

Kant's Account of Genius

Set question: explain, and critically assess, Kant's account of Genius.

Written for UCL's Aesthetics module. Kant needs a theory of Genius because his aesthetics is stuck with a tension: judgements of beauty can't be reduced to rules, yet art has to be more than random noise. I set out what Genius is meant to do for Kant (originality, exemplarity, inarticulability) and then push on where it strains: how a ruleless production can ground authority for future artists to follow, how something inarticulable can still be emulated, and whether Genius is too narrow a theory once you notice most art is judged partly by its purpose.

ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

1. Kant's aesthetics has a tension in it: judgements of beauty appeal to no determinate concept, yet art cannot just be noise.
2. Genius is what resolves that. It is the talent through which nature gives the rule to art: original, exemplary, and inarticulable even to the artist.
3. First problem: how can a production governed by no rule generate a standard that later artists are bound by? Kant owes an account of that authority and does not give one.
4. Second problem: if the process is inarticulable, it cannot be taught, so it is unclear how emulation is supposed to work at all.
5. Third problem, scope: most art is judged partly by its purpose. Either Genius covers only a narrow class of pure beauty, or it is broadened and stops explaining what it was introduced to explain.
6. Kant has replies to each. None of them fully closes the gap.

Immanuel Kant's conception of Genius is introduced to address the tension in his aesthetics: while beauty cannot be defined by rules, art must be rule-governed. Genius helps explain how beautiful art exists at all, and how it is at once original and capable of setting standards for future artists. I argue that, despite its explanatory power, Kant's conception fails to sufficiently answer questions about how ruleless production can generate standards, how inarticulate processes can guide artists, and the general scope of

Genius. Furthermore, Kant's replies do not fully resolve the issues. I shall first explain the need for Genius and outline its primary features. I shall then explore three criticisms and argue that Kant's responses, although serious, remain insufficient.

Kant requires a theory of Genius because his aesthetics argues that judgements of beauty do not refer to any determinate concept and make no appeal to any abstract ideal of what a beautiful thing ought to be (Kant 2000, 89). These judgements are disinterested, as they are not based on personal desire or advantage, and appeal to feelings of pleasure. Because of this, they claim a general validity: when one says something is beautiful, they expect others to agree. However, beauty, for Kant, is not simply "subjective nor objective" (Wenzel 2005, 2) and rests on a reflective judgement about the subject's relation to the object. This is why Kant argues that there cannot be a science of the beautiful and that one can only critique it, since beauty cannot be 'proven' by determinate rules (Kant 2000, 184).

By contrast, art is a human practice, freely created through actions grounded in reason (Ibid., 182). Art is also distinct from science, as it is not something one can do simply by knowing what to do (Ibid.). This means that producing art cannot be reduced to following a procedure, and it relies on reflective (not determinative) judgement. However, art is also guided by certain constraints and cannot be entirely lawless (Ibid., 186). These involve the concepts, intentions, or purposes behind an artist's work that shape the final product (Wenzel 2005, 94). Furthermore, beautiful art must appear free, as if operating through the artist's free play (Guyer 1994, 278) rather than mechanically. This creates a tension. Beautiful art seems to simultaneously presuppose both the existence and the absence of rules (Wenzel 2005, 98). Kant, therefore, needs Genius to account for both beauty and art.

Kant argues that the order is reversed. The product (art) comes first, and from there, the rule is abstracted (Kant 2000, 188). Genius maintains that beautiful art can be free while possessing form and giving rise to judgements, without reducing it to a mere mechanical adherence to rules (Guyer 1994, 275). It explains how art is both free and gives rise to rules and standards.

However, in addition to explaining its role, one must also explain what Genius is. Put simply, it is the "talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art" (Kant 2000, 186). This shows, importantly, that Genius is an "inborn predisposition of the mind" that cannot simply be learned (Ibid.). If Genius were teachable, the production of beautiful art would be reducible to learned processes (something that Kant denies). This aligns with our intuitions that technical mastery alone is not sufficient for artistic prowess. One may devote a lifetime to mastering artistic technique yet never achieve the feats of Genius Kant has in mind.

Additionally, Genius gives the rule to art rather than deriving it from any prior one. Genius helps the artist produce that "for which no determinate rule can be given" to follow in advance (Ibid.). The product of Genius sets a standard from which future artists learn, reshaping what they consider worthy to aim for.

Finally, Genius is restricted to art. Scientific 'Genius', in Kant's sense, is impossible by definition because science is teachable in a way that art is not. Scientific feats derive from determinate rules that can, in theory, be taught and explained step by step. However, art differs. One could study Homer's works for their entire life, attempting to master his poetry, yet achieve nothing comparable. By contrast, one could, in theory, learn everything about Newtonian physics and essentially redo it. This is not to undermine science, but to clarify the specific applications of Genius.

Having provided a basic framework of Genius, I shall outline its distinguishing features. As I have shown why Kant restricts Genius to art, I shall only focus on its three other primary features: 1) originality, 2) exemplarity, and 3) inarticulability (Ibid., 186-187). Since Genius does not reproduce art in accordance with previous rules, it creates something new and produces originality. However, although originality is necessary, it is not sufficient. Kant must distinguish between original instances of beautiful art and original instances of nonsense. Thus, works of Genius must be original and exemplary, serving as a standard for judging future works and redefining what future artists seek to produce. Works of Genius are not tools for copying but for emulation, opening the space for future originality rather than producing future clones of themselves. Thirdly, since Genius does not follow from the application of any rules, the agent cannot fully articulate where their work arises from. The artist is unable to fully explain the source of their work as a scientist would explain their methods. This emphasises Kant's claim that art cannot be reduced to a formal method to follow and replicate.

Additionally, Kant discusses the role of Spirit. Spirit is the "animating principle in the mind" (Ibid., 192) and is linked to the expression of aesthetic ideas (ideas that stimulate thought in a way that cannot be fully captured by language). Art without spirit may seem technically 'correct', yet feel lifeless. Spirit vitalises art, making it more engaging and elevating it beyond technical 'correctness'. Whereas Genius produces aesthetic ideas, Spirit is what successfully expresses them in an artwork.

Before criticising Kant's notion of Genius, I shall first explain his distinction between Genius and Taste. Kant argues that while Genius is required to produce works of art, Taste is required to judge them (Ibid., 189). Genius produces originality and aesthetic ideas, yet Taste is what disciplines and judges them. Taste is what adds form to beautiful art, yet it importantly does not operate under any determinate rules. This distinction contributes to Kant's aesthetics, emphasising the importance of not treating genius as the sole explanation for artistic prowess.

Having laid out Kant's theory of Genius, I shall turn to criticising it. The first criticism concerns Kant's seemingly paradoxical claim that Genius is simultaneously a ruleless means of producing art and a basis from which future artists can derive standards. If there are no rules to art, then how is it that these works of Genius count as authoritative models? Kant

claims that works of Genius influence how future artists approach their work and ought to be taken seriously. However, a difficulty remains: what grounds this authority? Any attempt to ground this authority under Kant's framework seems circular: one knows that a work ought to be taken as an exemplar because it is a work of Genius, yet one also knows that a work is a product of Genius because it is exemplary. Kant, therefore, needs an independent factor to break from this circular reasoning.

To escape this problem, Kant may argue that works of Genius are not exemplary simply because they are called Genius. They are exemplary because they appeal to Taste. Taste, as a faculty, is non-conceptual and not rule-based, yet calls for a shared recognition of aesthetic value in art. This means that individuals recognise something beautiful in a piece of art through their faculty of judgement, without appealing to explicit principles or the label 'Genius'.

This response is strong for two reasons. Firstly, Kant seems to avoid the claim that his reasoning is circular, since he appeals to an independent factor to ground why works of Genius are exemplary. Secondly, his response seems to align with our everyday intuitions. When confronted with an artwork generally considered a work of 'genius' and one that defines an era or genre, individuals struggle to point to specific rules that make it beautiful. Although attempts may be made to formalise the artist's techniques and 'teach' what led to a piece's beauty, such works have an ineffable aesthetic quality even when no determinate rule can be specified.

However, the Kantian response remains incomplete. By appealing to Taste, Kant explains why art may be judged beautiful, but not why it ought to set a future standard. It explains agreement in judgement but not Genius's authority. A work may be collectively admired without necessarily grounding its authority to serve as an artistic standard. Kant must explain what entitles these works to influence future artists. Without this, Kant fails to explain Genius's normative authority in serving as an exemplar. Additionally, claims that the rule is abstracted from the deed are also unclear. If the rule is not in a determinate form, then it is unclear how it serves as a rule at all. Kant, therefore, gives us a theory of how exemplary works are recognised but not what grounds their authority to guide future judgement.

Even if one is lenient toward Kant and allows works of Genius to serve as exemplars, there is concern about how Genius sets standards, given its inarticulability. Works of Genius do not adhere to predetermined rules in creating art, yet they also serve as exemplars. Thus, if artists are meant to emulate previous works of Genius without copying them, Kant must explain what is being emulated, given Genius's inability to be formulated as a rule and its inarticulability. 'Emulation' remains obscure. Kant must explain what is being carried over by the artist, as they cannot merely copy a previous work or extract a determinate rule. This presents a dilemma: Either (i) future artists do not learn anything exact from previous works

of Genius, in which case, Kant's aesthetic theory struggles to explain how art forms develop over time, or (ii) artists do learn from previous works of Genius, suggesting that there are teachable elements to art (and Genius), raising concerns about whether Genius really is inarticulable.

In response, Kant may stress that artists learn from works of Genius not by copying them but by emulating them. Works of Genius inspire the originality of future artists, awakening their free play and enabling them to create art without directly teaching them what to do, from which future rules can be derived (Ibid., 195).

This reply is attractive as it captures an important feature common to artistic practice. People seem to excel artistically not when given didactic instruction, but when presented with examples from which to draw inspiration and emulate; Virgil was not successful through formal study of Homer, but by drawing inspiration from his Epic Tradition. The best works of art, those deemed beautiful and 'works of genius', shift what people think is possible in art and often define an entire movement or era. These works help redefine what artistic success is understood as.

However, Kant does not solve the problem. Artistic skill also requires concrete techniques that can be learned and taught. Artists must learn genuine things that can be explained and taught articulately, such as techniques, structure and general conventions within a genre. Thus, Kant's theory is most plausible when taken to argue that although art contains teachable elements, they are not sufficient conditions for Genius. What allows Genius to set standards is also the inclusion of something inarticulable that inspires artists to emulate it without reducing it to a rule. However, there is a danger that the difficulty persists. Kant may explain what inspires future artists, yet, given the inarticulable nature of Genius, he remains too abstract in explaining how this inspiration is intelligible rather than some mysterious phenomenon.

Nevertheless, even if Kant addresses concerns surrounding standards and inarticulability, a problem with the scope of his theory remains. Genius explains how beautiful art is created without determinate rules. However, one can often praise beautiful art partly for its purpose, what it serves to express, and similar concepts. For example, one may judge a mask by how accurately it captures a character's expression. This tension is not external to Kant's framework. Kant states that art is intentional, and thus its end ought to be taken into consideration when appreciating it (Stecker 1987, 98). Additionally, Kant suggests that most art possesses 'dependent' beauty, which involves the concepts of form, perfection, function, and intention (Ibid., 89-90). Thus, if most art is appreciated in a way that partly considers concepts of purpose, function and intention, then Genius may be too narrow a theory to explain art fully.

In response, Kant may reply that although concepts may be involved in appreciating dependent beauty, they do not have to determine judgements or eliminate the role of imagination (Ibid., 94). This preserves the aesthetic character of judging dependent beauty and does not reduce it to a mere assessment of techniques. Thus, dependent beauty does not necessarily eliminate the space for Genius. However, the problem is deepened. Kant does not explain how Genius, as a means of producing beautiful art, connects to dependent beauty, which serves as a mode of appreciating beauty. This highlights a discrepancy between Kant's conception of artistic production and regular aesthetic appreciation.

Therefore, Kant faces another dilemma: (1) Kant's Genius accounts for instances of beauty that are not dependent and therefore are relatively uncommon. These pieces of art may be extremely formal or unusually 'pure'. On this account, Kant's theory would apply only to a very narrow range of artworks and fail to address most of the art that an aesthetic theory ought to address. Or, (2) Kant may broaden Genius's scope to account for the appreciation of dependent art that refers to concepts. However, a broadened Genius would no longer explain art production as irreducible to determinate rules, but rather as operating under conceptually structured conditions. Kant can only make his theory more plausible by weakening his original conception of Genius, thereby rendering it unable to address the original tension in 'beautiful art' that it was meant to resolve.

Together, these criticisms show how Genius explains why beautiful art cannot be reduced to mere rule-following and technical proficiency. Genius shows that great works are both original and capable of setting the standard for what future artists aim for. However, Kant's conception remains incomplete. Kant does not fully argue for the normative authority of Genius and why it ought to function as a standard. He also does not adequately explain how Genius's inarticulable nature can guide future artists, or how it relates to the appreciation of dependent beauty. Kant's replies attempt to defend his position but do not resolve these tensions. Thus, while Kant offers valuable insights into artistic production and appreciation, Genius fails to provide a satisfactory and complete account of aesthetic normativity. It explains how standards may emerge but not why they ought to persist.

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