

Can Kant's Idea of Sensus Communis (§40, Critique of Judgment) Be Relevantly Used in the Anticipatory Dynamics of Living Systems?

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Abstract

In §40 of his *Critique of Judgment*, which is part of the deduction of pure aesthetic judgments, Kant states that, in the case of the appreciation of beauty, it is necessary to proceed in three steps: (i) thinking for oneself (“Selbstdenken”), (ii) thinking in the place of someone else (“An der Stelle jedes andern denken”), (iii) thinking in accordance with oneself (“Jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken”). We consider this way of proceeding as an instantiation of the process of identification, and will address the question why Kant did not articulate a similar reasoning in relation to living systems, that he deals with in the second part of this Critique. We will explore the epistemological potential of identification - which implies a form of anticipation - in relation to living systems and will set out the epistemological specificities that emerge from this viewpoint.

Keywords: Kant, transcendental deduction, identification, anticipation, judgment

1 Introduction

Kant made it clear that objective – universal and necessary – knowledge can neither be the result of a divine intelligence, nor the pure product of empirical stimuli affecting our sensitivity and impinging on our faculties of abstraction. Objective knowledge is on the contrary something that has been actively constituted by an instance subject to sensitive inputs that tries to anticipate these by building representations, that is, by domesticating and guiding these inputs in terms of rules. To constitute something into an object therefore intrinsically involves the anticipative capacities of a subject: without anticipation, objectivity would be the mere result of a blind and chaotic reaction to contingent encounters, and would hardly deserve that name. Without sensitive input, however, objectivity would perhaps be perfectly ruled and regulated and anticipated, but it would remain completely empty, without sensitive content whatsoever, and it would also hardly deserve the name of objectivity. Objectivity is by definition twofold: content and rule, synthetic and a priori.

From the moment objectivity is seen in this way, the challenge can no longer be to search for its justification at one of both sides – the rule-giving instance *or* the stimulus,

rationalism *or* empiricism. The challenge is on the contrary to grasp how representations (anticipative rules) and senses can work together, that is, how their agreement (Übereinstimmung) can lead to a universally and necessarily stable object that has a validity for all reasonable subjects. This challenge includes the one of trying to understand what it means when this agreement, this fit, this stability, apparently fails, or when it seems to be completely out of reach.

Kant's first Critique, his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1997 [1781/1787]), deals with those cases where objectification is, or appears to be, successful. As classical mechanics according to Kant proves that objective knowledge is possible, the basic task is the one of looking for its conditions of possibility. His second Critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1988 [1788]), poses no real challenge to the objectivity at stake in the first Critique, in as far as it installs a region of objectivity of a different kind, a region where the Moral Law acts as a categorical imperative, and where the exception is not the impossibility of objectivity, but rather the non fulfillment of the moral imperative. His third Critique, his *Critique of Judgment* (1987 [1790]), however, that is about animate systems, as well as about the beautiful and the sublime, deals exactly with those cases where the kind of stabilization obtained with regard to natural, inanimate systems, does not seem to be realizable. It deals, in other words, with the impossibility of objectification. It does witness, however, of Kant's attempt to articulate, also in this context, some sort of reliable anticipation, a guidance on the basis of rules.

In this paper, I present some of Kant's concerns about objectivity as elaborated in this third Critique. I want in particular to question the way in which he divides the work in two parts, and I will focus on the differential way in which he justifies the solutions he proposes in that regard.

In a first part, I shall explain briefly what the third Critique is about and what the status of justification (transcendental deduction) is in this work. In a second part, I pay specific attention to paragraph 40, that contains, in my view, important indications on Kant's deduction in the context of esthetic judgment. In a third part, I explain what type of justification Kant proposes in relation to animate systems, and in what sense it differs from the one in relation to the beautiful and the sublime. In conclusion, I suggest that Kant could very well have missed something in relation to the living by not using the arguments he used in the context of the beautiful, and I will, quite tentatively, try to articulate what could be the epistemological consequences if he had been more consistent in this regard.

2 Kant's Third Critique and the Role of Transcendental Deduction

In the words of Kant, the *Critique of Judgment* focuses primarily on the feelings of pleasure and displeasure: it wishes to give a place to our experience of these feelings, and stresses thereby their contingent nature. Feeling is by Kant situated in relation to cognition and to the will, corresponding to three domains – teleology, philosophy and ethics – that express the workings of the three basic faculties of the human mind: judgment, understanding, and reason. Herman De Vleeschauwer (1937, pp. 342 ff.) explains that the connection between teleology and esthetics Kant makes in this Critique

was not at all uncommon at that time, as it was not uncommon to subscribe, as Kant did, to the distinction between knowledge, will and feeling (cf. the viewpoints on psychology by, a.o., Tetens, Mendelsohn, Sulzer). An esthetic judgment was at that moment dealt with in two ways: (i) it expressed a feeling of pleasure or displeasure, (ii) it dissimulated a purposive relation with man and with the organization of his faculties (De Vleeschauwer, 1937, p. 344).¹ Purpose and feeling, that is what the Kant's third Critique proposes to connect.

The subdivision in two parts of the third Critique is from thereon understandable: the first is about esthetic judgment and deals with the beautiful and the sublime, the second is about teleological judgment and deals with the formal diversity of purposive, living, systems. Both need to have, as did moral and cognitive judgments, their own a priori principles. It is the systematic striving of reason that pushes us towards the search for universal principles, also in this case. As such, this work puts to the test Kant's overall critical system, in as far as the contingency of pleasure and displeasure, as well as the extreme diversity of living forms, does not allow us to provide for a subsumption of the particular under the universal. The situation is reversed: instead of determinate judgments, we need reflexive judgments, that strive for universality, thereby inevitably and incessantly starting from the particular. As a consequence, the principles we are looking for are special: they don't have the purpose to explain the objects of our experience, they have the purpose to guide our thought in studying these objects. What Kant is looking for in his *Critique of Judgment*, are laws of judgment, not laws of nature.

In the two parts of the third Critique, there is an analytic, as well as a dialectic, of both esthetic and teleological judgment. The analytic of esthetic judgment contains an analytic of the beautiful and an analytic of the sublime. In this part, Kant discusses, as he did in his first Critique, the deduction of pure esthetic judgments. As we know, a justification is required in as far as we pretend that there is something with a universal or objective value. Objectivity or universality need to be specially argued for; they need to be justified as they can no longer be grounded in the stimulus, nor in reason. The issue of justification is called by Kant transcendental deduction.

In his *Critique of Pure reason*, a discussion of the deduction of the pure concepts of understanding was inevitable, because Kant could not assume that there was, at the level of concepts, an a priori intuition at work, as was the case in relation to time and space. The categories of understanding do not contain as such the conditions under which objects are given in intuition. To deduce the necessity of the concepts of understanding, is then to argue for their special dignity, that is, for the specific anticipatory capacity they can have with regard to things that come to us through intuition. The central question the deduction therefore addresses is: how can subjective conditions of thinking have objective validity? Or still, how can the categories become conditions for the possibility of all knowledge of objects? In Kant's famous formula: how are synthetic a priori judgments possible?

¹ De Vleeschauwer puts much more emphasis on esthetic judgment as an organizing principle of the third Critique, then on teleological judgment. I would be tempted to disagree on this point.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant gives a place to transcendental deduction in the part on the beautiful and the sublime. It is as inevitable as in the first Critique, in as far as esthetic judgments are as much synthetic a priori judgments as cognitive judgments are. We know, from the analytic of the beautiful, that to Kant beautiful things involve a harmonious cooperation between the faculties of our mind, in particular understanding and imagination. As such, they provoke delight. We also know that the esthetic judgment establishes a necessary relation between beauty and delight (*Wohlgefallen* – see § 18): if we say that something is beautiful, we have to assume that anyone, any reasonable being, will also experience the delight we experience. The necessity obtained is not of a theoretical, objective kind, as it is not guaranteed, on the basis of concepts, that anyone will have this experience of delight when being in the presence of the beautiful thing. The necessity is not practical either, as there is no concept, no rule of a rational will that free agents dispose of, that would make of this delight a consequence of an objective law, an “ought”. The necessity at stake in the esthetic judgment is only exemplary: it is the necessity of the assent of all to a judgment regarded as exemplifying a universal rule for which a rule cannot be given. The conditioning of this subjective necessity is related to the idea of a common sense (*sensus communis*). It is only under the presupposition of a common sense that it is possible to lay down a judgment of taste.

What is Kant doing here? Firstly, he makes a connection between the power of judgment – traditionally belonging to the domain of cognition – and the feelings of pleasure and pain, through the concept of teleology (cf. De Vleeschauwer, 1937, pp. 355-362). Kant indeed says that the fact of attaining a goal procures pleasure or delight. The agreement of our perceptions with our categories gives no feeling at all, as our understanding functions in a necessary way here, according to its nature. But the discovery of the convergence of various empirical laws with the purposes pursued by reason, does provoke a feeling of pleasure, that can go as far as admiration. Reason’s striving for systematicity and purposive unity, and the experience of convergence of this striving with our own sensitivity, is what can explain that we feel pleasure while attaining a goal. Secondly, Kant refuses categorically that a judgment of taste can acquire its necessity on the basis of concepts. It is not a theoretical, objective judgment. Thirdly, he refuses to accept that these judgments can be grounded in experience: experience can never provide for the necessity we are looking for. This, he already made clear in his first Critique, and it is actually this insight that brought him to turn his philosophy into transcendental philosophy. Finally, he does not agree with the idea that the necessity of the judgment of taste is somehow related to the categorical imperative of the moral law. However, he does not give up on necessity. He clearly wishes to consider the judgment of taste in terms of necessity, thereby lifting it up from the merely empirically or psychologically contingent – a judgment of taste is not just an expression of our contingent feelings. Its necessity has to do with the way in which we, human beings, are connected, or at least, with the way in which we make the *presupposition* of this connection. This presupposition is not necessary to explain or to understand the object given in experience, but it is necessary to make this diversity, that we encounter in experience, into a science, into a systematic unity. This principle involves only our judgment; it is subjective.

We can therefore conclude that the deduction in the analytic of esthetic judgment is a deduction about the purposive arrangement of the formal diversity of things in view of their intelligibility for us, and it establishes (i) the necessity of the intelligibility of such a diversity, (ii) the necessity of a teleological principle that guides the integration of this diversity in a rational system, (iii) the purely subjective character of this principle (De Vleeschauwer, 1937, p. 353).

Let us now come to the famous §40, in which Kant further explains the way in which the necessity of the judgment of taste is grounded in a shared background, a common sense.

3 Paragraph 40: Sensus Communis and Identification

The idea of *sensus communis* or “communal sense” refers to the fact that, in making a judgment of taste, we have in our reflection to take into account, in an a priori way, the mode of representing of all other human beings, so as to compare our judgment to the collective reason of humanity. This should allow us to escape the illusion that stems from subjective, private conditions that could negatively affect the judgment. The point is not so much to take into account the real, but rather the possible judgments of other people, that is, to put yourself in the place of any other man so as to free yourself of the things that are attached to your judgments in a contingent way. In other words, Kant proposes to abstract from the matter, the “Reiz und Rührung”, the sensation (*Empfindung*) of the representation and to focus on its formal specificities. Only then will it be possible to obtain a judgment that is more than purely contingent, that can serve as a general rule.

In this regard, Kant speaks of a number of maxims, of which he says that they are not really a part of a Critique of taste, but that he nevertheless considers as important in clarifying the axioms (*Grundsätze*) of this Critique.² Three steps are distinguished here: (1) to think for oneself (“Selbsdenken”), (2) to put oneself in thought in the place of everyone else (“An der Stelle jedes andern denken”), (3) always to think consistently (“Jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken”). The first is the maxim of the mode of thought *without prejudice* (“vorurteilsfrei”), the second is the *enlarged* (“erweiterten”) thought, the third the *consecutive* (“konsequenten”) thought.

The first refers to a reason that is never passive. We indeed have to suppose that reason is an active, dynamic, living instance. If this would not be the case, nothing at all would be possible. Something has to move, which means that there has to be something that in some way imposes a directionality on the things surrounding it. This does not mean, however, that there is no tendency to passivity, also in reasonable beings - the

² We know that we have to be careful when Kant states that something is not really important at a specific place. Most of the time, it appears to be of the utmost importance in view of the systematicity of his transcendental philosophy. Let us remind of the way in which he speaks of his Table of the Nothing in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, or of the various “Anhänge” and “Anmerkungen” that are most of the time extensive and baroque in style, as if Kant insists to say something but has difficulty in saying it concisely. I believe this paragraph 40, and in particular the three maxims Kant here distinguishes, are of the same order.

fact of moving is certainly not enough to think for oneself. This tendency to passivity, this danger even, indicative of the heteronomy of reason, is called prejudice. The greatest prejudice of all is superstition, which represents nature as something that is not subjected to the rules of understanding, and which remains blind for the capacity one has as a reasonable being to guide, and not just to be guided. The maxim of "Selbstdenken" is, according to Kant, related to the workings of the understanding, which include the capacity to have a conceptual impact on the environment, and which express the possibility to guide something or someone. By warning for the dangers of passivity or superstition, however, Kant indicates that the faculty of understanding, as such, remains potentially blind with regard to the placement and meaning of its own activity, blind to its use in function of something else, its purposive use. The two other maxims address precisely this point.

The second maxim, the one of putting ourselves in thought in the place of any other, "An der Stelle jedes andern denken", rests on the capacity of abstracting from one's own private conditions and concerns. It is to Kant only in this way that a universal standpoint can be reached. Cognition is not at stake here. It is rather a mode of thinking (Denkungsart), which means to Kant: a purposive use of its capacities of cognition, which are enlarged in as far as they are distanced from, and not restrained, "eingeklammert" by, private concerns and conditions. This enlarged thought enables one to judge about the meaning of one's own standpoint. Kant does not explain why or how one comes to this capacity, what exactly has to be fulfilled. Apparently, it suffices to negate one's own private concerns. It can be asked, however, why these private concerns should be negated. As was the case in his second *Critique*, Kant seems to assume that human beings quite automatically have this mechanism in place and are willing to abstract from their private conditions to give the fellow human being a position. Kant calls this second maxim the maxim of judgment, which refers to the capacity to connect particularity and universality.

The third maxim, the one of consecutive thinking ("konsequent Denken") is the most difficult to attain and can only be reached through the combination of both the former, and by a constant attention for their workings. Kant calls this the maxim of reason. It implies a return to oneself, bearing within oneself the universality of judgment, and witnessing of a detachment of all private conditions.

On the basis of these three maxims, Kant can now say that taste is to be called a *sensus communis*, a communal sense, with more justice than sound understanding can. He means that the "sensus" here appropriately refers to the feeling present in the judgment of taste – more than in sound understanding. And he takes the "communis" to refer to the general communicability of this feeling without mediation of a concept. Taste is then defined as the "faculty of judging of that which makes *universally communicable*, without the mediation of a concept, our feeling in a given representation." To Kant, there is a specific skill in communicating thoughts when a concept cannot be presupposed, when imagination, in its freedom, awakens the understanding without the aid of concepts. Only in this case, the representation communicates itself, "not as a thought but as an internal feeling of a purposive state of the mind" (§40).

According to De Vleeschauwer (1937, 362ff), the deduction becomes quite simple now (at least in comparison to the deduction of the first Critique): in the delight we experience by considering the beauty of an object, we experience only the purposiveness of the object with regard to the power of judgment in view of creating a harmony between imagination and understanding. But the power of judgment, considered only from its formal side, is limited to its subjective conditions, of which we can assume that they are present in all subjects. The conformity of a representation with its subjective conditions holds for any one, and this in an a priori way. So the esthetic judgment can be called universal, and we can rightly suppose that the subjective conditions are present in all subjects. From these two ideas, (i) that the subjective conditions are present in all subjects, (ii) that esthetic judgment does not concern a determinate object, but only its formal purposiveness as a subjective condition of the function of judgment, it follows that this judgment will share the universal communicability of the general conditioning of the faculties, the *sensus communis* or communal sense. (De Vleeschauwer, 1937, p. 362).³

A couple of remarks are in order here.

Firstly, the *sensus communis* expresses the presupposition of a sense that we, human, reasonable beings, share. The judgment of taste expresses in the first place something about the communality of the conditions within which judgments take place. In other words, the judgment of taste presupposes certain structural, mental, similarities between human beings.

Secondly, Kant, as well as De Vleeschauwer, seem to be, quite evidently, attached to the idea that this structural similarity involves communicability, in this case, communicability of feelings without concepts. However, in what sense shall communication be understood here? It certainly is striking that communicability is used in a context where concepts do not play a central role. To me, communication in this sense is quite alike to a form of resonance, a process that works in the absence of resistance, which is the case with the type of structural similarity we seem to have here. It is the type of communication Leibniz described, in his *Monadology*, at the lowest level of his monade: the communication between animals (ants for instance), where no reflection whatsoever is involved, but where there is only "information" that flows from one place to the other and that gives rise to a global pattern. If we reason along these lines, we can wonder what is common in this *sensus communis*. It is certainly not the awareness of a common measure, even if the communal process is regulated. Kant does not seem to be willing to think in terms of a common measure. Perhaps this would bring him too close to the regulating function of concepts or ideas in the case of esthetic judgments.

Thirdly, Kant's description of the communal sense in terms of the three maxims, can indicate that he has in mind a process whereby one starts from position A – a point of activity and directionality – steps out of this position to come into position B – a point

³ In passing, let us mention that the judgment on the sublime, according to Kant, does not need a deduction, as an exhibition (exposition) already suffices. However, the judgment on the sublime is as universal as is the judgment on the beautiful, even if it does not rest on the harmony of our faculties in use, imagination and reason.

of activity that is supposed to be of someone else, to return to position A in a modified, more consequential way. The crucial steps here are the second and the third one: the one of supposing *that* there is something different from your own activity, and the one of trying to take it back to the initial position. It is only in this way that one can arrive at an identification of one's own position, *as* a position, different from other positions and having from there on the potentiality of a proper meaning. This process is actually a process of identification (cf. Van de Vijver, 2000), that Kant seems to consider as the ground of all processes of judgment. Important in identification is not so much *what* one identifies with as an outside point, but *that* one identifies with such a point and that one takes it back home, so to speak. Lacan (s.d.) correctly stresses that this point, in its efficiency, is almost nothing; it is just an acknowledgment of the fact that there is something else, something outside of your own dynamics. It seems that Kant gives a lot of weight, too much weight perhaps, to that point, in terms of the fellow human being, and that it is this overstress that hinders him in articulating a deduction in the domain of living systems. So let us come now to our third and final part.

4 No Deduction, but a Transcendental Solution to the Antinomy of Teleological Judgment

In the second part of his third Critique, Kant deals with teleological judgment, and more specifically with those forms that are organized in a teleological way – living organisms. Contrary to esthetic teleology, that presupposes feeling, objective teleology, as he calls it, presupposes a concept. Objective purposiveness tends to show that the existence of the form of living things depends on the fact that we consider them as products of the representation of ends of nature. This purposive concept cannot, however, be constitutive, as it does not allow us to determine these forms. It is only regulative for our faculty of judgment, as it is on its basis that we consider the existence and the form of these things as regulated by a teleological principle and that we realize a further systematicity of our experience. For Kant, there is no deduction that could justify the fact that there are such things as natural purposes, either as subjective purposes, or as genuine constituents of nature. We can indeed not presuppose that there are things in nature that obey efficient causality and that act under the influence of the representation of a purpose. And we can not say either, as we did in the case of beautiful things, that these objects are purely subjective purposes.

Kant tackles the issue, firstly by articulating the structural conditions on the basis of which we call something a natural purpose. This basically amounts to an analysis of their causal circularity, that is, the way in which the whole and the parts determine each other reciprocally (cf. Van de Vijver + Kant, §). Secondly, he makes a distinction between the effect and the representation of the effect. Even if it is difficult in the case of an organic system to presuppose that there is an intelligence at work – at least, our experience with natural purposes does not allow to certify that – it is the representation of the purpose that carries the circular causality. There is, in other words, no constitutive, but only a regulative use to be made of the concept of purpose, on the basis of which we consider organisms *as if* they were built according to a purpose.

Here again, teleology rules, as was the case in the subjective-esthetic judgment, as a principle of the faculty of judgment. Reason completes the science of nature through this teleological principle. Without this principle, large parts of nature, as we experience it, would remain totally unintelligible. Esthetic and teleological judgment come together as two judgments that are often falsely attributed to nature, and that have to be attributed to our faculty of judgment. In the case of the esthetic judgment, a deduction is deemed possible, on the basis of the *sensus communis*. In the case of teleological judgment, a deduction is not possible, but Kant introduces a transcendental solution, and solves the antinomy between mechanism and teleology on the basis of the introduction of the Idea of purposiveness of nature. Mechanism and teleology remain thereby both legitimate options, but they have a different domain of validity, and this difference can only be understood at the higher level of the Idea.

5 Conclusion

One of the consequences of not having a deduction for the second part of the third Critique, is that Kant does not come to explore the potentialities of what I would call a logics of identification. This has to do, of course, with the fact that he treats the issue of living teleology in conceptual terms, and seems to wipe away the issue of feeling. To me, this is a questionable move, and it might be taken as a remnant of dualism, between feeling and concept, that has become today quite problematic. Why indeed would our encounter with living systems – that, in their autonomy, principally escape our attempts to objectify them – not essentially mobilize our feelings of pleasure and displeasure? If we think in particular about the connection between teleology and pleasure that Kant himself makes, it might very well be said that the fact of not attaining our goal of constitution produces in us displeasure, and as such provokes our cognitive capacities, in ways similar to what sublime things do with us. But it does not even have to come to the sublime: our encounter with living systems can show that we do sometimes experience pleasure in having built a more or less adequate representation of them, in having found an adequate goal. Then living systems do in us produce harmony between our understanding and our imagination, and thus produce pleasure. Why disconnecting these two, feeling and concept, in such a strict way?

Apart from the distinction between feeling and concept, we can wonder whether living systems do not respond, as human beings do, to a logics of identification. We should perhaps have to think about ways to rephrase the maxims Kant discusses in organizational terms (cf. Van de Vijver, 1999), but the idea might be not so ridiculous to consider that living systems are living to the extent that they are capable of taking something to stand for something else. Processes of interpretation of the environment, do they not imply a moment of activity, a moment of putting oneself in the place of the other – the stimulus (cf. prey and predator), and returning to oneself? It might be relevant to look at the side of biosemiotics in this regard.

Finally, the way in which Kant describes the *sensus communis* can show that he is quite uncritical about the place fellow human beings have for us. He indeed presupposes, as he did in his second Critique, that most of us are, most of the time,

reasonable beings that strive for happiness and peace. The humanistic undertone is perhaps also what prevents him from taking into consideration that a logic of identification might well be at work also in living and between systems. Moreover, it might very well prevent him from developing the idea that human beings are perhaps not so outstandingly different from other animals in their capacity to integrate their experience in view of a self-knowledge or a self-thinking. To consider living systems along the same lines as beautiful objects, might have as an advantage to make our thinking less anthropocentric, or at least less implicitly anthropocentric. The advantage of studying living systems in this way, is also that our understanding of their potential of resistance and provocation, is thereby widened. It might make in particular the whole distinction between objective and subjective teleology less evident (cf. Longuenesse, 2033, p. 146 – who talks of the "merely reflective"). Both the beautiful and the living determine a space of structural sharing, and hence, of communicability, and, in some occasions, of conceptual sharing. Both might show that the appropriate answer is one of sustained indecision – neither/nor –, much more than one of deduction.

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