Internal Criticism and the Dynamics of Reason in Kant’s Aesthetics[[1]](#footnote-1)

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*The View from Within* can be read as a deep and sophisticated translation of the Kantian moment in philosophy, of the understanding of philosophy as the self criticism of reason. The idea of a self criticism of reason is embedded in the very doubleness of the title of Kant’s most famous work - *The Critique of Pure Reason* – in which reason appears both as the criticizing agency and the criticized object. Reason’s autonomy is thereby identified with its capacity to criticize and set limits *to itself* . Reason’s capacity for self criticism is tantamount to its autonomy, to its being the ultimate judge of its different needs, that is being the capacity to adjudicate between them and bring them into balance.

But it is not evident how we are to translate Kant’s critical framework into a practice of criticism of our life with concepts and of our thick normative commitments. I see Fisch and Benbaji’s achievement in the attempt to broaden Kant’s project to provide a picture of the possibility of internal criticism of rational discourse more generally and in particular of the ways this capacity is manifest in scientific progress as well as in social change. In concretizing the Kantian notion of Reason’s self-criticism, *The View from Within* further provides a sense of the movement or dynamics of reason, or of something one might call a temporal or historical dimension of reason’s self-realization. Such a picture of the dynamics of reason moreover suggests the character of a communal embodiment of reason as well as reflects on the place and role of the contribution of the individual in the establishment and transformation of common agreement.

In order to establish more specifically a meeting point between the Kantian problematic and *The View from Within,* let me start from one of the issues arising in the attempt to occupy the internal standpoint. The debate on internal realism and normative diversity is often formulated, as Fisch and Benbaji have pointed out, in relation to the distinction between thin and thick concepts. Indeed, the more normative commitments are understood in terms of our use of thick concepts, the more pervasive they become in the fabric of our lives. But the more value becomes part of our experience, the more it is understood in constitutive terms, the more the problem of normative self-criticism becomes acute. Indeed, the thin concepts are such as to seemingly provide a view from nowhere, a trans-temporal, or trans-cultural perspective. They supposedly obligate us by tearing us away from our natural habitat and inclinations. The move away from thin evaluative concepts such as truth, good, etc… to the thicker terms governing the normative dimensions of our lives can lead to a form of framework relativity, or a sense of being inescapably wedded to our forms of life without any true possibility of self-criticism.

But is it necessary to choose thick over thin or vice versa? Or rather, is the justified sense that our normative outlook is to be found in our use of thick concepts, , in itself opens the possibility of internal critique that does not require the ‘stepping out’ implied by thin concepts? In order to approach the matter, let me rephrase the distinction along Kantian lines in a rather coarse and schematic way. The thin is the dimension of the idea, whereas the thick is the ever-present *problem* of the realization of the idea in the world of experience. The thin is indeed empty of content in itself, but this is only to say that a certain configuration of our normative commitments formulated in thick terms must be the way in which we experience the pull of such unconditioned notion such as “the right”, “the true” or “the good”. Ultimately the dimension of the non-intuitive (the thin) is a horizon for the transformation of that which is always to be understood in terms of the thick terms of a specific form of life. The situation then is not one of a choice between the thick and thin perspective, but rather one of assuming the tension of holding both together, or of seeking way of seeing the one being the partial realization of the other.

The question that arises is precisely, what is it to become aware of the conditioned and partial form of present existence at the heart of one’s immersion in its normative commitments. What would be our sense of the partiality of our normative commitments, which at the same time does not lead us to consider them dispassionately from outside? How do we *experience* our partiality? In Kantian terms, this would imply properly formulating the presence of the idea in the domain of experience, as present in our thick normative commitments, without its being part of experience itself. One course open to us, which is familiar from Kant, is to refer to the *regulative* role of the idea in relation to the present achievements of knowledge. But referring oneself to an indefinite future, infinitely deferred is not the best spur to cast doubt on our present condition. How are the transformative demands of the idea understood to be internal to our experience of the world?

One of the fields in which the idea of internal criticism is most clearly at play, and where its fundamental dimensions, its holding on one side to the idea and on the other to the most concrete singularity, is the field of aesthetics. It is a field which raises the question of the constitution of a community of judgment, the place of the individual achievement in that process of coming to agreement, as well as the character or dynamic form that brings into play our sense of the ‘unfinished task’ of making sense of our world. The articulation of the field of culture, and specifically of the place of beauty and art in it, is, as is well known, the business of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. It is no coincidence that we find an understanding of the grammar of internal criticism in the last of Kant’s three ‘Critiques’. Indeed, that work of Kant constitutes the *completion* of the critical enterprise, whose two first installment were concerned with our knowledge of nature on the one hand and with our capacity to act from freedom on the other. But that completion does not take the form of establishing constitutive principles for a third independent realm. Rather, as the introduction to that work makes evident, we are provided with the dimension of mediation between nature and freedom, that is with something like a blueprint of a task that can only be realized in time. In this sense judgment comes to occupy the place of reason itself, or to be the field in which is most clearly elaborated reason’s capacity to regulate its own needs and oriente itself in realizing its highest interests in the world. Judgment is one might say the analogue of reason’s manifestation as self-criticizing, and aesthetic judgment is therefore the purest manifestation of the *capacity* for internal criticism.

The unity of reason in the realm of knowledge of nature is understood in terms of the interconnection of our cognitions oriented by the systematic unity of the idea. This naturally leads to conceive of the movement of reason primarily in terms of its (infinitely distant) future goal. In considering the question of systematicity merely from the point of view of the mathematizable sciences, we indeed might be tempted to conceive merely of the relation of the present state of our knowledge to the realization of a systematic unity of the different fields and different laws that we hold as true. But when the issue of systematicity is posed, as it is in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as one of mediating between nature and freedom, then it is just as necessary to conceive of the possibility of the *transformation* of our nature, that is of the possiblity to constitute a second nature. This cultivation of nature demands the recognition that it involves the *potential* for actualizing our intelligible character.

One of the most interesting aspects of Kant’s account of the temporality of reason, as it is reflected in the aesthetic, is precisely the way it opens a dimension of *potential* inherent in our sense of the world, and primarly in our sense of that which belongs to what is already there, that is of nature. In the field of the aesthetic, the horizon that defines a form of advance, of what is *to be constituted* requires that we presuppose a potential, as what holds in store the possibilities to be realized. This dynamics of reason, appears, more than anywhere else in the Kantian corpus, in considering the grammar of aesthetic judgment in the ‘Third Critique’. .

Put differently, Kant’s preoccupation in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* with the teleological judgment and its clearest manifestation in the judgments pertaining to organic beings (natural ends) is not primarily the expression of an interest in the character of biological explanation, but rather it should be placed in a broader consideration of the understanding of the dynamics of reason and its horizon of actualization as it is reflected in our capacity to judge. It is strictly speaking a matter of establishing the character of life in the space of our concepts. The duality of the potential of nature we rest upon, and the yet to be constituted (artificial) ideal is probably clearest in considering the character of aesthetic judgment in Kant. It is to this complex manifestation of this polarity that I will devote the main argument of the paper.

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The duality of the natural and the artificial can become manifest in Kant’s structuring of the themes of the ‘Third Critique’ if we properly relate the discussion of the idea of the Universal Voice in the Second Moment of the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’ to the discussion of the natural character of Common Sense in its Fourth Moment. To indicate schematically that which we need to articulate more gradually, we can say that the ideal character of the universal voice is possible only on the ground of the natural character of common sense, and conversly, the possiblity of recognizing a natural ground of the meaningful articulations of our world, emerges only by taking upon oneself to occupy the higher standpoint that does not yet exist, to represent in one’s judgment the idea of universal agreement in taste.

Before elaborating the structure I indicated, let me quote at the outset a passage in which Kant suggests the complexity of the temporality at play. In section 22 he asks himself whether common sense is to be conceived as natural or artificial, and goes on to say that there is no clear answer either way: “Whether there is in fact such a common sense, as a constitutive principle of the possibility of experience, or whether a yet higher principle of reason only makes it into a regulative principle for us first to produce a common sense in ourselves for higher ends, thus whether taste is an original and natural faculty, or only the idea of one that is yet to be acquired and is artificial, so that a judgment of taste, with its expectation of a universal assent, is in fact only a demand of reason to produce such a unanimity in the manner of sensing, … – this we would not and cannot yet investigate here;”[[2]](#footnote-2) (124, 5:240)

I begin the elboration of the structure by considering the character of the universal voice in the Second Moment. The second moment raises the problem of the universality of the aesthetic judgment. Kant conceives of the universality at issue in judgments of beauty as one ranging over all *judging subjects* and not over all objects judged to be beautiful. That is, the problem of universality has to do with the possibility of universal *agreement*, rather than with universal features of objects that are to count as beautiful. We cannot have aesthetic universality of the form “all roses are beautiful”. This is so, not because some roses may be ugly, but because the aesthetic judgment is logically singular.

But, what is more important to our present purpose, is that subjective universality is not something that is assumed to actually hold (as it would be in the case of cognition, where in judging that such and such is the case, I expect all rational subjects to agree with my judgment.). Nor is the situation like the case of moral universality where, even though, universal conformity to moral principles is not to be expected, there are grounds to assert the necessity of all to conform their actions to the categorical imperative. The peculiar universality of the aesthetic is explained by Kant in terms of the idea of the universal voice. The universal voice is the *idea* of agreement, which I have in view in judging. To speak with a universal voice would be to take upon myself to represent everyone in my judgment. In other words, the aesthetic judgment is essentially representative. It has the structure of taking one’s own judgment as an example of a rule that is as yet not formulated.

My feeling of conviction in my judgment is manifest in its communicable character. In the fact that I can articulate it in words that make it availabe to others. This implies first that in such an aesthetic judgment there is involved a making available to others (a communication), call this the articulation of the beauty of the work in acts of criticism. But secondly that this expression of my conviction has an exemplary character: it is a speaking for all, by relying on my own feeling.[[3]](#footnote-3) Beauty makes claim to autonomy. I do not ask myself would everyone judge as I do. Nor would it be quite right to say that I judge for myself and then infer from a reflection on the condition in which I find myself, that all would have judged similarly in theses conditions. Rather, universality is internalized into the very making of the judgment. In passing judgment I allow myself to speak for others. The aesthetic judgment is pronounced with a universal voice as the judge of taste “… judges not merely for himself, but for everyone…” (98, 5: 212).

But the full structure of such exemplary judgment is not comprehensible by reference to the second moment alone. Indeed, the characterization of exemplariness as the proper modality of the aesthetic judgment is given in the Fourth moment: “… as a necessity that is thought in an aestehtic judgment, it can only be called *exemplary*, i.e. a necessity of the assent of *all* to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce.” (121, 5:237) Here we encounter once more the understanding that what pertains to the idea is as yet not (and at no time will be) available as a commonly agreed upon order or rule. But Kant does not merely rehearse in the Fourth Moment, the claims made in the elaboration of the universality of the aesthetic judgment in the Second Moment. For what is now explored in the structure of exemplarity is the relation between exemplary expression and its *ground*. That ground is called ‘common sense’ and is to be understood as the pre-existing natural dimension in the space of our concepts.

This quasi natural character inherent in juding already appears as Kant discusses the judgment in general, at the beginning of the ‘Analytic of Principles’ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There he distinguishes the exercise of the capacity to judge from the acquisition of knowledge and suggest that the former might require talent. Talent is what we have from nature, but if it is attributed to the power to judge, it must be a form of talent that relates to the use of our conceptual capacity. Kant calls it therefore ‘mother-wit’ (*Mutterwitz*). That same notion of the natural ground in the exercise of our conceptual capacity is that which in the aesthetic is called “common sense”.

Several points need to be stressed in explicating Kant’s account of that common sense. In the first place Kant conceives of it as a *presupposition* that is required to counter skepticism about our knowledge claims. Assuming that the threat of skepticism to which he refers arises in the use of our empirical concepts (rather than our knowledge of the a priori principles of experience of nature as such), we can trace it to the problem that Kant lays out in the introduction of the ‘Third Critique’: “For it may certainly be thought that, in spite of all the uniformity of things in nature in accordance with the universal laws, without which the form of an experiential cognition in general would not obtain at all, the specific diversity of the empirical laws of nature together with their effects could nevertheless be so great that it would be impossible for our understanding to discover in them an order that we can grasp,” (72, 5: 185)

Thus, what is doubted is the very possibility of establishing a systematic order of nature at all levels. Kant, for sure, cannot assume such unity to be part of the constitutive principles of nature. Nothing in the analysis of knowledge in the ‘First Critique’ would secure the possibility of such an ultimate hanging together of nature as a whole. His solution, given in the ‘Third Critique’ is, as is well known, to invoke purposiveness to be internal to the character of *judgment*. The highest principle of judgment is in its capacity to regulate itself in term of the assumption of that ultimate character of systematicity which has the unity of the purposive.

If indeed, I am right in relating the skeptical problem which Kant alludes to in the discussion of common sense to the problem of systematicity as it appears in the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, this would mean that a fundamental character of the nature of systematicity is to be revealed, under the name of common sense, in the aesthetic. Our understanding of systematicity cannot be exhausted by the inferential. Indeed, once it is clear that one cannot hope to establish a deductive order leading all the way from the highest universality of the principles of experience in general to the most particular laws of nature, once it becomes necessary to introduce purposiveness into the character of judgment itself, the sensing of a potential for purposive advance in the space of concepts must be accounted for. Speaking of an aesthetic dimension of systematicity would then mean that the imagination, the mediating faculty, is provided with the task of holding together a multiplicity of irreducible dimension, so that their unity is found fitting to our judgment. That *sense* of the systematic that involves the imagination is properly speaking what can only be *felt*, or what belongs to the aesthetic.

We have now an initial understanding of the relation of the common sense to our sense of the potential of nature to receive systematic articulation. But we still have to relate it to the aspect of common sense that is turned towards the idea of universal agreement. Indeed, if there is an internal connection between the second and fourth moments of the Analytic of the Beautiful, then the problem of communicability which is key to the idea of being representative must also reappear in terms of the articulation of the ground, in the notion of common sense. This is not immediately evident in the Fourth Moment, but becomes apparent as Kant returns to the issue of common sense later in the work. This is not to say, as some have claimed, that there is a common sense that must be understood in relation to cognition and another capacity, call it *sensus communis,* that is turned to the social or the communal. Rather, the two dimensions of our knowledge of the world and of our relation to others are brought toghether by way of Kant’s unified understanding of the common sense.

Kant provides an initial definition of this common sense in section 40: By ‘‘sensus communis,’’ however, must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judgingd that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment.” ( 173, 5:293)

Now for sure, a simple expedient would appear to be available here – namely to assume that as a matter of nature we all have the same capacities, therefore what feels natural to one under appropriate conditions, can be also inferred to be what we have in common and can be called therefore a “public sense”. But this does not take into account the necessity in judging to put into play the faculties which we share in a way that is, if not determined by, then at least attuned to, the singular case we are judging. Indeed, what is precisely posing the need for representativeness in judgment is the problem raised by relating our capacities in general to the singular case. Representativeness must rely on a ground which is sensed, yet not altogether made explict or realized. To be truly a speaking for others, it must take itself to actualize a certain natural potential of rightness at the heart of our judgment: the common sense.

Kant seeks to distinguish the idea of taste as a common sense from the identification we often make of the common with the vulgar, or average, that is the lowest common denominator upon which people agree. That latter is, as Kant puts it, “the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being.” (173, 5: 293) He further points out that “to possess [that which is encountered everywhere] is certainly not an advantage or an honor.” (ibid).

A further temptation would be to identify common sense with what can be called “common understanding”. Kant lists three criteria for attributing to someone such common understanding: “(1) to think for oneself; (2) to think in the position of every one else; (3) always to think in accord with oneself.”(174, 5:294) These are so to speak formal characterization of the use of the understanding: The first avoids passivity, that is *relying* on the judgment of others, or what one calls *prejudice* (its most dangerous form being *superstition*). The second avoid narrowness of the mind and encourages the mental habit of making a *final use* of our faculties. The third maxim of *consistent* thought is according to Kant “The third maxim, namely that of the consistent way of thinking, is the most difficult to achieve, and can only by achieved through the combination of the first two and after frequent observance of them has made them automatic..”(175, 5:295)

Common understanding is indeed an important model so as to recognize characteristic features of common sense, but it cannot be identified with it, precisely because the former is *understanding* and the latter must be based on sense, that is on *feeling*. The question then becomes how to translate the three features of common understanding into characteristics of taste, that is of judgment resting on feeling. There is no difficulty to translate the requirement to rely on oneself, to aesthetic terms. It is, namely, to judge always based on one’s own feeling, rather than adopting the judgment of others. The second requirement for enlarging the use of our faculty precisely is identified in aesthetic terms with judging with a universal voice. One’s judgment must not rely on one’s own narrow purpose or interest, but rather incorporate within itself the finality belonging to the idea of universal agreement. But the most difficult question is how to account in aesthetic terms for the requirement of consistency. Consistency seems so much to be a matter of conceptual relationships, of logic that the notion of aesthetic consistency might appear itself to contain inconsistency. It is here that one must seek to bring into play our earlier characterization of common sense as the feeling that *belongs* to systematicity.

I want finally to bring out what I called the natural dimension of common sense. This is not nature outside and opposed to human conventions, but rather that which is nature or ground of our convictions in our existence together. Sometimes indeed, we speak in ordinary language, of the capacity someone has to move naturally in the space of meaning as his being endowed with common sense (recall that Kant thinks of the person having sharp judgment as being endowed with mother –wit). Having common sense (in that ordinary use of that notion) is having a balanced standpoint on things. In judging by relying on common sense the imagination, our mediating capacity, is equally weighing disparate aspects of our experience, and brings them into balance. If there is something against which common sense is appealed to, it is excess of one side of our nature (usually our intellectual excesses). Referring back to a fundamental figure Kant uses in the Fourth moment, this might be called a sense of *proportion*: But this disposition of the cognitive powers has a different proportion depending on the difference of the objects that are given. Nevertheless, there must be one in which this inner relationship is optimal for the animation of both powers of the mind (the one through the other) with respect to cognition (of given objects) in general; and this disposition cannot be determined except through the feeling (not by concepts).."(123, 5: 238)

We also speak of exercising common sense as being sensible, not meaning thereby sensing a special quality in experience which others might not see, but having a sense of the balance of all sides, taking different aspects into account. Now, a sense of proportion is something that would be distinct from knowledge given by rules or criteria. That is, instead of the reliance on a rule (for no rule can determine our aesthetic judgment) we would appeal in the idea of balance between different matters to the notion of measure. To have a sense of all dimensions by keeping them, measured, in balance, is, one might say to feel at home in the world.

In conclusion, one might ask what it would take to translate the consideration of the supposedly restricted field of the aesthetic judgment, back to our life with concepts more generally. If I am correct in stressing the centrality of the idea of common sense to the meanigfulness of the aesthetic, it would find a parallel in philosophizing committed to the importance of ordinary language. An elaboration of the affinities between the ordinary language methods and practices of Austin and Wittgenstein, and Kant’s grammar of aesthetic judgment has been central from the very start to Stanley Cavell’s writings. “Kant’s ‘universal voice’ ” Cavell writes “is, with perhaps a slight shift of accent, what we hear recorded in the philosopher’s claims about ‘what we say’.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is not the place to engage in detail the role that Wittgenstein plays in the argument of *The View from Within* . Let me only point, in concluding this paper, to a difficulty that arises in stressing Wittgenstein’s reliance on the rootedness of ordinary language in forms of life. It seems to generate a dillema which is echoed in different moments in the argument of the book: One could stress the parochial nature of a form of life and thereby problematize the very possibility of critique and transformation. A reliance on the standard of the ordinary, would yield a philosophical outlook that tend to be uncritical, or could merely affirm the deep grounds of communality. This understanding seems to be at the basis of Ernst Gellner’s accusation of Wittgenstein’s philosophical practices as expression of a conservative, even reactionary political tendencies. Wishing to introduce a moment of change into such a Wittgensteinian framework, one would be then be led to the other extreme of arguing that such change can only amount to a total, conversion - like shift. Here too one would forego the possiblity of an internal critique, or the very idea of a rational internal transformation.

I hope that the model I suggested in the analysis of aesthetic judgment can provide a further model in which the moment of indivdiual exemplarity in speaking for common sense might precisely be the basis of a sophisticated form of critique. I end this paper with a quote from Stanley Cavell’s ‘Claim of Reason’ in that spirit: “In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture’s criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them, and at the same time confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture’s words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself along the lines in which it meets me. This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy…”[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. The present essay elaborates an intervention in a colloquium at Tel Aviv University, on the occasion of the publication of *The View from Within*,. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All references to Kant’s ‘Third Critique’, immediately following the quote are to I. Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. The first reference is to the page number in the english transaltion, the second to the pagination of the Akademie edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This bears comparsion to the idea of political representativeness in which the representative must take himself to speak for the general will. For an elaboration of this analysis see my *Expressions of Judgment: An Essay on Kant’s Aesthetics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 22-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What we Say,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 94) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stanley Cavell *The Claim of Reason*, New York: Oxford University Press 1979, p. 125 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)