity: we take ourselves to be responding to the object as we 'ought'. However, Ginsborg claims that our awareness of the appropriateness of our response is not grounded in any antecedently grasped concept or rule; rather, the response itself is the standard. That is to say, we experience the response itself as 'exemplary' of a rule of which we do not have an antecedent grasp. It is this sort of normativity that Ginsborg labels 'primitive'.

To clarify the idea of primitive normativity, Ginsborg often offers the example of children engaged in sorting behavior. Imagine a child who is sorting cubes and pyramids but has not yet acquired the concept 'cube' or 'pyramid'. On Ginsborg's view, even without these concepts, the child can nevertheless take her response itself to serve as a normative standard, i.e., to exemplify how one ought to sort. For Ginsborg, this example illustrates the notion of primitive normativity that is central to Kant's account of reflecting judgment and shapes his theory of cognition, aesthetics, and teleology.

The Normativity of Nature is divided into three parts. In Part One, Ginsborg examines the relationship between reflecting judgment and Kant's aesthetics. One of her central concerns throughout these essays is making sense of one of the seemingly paradoxical features of Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, viz., his view that although judgments of taste are subjective, they nevertheless claim to be universally valid. While commentators like Ameriks have argued that Kant was mistaken to claim that judgments of taste are subjective, Ginsborg defends Kant and uses her so-called 'one-act' interpretation of his account of aesthetic judgment to do so. According to her one-act view, for Kant aesthetic judgment involves a single self-referential act in which we take our

¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Transl. Guyer and Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2002). (KU)

mental state to be universally communicable. Thus it is a mistake to think (as Guyer's 'two-act' would have it) that this act is somehow distinct from the free play and pleasure involved in judgments of taste; rather, she argues that the taking of our mental state to be universally communicable just is free play and that it manifests phenomenologically to us through pleasure.

Meanwhile in Part Two, Ginsborg focuses on the contribution reflecting judgment makes to cognition. On her reading of Kant, although cognition involves us subsuming intuitions under concepts, there is a more fundamental sense in which we 'think the particular as contained under the universal', viz., when we take our natural response to an object to be exemplary of how one ought to respond (148). And although the latter plays a pivotal role in her reading of Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment, she argues it is no less central to his theory of cognition insofar as it explains not only our ability to 'perceive as', but also serves as the basis for a non-circular account of how we acquire empirical concepts. However, on Ginsborg's reading of Kant, reflecting judgment does not just make cognition of objects outside of us possible, but it also guides how we reflect on ourselves and enables us to cognize ourselves both as spontaneous agents and as appearing in the phenomenal world.

Finally in Part Three, Ginsborg addresses the connection between reflecting judgment and teleology. In these essays, Ginsborg uses the notion of primitive normativity to elucidate Kant's concept of 'purposiveness'. Doing so, she claims, helps us not only understand the unity of the two halves of the third *Critique*, but also to clarify some of Kant's key commitments about biology. With regard to the latter, Ginsborg argues that her interpretation of purposiveness helps us understand Kant's claim, on the one hand, that organisms are mechanically inexplicable and, on the other, that we must judge them as part of nature. On her view, we can treat organisms as natural and normative because the mechanical inexplicability of organisms rests not on any claim about their causal origin, but rather on the fact that we cannot make sense of their structure and behavior in a non-normative way. And though the success of mechanical explanations in modern biology, e.g., in molecular biology, might seem to put pressure on this view, Ginsborg maintains that there is a "transcendental argument for the intelligibility of natural normativity" (342). According to Ginsborg, there is already one class of natural phenomena that we regard as natural and normative, viz., our own natural responses to the world (as discussed in Part Two). This being the case, she claims that we cannot rule out the possibility that normativity is relevant to biological phenomena just because these phenomena are natural.

While I am sympathetic to Ginsborg's overall project, I want to raise three critical concerns. The first pertains to the role of the object in aesthetic judgment. While Ginsborg denies that Kant either could or should endorse an objectivist account of aesthetic judgment, she nevertheless acknowledges that there is something about the object that "we cannot adequately put into words," which we take our response to be appropriate to (126). My concern about this aspect of her view is that it downplays the importance of the spatial and temporal form of the object in Kant's account of judgments of taste. In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, for example, Kant argues that it is appropriate to call objects in nature 'beautiful', but not 'sublime' because with the beautiful we are responsive to the "form of the object, which consists in limitation [*Begrenzung*]," presumably in space and time, whereas with the sublime we experience a 'formless', i.e., 'limitless' [*Unbegrenztheit*] object (KU 5:244). Meanwhile, in his discussion of the object's 'form of purposiveness' in the Third Moment of Taste, he claims,

All form of the objects of the senses... is either **shape** or **play**: in the latter case, either play of shapes (in space, mime, and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time)... **drawing** in the former and composition in the latter constitute the *proper object* of the pure judgment of taste (KU 5:225, my emphasis).

In both cases, Kant does not just pick out something or other about the object, but rather identifies something specific about it, viz., its spatially or temporally limited form, as what we are responsive to in judgments of taste. Moreover, if the object's form does play a more robust role in aesthetic judgments, then one might wonder whether judgments of taste are "purely self-referential" in the way that Ginsborg suggests (48). Though it is true that, for Kant, the ultimate ground of the judgment of taste is the subject's feeling of pleasure, given that he also claims that the 'proper object' of the judgment of taste is the object's form, then it seems this form bears on the intentional structure of these judgments.

The second worry I want to consider is whether the normativity involved in aesthetic judgment is more sophisticated than the primitive normativity that is involved in empirical concept acquisition of the kind that pertains to both children and adults. In §40 of the third *Critique*, for example, Kant suggests that the reflection involved in taste requires

one holding his judgment up [*sein Urteil zu halten*]... to the merely possible judgment of others, and putting himself into the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our own judging; which is in turn accomplished by leaving out as far as is possible everything in... sensation, and attending solely to the formal peculiarities of his representation (KU 5:293-4).

Holding up one's own judgment to others, putting oneself in the position of others, abstracting from personal contingencies, and attending solely to the formal peculiarities of one's mental state seem like complex reflective acts that require a rather developed awareness of oneself and others. Although on Kant's view these acts are involved in our judgments of beauty, it is not clear to me that they are involved in the sorting behavior of children. And while this reading of reflection in aesthetic judgment may seem to push it toward the two-act view, I do not think this is necessary: one could still endorse the one-act view, but analyze the self-referential act, which phenomenologically manifests as pleasure, in more complex, less primitive terms. These considerations put pressure on Ginsborg's view that the normativity involved in the kind of empirical concept acquisition children engage in is of the same sort as that involved in judgments of taste.

The final question I want to pose is this: how Kantian is the notion of primitive normativity? At pivotal junctures, Ginsborg describes the notion of primitive normativity in Wittgensteinian terms: she draws on his idea that rule-following and the meaningful use of language depend on our pre-linguistic, proto-cognitive dispositions, but she then gives his view a 'normative twist', arguing that these dispositions are also experienced normatively (160). Though there are philosophical motivations for being committed to this view that stem from wanting to be able to offer a non-circular account of concept acquisition, since Kant says very little about the process of empirical concept acquisition in the third *Critique*, it seems we would then need to look to his account of aesthetic judgment for his commitment to primitive normativity. However, for reasons just discussed, it is not clear that the normativity involved in aesthetic judgment is sufficiently similar to the normativity involved in concept acquisition. So one might ask whether Ginsborg's emphasis on primitive normativity stems more from Wittgenstein-inspired considerations than from Kant's view in the third *Critique*.

Critical comments aside, however, while the field of Kant scholarship is well-trodden, over the past 25 years, Ginsborg has been building an original body of work that helps us rediscover the third *Critique*, as making a pivotal contribution to Kant's theory of cognition and thus as a necessary complement to the first *Critique*. Now presented as a whole, *The Normativity of Nature* embodies the full force of these careful and transformative efforts.