

How Beauty Disrupts Space, Time and Thought: Purposiveness Without a Purpose in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*

Stuart Dalton¹

Abstract: In this essay I explore the phenomenon of “purposiveness without a purpose” in Kant’s account of aesthetic judgments. I begin by considering what Kant means by purposiveness in general, and then I analyze the specific “purposiveness without a purpose” that belongs to aesthetic judgments. I analyze the purposiveness without a purpose of the beautiful first in terms of space and then in terms of time. The essay concludes with a consideration of how purposiveness without a purpose makes beauty resistant to thought.

Keywords: Kant, Kantian Aesthetics, Critique of Judgment, Third Critique, Analytic of the Beautiful, Purposiveness.

¹ Philosophy & Humanistic Studies Department, 021-A White Hall, Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, CT 06810, USA, 203-837-3282, email: daltons@wcsu.edu

In Kant's *Critique of Judgment* the Third Moment of the Analytic of the Beautiful is very strange. After considering aesthetic judgments in terms of their quality and their quantity, and before considering them in terms of their modality—all of which we might have suspected—Kant suddenly turns his attention to "the relation of purposes that is taken into consideration in them" (§10, 219/64).ⁱ The analysis of purposiveness seems to arise from nowhere, and its strangeness is only augmented when we discover that what really interests Kant is a very particular kind of purposiveness, which he (unflinchingly) calls "purposiveness without a purpose [*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*]."

My purpose in this essay is to question the purpose of purposiveness without a purpose in Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful, and also to consider its consequences. I will first analyze purposiveness in general as Kant explains it in the third *Critique*, and then I'll consider the purposiveness without a purpose that Kant associates specifically with aesthetic judgments. I will analyze the purposiveness without a purpose of the beautiful first in terms of space and then in terms of time, and finally I will consider how purposiveness without a purpose makes beauty resistant to thought. Overall I will argue that because the beautiful is purposive, and yet has no purpose, it disrupts space, time, and thought.ⁱⁱ

1 Purposiveness in Kant's Philosophy

The general transcendental character of purposiveness in Kant's philosophy must be understood first before we can understand the particular form of purposiveness that Kant assigns to aesthetic judgments. For Kant purposiveness is fundamentally about causality, "the causality that a concept has with regard to its object" (§10, 220/65). The concept of a thing is "*what sort of thing it is [meant] to be*" (§15, 227/74), and "insofar as the concept of an object also contains the basis for the object's actuality, the concept is called the thing's *purpose*" (iv, 180/20). Purposiveness is indicative of an organization according to lawful principles that understanding can only comprehend by attributing it to the will. Thus purposiveness is a sign that an object was created by a rational agency following the pattern provided by a rational concept. This rational concept is the transcendental ground of the object, the condition of its possibility in terms of both its existence and its form (§10, 220/65).

To grasp such a transcendental condition of possibility requires that we consider not our cognition of the object, but rather the object itself as an effect that refers back to a cause—"an effect that is possible only through a concept of that effect" (§10, 220/65). To think purposiveness, therefore, is to think in reverse: to think from effect to cause, from particular to universal, from the object to the concept that made it possible. It is thus a species of the sort of thinking that Kant calls "reflective judgment" (iv, 179-181/18-20).ⁱⁱⁱ In this particular reflective judgment the presentation of the object does not provide content for the syntheses of cognition, but rather acts as a detour for thought—an occasion for reflection that throws thought back from the object to the concept that is the condition of its possibility. The presentation of the object assumes an unusual role in this reverse movement. Insofar as it initiates the regression of reflection by exhibiting the effect in the causal relation, "the presentation of the effect is the basis that determines the effect's cause and precedes it" (§10, 220/65). In this way the effect comes before, and in a certain sense determines, the cause in an aesthetic judgment. This occurs because the thought of purposiveness makes use of the presentation of the object not as an occasion for the projective synthesis of cognition, but rather for the regressive reversal of reflection.

2 The Purposiveness Without a Purpose that Belongs to Beauty

What differentiates the purposiveness associated with an aesthetic judgment from other forms of purposiveness is the fact that its reflective movement never arrives at a concept. An effect is presented to consciousness that must have a conceptual cause, but no concept will ever be found because the beautiful has no concept (§17, 231/79). "*Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose*" (§17, 236/84). A judgment of taste is neither founded on a concept, nor addressed to one as the *telos* of its reflection (§5, 209/51), and therefore the purposiveness of the beautiful is a "purposiveness without a purpose."^{iv}

Kant argues that purposiveness without a purpose is required by the mind in order to grasp certain phenomena. There are, he argues, "objects, states of mind, [and] acts" that simply cannot be apprehended otherwise (§10, 220/65). Phenomena of this type present to the mind a "form" that requires thought to posit a prior concept which could serve as the cause of the form (§10, 220/65). The form is given in the presentation, but the concept is not.^v The concept (the purpose) is never presented; it is accepted by thought as a requirement of thought, as a necessary yet inaccessible condition of the possibility of this otherwise incomprehensible form which is presented to the mind. This is simply a need that the mind has, which it cannot ignore (v, 184-186/23-26). "[P]urposiveness is a lawfulness that [something] contingent [may] have [insofar] as [it] is contingent" (First Introduction vi, 217/405). Thus, purposiveness without a purpose is possible insofar as we "observe a purposiveness as to form and take note of it in objects—even if only by reflection—without basing it on a purpose" (§10, 220/65). "[W]e do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will" (§10, 220/65). This paradoxical reflection—from the presentation of a presence to an absence that makes it possible—is the peculiar movement of purposiveness that we find associated with aesthetic judgments.

It is simply the presentation of a beautiful object that starts the reflective movement. An aesthetic judgment "presupposes no concept but is directly connected with the presentation by which the object is given (not by which it is thought)" (§16, 230/77). And what concerns an aesthetic judgment in this presentation is only the "form" that it contains. The form of the beautiful that is presented, and the purposiveness that is connected with it, is the determining basis of a judgment of taste (§13, 223/69). Kant summarizes all of this in a passage from paragraph 11:

Therefore the liking that, without a concept, we judge to be universally communicable and hence to be the basis that determines a judgment of taste, can be nothing but the subjective purposiveness in the presentation of an object, without any purpose (whether objective or subjective), and hence the mere form of purposiveness, insofar as we are conscious of it, in the presentation by which an object is *given us* (§11, 221/66).^{vi}

Purposiveness without a purpose in Kant's aesthetics can be understood better by analyzing this phenomenon in terms of its effects in space and time. I will begin with space. In the *Analytic of the Beautiful* the "form of purposiveness" that Kant described above actually takes at least two separate particular forms, and each of these creates a spatial disruption that is resistant to thought. The general model of purposiveness without a purpose requires that the form of an "object, state of mind, or act" be presented to consciousness in such a way that it cannot be apprehended without presupposing a causal concept. In the presentation that determines an aesthetic judgment these general criteria are met by at least two particular forms: one is the

form of a state of mind, (which is also an activity), and one is the form of an object. Each of these forms occupies a distinct space.

3 Two Disruptions in Space

Kant explains in paragraph 14 that the form of the beautiful can actually take two different forms: "All form of objects of the senses (the outer senses or, indirectly, the inner sense as well) is either *shape* or *play*...it is the design in the first case and the *composition* in the second that constitute the proper object of a pure judgment of taste" (§14, 225/71-72). Pure aesthetic judgments "assert that an object or a way of presenting it...is beautiful" (§14, 223/69). Consequently there are at least two possible forms of purposiveness without a purpose that we should consider, and each of these creates a different spatial disruption.

3.1 Subjective Space

The first of these forms is realized in the play of the subject's faculties. The presentation of the beautiful object bestirs the imagination and the understanding and sets them both into motion. The result, Kant says, is a "mental state in which...imagination and understanding are in free play" (§9, 217-218/62). The mind feels this play as a "facilitated play" of the imagination and the understanding, a "quickening" of the two faculties in a "proportioned attunement" (§9, 219/63-64). Consciousness of this attunement is a feeling of pleasure, which comes from referring the presentation to the subject's "feeling of life" (§1, 204/44). The consciousness of the play does not precede or follow the pleasure; it is itself the pleasure (§12, 222/68); and this universally communicable (shareable) feeling in turn becomes the basis for the aesthetic judgment that is to be required of everyone.⁵

Kant explains that the playful harmony that creates such pleasure in the subject is "an activity that is indeterminate but...nonetheless accordant" (§9, 219/63). The play of the faculties cannot be grasped or explained by the mind unless some predetermining conceptual purpose is supposed.⁶ The imagination and the understanding create this form of purposiveness without a purpose when they vibrate together in something like a loving harmony. They move as one in a dance whose steps cannot be predicted in advance according to a conceptual scheme, but which nevertheless trace out a form, an ordered pattern of enamored agreement, a harmonious rhythm. The play of imagination and understanding is a structured play, though it is not structured in advance. It is a "free lawfulness of the understanding...which has also been called purposiveness without a purpose" (General Comment 1, 241/92).^{vii} The form that this movement marks out on the dance floor points to a concept that must have served as choreographer; but when we seek it out, no concept can be found.^{viii}

This particular form of purposiveness occupies its own particular space. The play of the presentational faculties, as a form that belongs to the "inner senses," points to an inner space of thought (§14, 225/71-72). This space is the region of thought's inner activity. It reveals itself, Kant says, as a space made possible by an "inner causality (which is purposive) concerning cognition in general, which however is not restricted to a determinate cognition" (§12, 222/68). This "inner causality," which must occur at thought's deepest and most impenetrable level—within its most profound space—makes possible certain other spaces of purposiveness closer to the surface. Thought's inner causality creates and maintains these spaces as pleasurable regions where consciousness is inclined to tarry. The pleasure that arises from the purposive harmony that fills the space in which the beautiful is contemplated has the effect, Kant tells us, of "*keep[ing]* [us in] the state of [having] the presentation itself, and [keeping] the cognitive

powers engaged [in their occupation] without any further aim. We *linger* in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself" (§12, 222/68).^{ix}

The play of the faculties marks out the boundaries of this space of lingering in the indeterminate yet purposive movement of its dance. The steps of that dance delineate a region which resonates with the harmonic vibrations of the presentational faculties. Their play occupies that space, and its purposive character sets that space apart and endows it with a mysterious quality. For such a space can exist only by virtue of a more fundamental space, a conceptual space, that supports it from below; but in the place of this conceptual space thought finds only an absence. Thus, the space of the purposive dance of the faculties remains—necessarily and yet impossibly—suspended in mid air, hovering over an abyss that somehow makes it possible.^x

3.2 Objective Space

The second purposive form associated with aesthetic judgments is a consequence of the fact that such judgments are “disinterested” (§5, 211/53). Kant explains this lack of interest in the first moment of the analytic of the beautiful (§1-5, 203-211/43-53).^{xi} As opposed to the liking for the agreeable and the liking for the good, the liking involved in a judgment of taste assumes a “contemplative” posture (§5, 209/51). It is completely disinterested in the actual existence of the object that is presented to it. Though an aesthetic judgment is always determined by the presentation of some object, its concern is not with the object's *existence* but rather only with its *presentation*—which is immediately referred to the subject's feeling of life. What matters to a judgment of taste “is what I do with this presentation within myself and not the [respect] in which I depend on the object's existence” (§2, 205/46). Thus, an aesthetic judgment is a “dry liking,” totally void of emotion and sensation (§14, 225/71). It steps back from all charms and attractions in the object itself and concerns itself solely with the object's form.

The form that the disinterested subject contemplates in the presentation of the object is a purposive form. It falls into the second category that Kant outlined for forms of the (inner and outer) senses: that of a “shape” (§14, 225/71-72). The disinterest of an aesthetic judgment causes it to retrieve from the object's presentation only that object's bare, empty form. The judging subject does not refer the complete presentation of the object back onto the object itself in order to cognize it; rather, it takes from that presentation only a disinterested, abstract form which it refers back onto itself in order to make a judgment concerning its own pleasure or displeasure. What emerges from the presentation as a result of this disinterested movement is another form that cannot be grasped or explained without presupposing a prior, purposive concept (though once again no concept can be found). Thus, the form of the beautiful object that a disinterested aesthetic judgment contemplates is another form of purposiveness without a purpose.^{xii}

Like the form constituted by the purposive dance of the presentational faculties, this form also contains a certain harmony. “What is formal in the presentation of a thing [is] the harmony of its manifold to [form] a unity (where it is indeterminate what this unity is [meant] to be)” (§15, 227/74). This harmonic unity is given in presentation in such a form that it testifies of objective purposiveness. It signals the existence of some determinate object that must have given it such a unified form, thereby bestowing purposiveness upon it. But because a judgment of taste is disinterested in the actual existence of such an object, it refrains from referring the harmonic unity of the manifold back onto an object in order to discover objective purposiveness. Its judgment is not based on any objective or “intrinsic purposiveness to which the combination of the manifold might refer” (§16, 229/76). Instead, it reflects the form given by the harmony of the manifold back onto its own feeling of life, in order to discover a subjective purposiveness. Thus, though there is a formal unity in the harmony of the manifold given in presentation, “it is

indeterminate what this unity is [meant] to be...For here we abstract from what this unity is *as a purpose* (what the thing is [meant] to be), so that nothing remains but the subjective purposiveness of the presentations in the mind of the beholder" (§15, 227/74). By abstracting from the object's objective purposiveness, the disinterested judgment of taste preserves that object's unified form in a state of indeterminacy, a state of suspension that is purposive without having a purpose.

In this state of suspension, the unity of the manifold assumes the form of an empty figure. It is a simple outline that remains after a judgment of taste has performed its abstraction, and it is appreciated for the simple unity and regularity that radiates from it. "[W]hat we call pure in a simple kind of sensation is its uniformity, undisturbed and uninterrupted by any alien sensation. It pertains only to form, because there we can abstract from the quality of the kind of sensation in question" (§14, 224/71). Kant offers color and tone as examples of such an empty figure.^{xiii} The mind, "by reflection," apprehends in both color and tone "the formal determination of the manifold," the "regular play of the impressions (and hence the form in the connection of different presentations)" (§14, 224/70-71). Insofar as the color or tone is "pure," i.e., uniform and empty of content, this form is a beautiful form (§14, 224/70). Color and tone in this "pure" form are excellent examples of what Kant calls "free beauties" which "mean nothing on their own [and] represent nothing" (§16, 229/77).^{xiv} They are empty, abstract forms that indicate, in their indeterminate state, nothing more than a purposiveness without a purpose.

This form of purposiveness without a purpose delineates and occupies its own peculiar space. The harmony of the manifold marks out an exterior space of purposiveness. An objective purpose could be found for this unified form in the object itself, were it to be approached cognitively. But the judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment so it is utterly disinterested in the object itself. It has already cut the form of the harmony off from its object, so that it could reflect it within itself (for its own purposes). But the form of the object does not get completely assimilated into those purposes. It has a purposiveness of its own that persists in its own space; it does not get entirely swallowed up in the inner space of thought, where it is the impetus for the play of the presentational powers. Between the actual object and the faculties that present it to the mind, there is an abstract form that has its own purposiveness. After the object has been cut away and the presentation has been absorbed into consciousness, the form is, somehow, still "there."

Where? The form of the beautiful object marks out a space that is clearly external yet nevertheless indeterminate, corresponding to the indeterminate nature of a form whose origin and end have both been cut away. Between the presented object and the presentational faculties, the space of the beautiful form is held in suspension. It is also an empty space. Only an abstract figure is traced out, in a line of absolute simplicity. Inside there is no content. In this suspended, empty space a residue of the beautiful form is preserved after the operation of thought has performed its abstraction. From within this space that form continues to affect us. Its purposiveness, passed over by the judgment of taste (in its rush to determine its own pleasure or displeasure), continues to testify of a causality of the beautiful that is not contained, and cannot be contained, by the operations of thought. From this external space the form of the beautiful disturbs the judgment of taste with the suggestion that something is still out there, something that needs to be accounted for, (and yet cannot be accounted for, since its purposiveness has no purpose).

4 One Disruption in Time

In Kant's aesthetic theory an aesthetic judgment confronts purposiveness in two different spaces, which it does not succeed in unifying. But it is fascinating to note that the same forms of purposiveness that diverge in space converge in time. Considered temporally, the separate forms of purposiveness without a purpose that arise from the presentation of the beautiful object both denote the same time.

According to Kant the time of all purposiveness, even though it is occasioned by presentation, is not itself a present time. Presentation, which of course always occurs in the present, only supplies the effect in a purposive relation. The cause that is that effect's purpose, since it implies finality—*forma finalis*—necessarily lies in the future. That future cause is considered a condition for the present effect's very existence. The mere fact of the present presentation presupposes a future concept that has yet to be presented. Without that future concept, the effect could never be apprehended or explained. Consequently to be purposive is to be drawn into the future, to receive present meaning from a concept that is beyond the present. Considered temporally, therefore, the reflective judgment involved in the thought of purposiveness is a reflection from the present into the future.

The thought of purposiveness *with* a purpose can, upon reflection, find that future cause and present it to the mind. Thus the cause is only momentarily a lost cause; reflective judgment overtakes it and re-presents it to the mind. In this way the futurity of purposiveness is erased, and replaced by presence; the concept which causes purposive effects resides in the future only temporarily. The presentation of the effect immediately summons reflection to apprehend the missing concept and bring it into presence before consciousness.

But when thought reflects instead upon purposiveness without a purpose, it is thrown forward into a future that is empty. Though the very presence of the effect bears witness to a final causal concept in the future, reflection can find nothing there. It seeks in vain for a cause, a concept, a purpose that can be re-presented to thought; and yet the form that is presented is still purposive. Thought demands that there be a final cause to explain this effect, but that cause remains (for thought) a lost cause, an inhabitant of a future that reflection and presentation cannot penetrate—a future that cannot be made present. The time of purposiveness without a purpose, therefore, is not a purposive time. The form that it presents to thought is contra-purposive. Instead of offering to the mind a form that is harmonious and unified, it confronts the presentational faculties with a dispersion that cannot be gathered. Thinking is left in the peculiar position of demanding a form of time that makes no sense to it, a form that is un-formed, and that therefore escapes its comprehension. The purposiveness without a purpose that emerges in aesthetic judgment causes thought to reflect forward to the time of the unthought, a time which will remain forever lost to it.

Thus, while the harmony of our presentational powers in aesthetic judgment causes thought to linger in present enjoyment, and while its disinterested nature makes such a judgment appear to be "the most free," it would seem that a liking for the beautiful is actually the most captive liking of all, since it is held hostage by a future that it cannot overtake and cannot explain.

5 In Conclusion: The Purposive Disruption of Thought in Kant's Aesthetics

The disruption of space and time that are effected by the purposiveness without a purpose of beauty ultimately effect a disruption of thought. In Kant's aesthetic theory beauty is resistant to thinking. Thinking pursues a concept for the beautiful in both space and in time, but in each

case it finds nothing. “Purposiveness without a purpose” names that quality of beauty that makes it endlessly attractive but simultaneously resistant to any sort of conceptual reduction. “Purposiveness without a purpose” explains how aesthetic theory is possible, but also impossible; how any theory of beauty must remain incomplete. The beautiful promises a concept but that concept remains forever out of reach. Because beauty can never be reduced to just a concept the beautiful must be experienced and not just thought. Reminding us of that fact seems to be the ultimate purpose of the purposiveness without a purpose that belongs to beauty.

Endnotes

ⁱ All references within the paper, unless otherwise noted, are to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. I will cite the section number followed by the page number first for the German text, and then for the English translation. The German text is *Kants gesammelte Schriften, herausgegeben von der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902-1983), vol. 5 (*Critique of Judgment*) and vol. 20 (First Introduction). The English translation is that of Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

ⁱⁱ Because my analysis will be limited to the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment I will only consider subjective modes of purposiveness. For a discussion of the objective modes of purposiveness that Kant distinguishes in the Critique of Teleological Judgment, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, "Regulative and Reflective Uses of Purposiveness in Kant," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 30, Supplement (1991), 49-63.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christel Fricke explains how the faculty of reflective judgment is a condition of the possibility of judgments concerning purposiveness in "Explaining the Inexplicable: The Hypothesis of the Faculty of Reflective Judgment in Kant's *Third Critique*," *Noûs*, 24 (1990), 45-62.

^{iv} Here I disagree with John Zammito's contention in *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) that when Kant speaks of purposiveness without a purpose it is only “a figurative use of the language” (p. 96). Throughout this paper I will argue that Kant is asking us to make the effort to understand what aesthetic purposiveness without a purpose means literally, within the context of his philosophy, and not just as a metaphor or some other less than literal use of language.

^v For an account of the changing status of "form" from the first *Critique* to the third, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 58-59.

^{vi} Rachel Zuckert responds to the charge that Kant's use of form to explain the phenomenon of purposiveness without a purpose reduces his aesthetic theory to a simpleminded formalism in her essay “The Purposiveness of Form: A Reading of Kant's Aesthetic Formalism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44,4 (2006), 599-622.

^{vii} An interesting discussion of the "constrained freedom" of the faculties in their play can be found in Mary A. McCloskey, *Kant's Aesthetic* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 69-71.

^{viii} Hannah Ginsborg makes this point in "Reflective Judgment and Taste," *Noûs*, 24 (1990), 70-75, and also in her *The Role of Taste in Kant's Theory of Cognition* (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. 1-44.

^{ix} Dieter Henrich provides a detailed survey of the historical development of Kant's theory of the harmonious play of the imagination and the understanding in his *Aesthetic Judgment and*

the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 29-58.

^x Philip Fisher's book *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) offers a marvelous extended analysis of this particular dimension of aesthetic experience.

^{xi} Eva Schaper discusses the connections between the first moment (disinterested pleasure) and the third moment (purposive without a purpose) of aesthetic judgment in her essay, "Taste, Sublimity, and Genius: The Aesthetics of Nature and Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), pp. 367-393. Gilles Deleuze contrasts the disinterest of aesthetic judgments with the speculative interests of cognitive judgments and the practical interests of moral judgments in his book *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) pp. 46-48.

^{xii} This second form of purposiveness is connected with the same presentation as the first, but it does not play the same role in a judgment of taste. Kant tells us that the form of the internal harmony of the presentational powers is alone what "determines" a judgment of taste. "The purposive form in the [way] the presentational powers are determined in their engagement with the object" is the only form that a judgment of taste "brings to our notice" (§15, 228/75). By bringing to our notice a second purposive form associated with a judgment of taste, I do not mean to deny the unique function that the first form has in determining that judgment.

^{xiii} Theodore Edward Uehling, Jr. offers a sustained and informative analysis of Kant's treatment of color and tone in *The Notion of Form in Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 21-34.

^{xiv} Geoffrey Scarre discusses Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty, and connects it to the relationship between the beautiful and the good, in his "Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 21 (1981), 351-362. Eva Schaper's discussion of free and dependent beauty in her *Studies in Kant's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1979), pp. 78-98 is also informative.

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