

Normativity and Purposiveness

What do our appreciation of tonal music and tea roses, our acquisition of the concepts of a triangle and the colour green, and our cognition of birch trees and horseshoe crabs have in common? In *The Normativity of Nature*, Hannah Ginsborg argues that, according to Kant, the uniting element is a primitive normative attitude. It consists in regarding an action as *appropriate*, or an object as *how it ought to be*, not according to an antecedent rule, but according to a standard exemplified by the action, or object, itself. The concept of primitive normativity is Ginsborg's own, not Kant's. But Ginsborg shows in detail how this notion underlies Kant's undertaking in the *Critique of Judgment (CJ)*. There, Kant's project is to account for the general capacity to judge, which characterises our human attitude to the world, and the specific forms such judging takes when it is directed at beautiful things and biological organisms.

Ginsborg's interpretation of this project is sophisticated and highly original. Having her papers available in one collection is important not only for the sake of convenience but also because it draws attention to a tight thematic thread running through the diverse and seemingly disunified parts of the third *Critique* on her reading. It thereby draws attention to the deep unity of Ginsborg's own ideas on such prima facie disconnected topics as beauty, concept formation, and biology. Commenting on this impressive feat is a great pleasure but also a somewhat daunting task. My comments shall focus on two specific issues. They concern, first, Ginsborg's interpretation of natural teleology associated with judgments in biology and, second, her account of the relation between aesthetic judgment and cognition.

As Ginsborg notes, Kant distinguishes a paradigmatic conception of purposiveness, associated with the products of intentional design, from a broader notion, which applies to things that only appear as if they were the products of design. Organisms are purposive in the second sense. On Ginsborg's interpretation of Kant, this means that we do not judge organisms as conforming to a concept, or design, in accordance with which it was intentionally produced. Instead it means simply judging that the organism "conforms to a concept of how it ought to be" (241).¹ Kant's biological teleology, for Ginsborg, is more fundamental than the normativity associated with reasons. It is a case of "oughts without intentions" (332).

What exactly do such oughts consist in? A first objection I want to raise is that the notion of primitive normativity is *too* primitive to account for Kant's specific conception of organic purposiveness. On Ginsborg's account, to regard an organism as being as it ought to be is to construe it as conforming to a normative law. This, in turn, is cashed out as regarding organisms as containing normative principles within themselves, rather than conforming to constraints imposed by an external designer. The idea that the organism conforms to its own standard, however, does not by itself carry any information about the nature of the standard. It is neutral with regard to the particular structure or behaviour that, on Kant's account, is specific to organisms. The worry, more specifically, is that Ginsborg's primitive normative reading does not account for the fact that Kant characterises organisms in parallel with paradigmatic cases of purposiveness. He describes the apparent purposive organisation of parts within the organism as a whole (e.g., *CJ* 5:360) and the apparent goal-directedness of the

¹ Numbers in the running text refer to the pages of *The Normativity of Nature*.

organism's development and regeneration of damaged parts (e.g., *CJ* 5:370f.).² But any minimal characterisation of organisms as subject to normative constraints seems too thin to account for these characteristically organic features of purposive organisation and goal-directed self-organisation.

Similarly, it is unclear how the idea of primitive normativity can compensate “for the absence of natural necessity” in the way Kant's account requires (240). As Ginsborg points out, for Kant, comprehending an object requires cognizing it “as, in some sense, necessary” (240). Since we cannot construe organisms as necessitated by the laws of nature, she argues, we must instead understand them as necessitated by normative laws. As I understand Kant, however, the reason why he thinks comprehending something presupposes regarding the thing as necessary is that comprehension requires insight into the laws and principles that condition the structure and working of the thing.³ Since we cannot explain the internal organisation and functioning of the eye as necessitated by mechanical laws, teleological laws come into play. What this means, I think, is that we need to regard the structure of the eye as necessitated by a causality which acts according to such principles as ‘to enable seeing, the eye must be equipped with a lens’. That is, we need to regard the eye as necessitated by an end-directed causality. But regarding organisms in this way is to rely on a more contentful conception of natural purposiveness than is afforded by the idea of primitive normativity.

² All references to Kant are to the volume and page numbers of Immanuel Kant, *Kants Werke* (Berlin: Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900ff). Translations are from Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. J. M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³ See, e.g., *Lectures on Logic* (9:64f.).

Even if the idea of primitive normativity were able to account for this more substantive conception of organisms, moreover, it is not obvious that Kant has room for a notion of purposiveness that is entirely divorced from the end-setting intellect. In his short piece on the *Employment of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, for instance, Kant maintains that purposes “have a direct relationship to reason” (8:182, see also *CJ*, 5:220). When he argues that organisms only appear *as if* they were purposive, it would therefore seem that he is not attributing to organisms a *more fundamental* form of purposiveness, but rather one that is understood *in light* of the paradigmatic notion. On this alternative reading, to regard organisms as purposive, while also denying that they were in fact produced by intentional design, is to assert an analogy. It is to argue that we have to reflect on organisms, as Kant puts it, “in accordance with a remote analogy with our own causality in accordance with ends” (*CJ*, 5:375).

I think Ginsborg construes the analogical reading too restrictively as grounded in an analogy between organisms and artefacts.⁴ As a result, I believe, she rejects the reading too quickly, arguing that the analogy with artefacts conflicts with viewing organisms as natural (262, 321). As I see it, however, Kant presents the causality of nature in organic processes as analogous to that of intentional activity itself.⁵ By means of the analogy with our ‘causality in accordance with ends’, he argues, we must reflect on nature as having the capacity for self-organisation, and on organisms as being the products of nature’s own purposive activity. It is this analogical construal, I believe,

⁴ Ginsborg is not alone in reading the analogy in this way. See, e.g., John D. McFarland, *Kant’s Concept of Teleology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 111; Peter McLaughlin, *Kants Kritik der teleologischen Urteilskraft* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1989), 39; Paul Guyer, ‘Organisms and the Unity of Science’, in: E. Watkins (ed.), *Kant and the Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 259-281, 265ff.

⁵ I have developed this reading in detail in Angela Breitenbach, *Die Analogie von Vernunft und Natur* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2009), chs 3-4.

which provides us with the teleological laws in accordance with which we can reflect on organisms as necessary.

Rather than interpreting natural purposes as oughts without intentions, I wonder what speaks against understanding them as *as if*-oughts, construed by analogy with the oughts of intentional activity. These *as if*-oughts do not occupy a space *between* practical and theoretical reason, as Ginsborg holds (cf. 254). Instead, they are construed by analogy with the activities of practical reason, while having a regulative use in the domain of theoretical reason. They are, as a result, more substantive than the oughts of primitive normativity.

On Ginsborg's reading of Kant, a primitive normative attitude is also what makes cognition as well as aesthetic judgments possible. The attitude of primitive normativity distinguishes the human capacity to grasp a particular under a concept from an animal's blind and habitual disposition to discriminate one thing from another. The child's sorting of green triangular blocks from red square ones, for instance, qualifies as a case of concept application only if the child regards her sorting as appropriate to the object. Similarly, only if the biologist regards the as yet unspecified tree she studies as being as it ought to be can she formulate a determinate rule, or concept, according to which the tree may be assessed. On Ginsborg's account, the attitude of primitive normativity makes the application and formation of concepts "a matter of right as opposed to fact" (141).

Judgments about beautiful things, Ginsborg furthermore argues, are pure manifestations of the attitude of primitive normativity on Kant's account. They consist in my taking "my imaginative activity in the perception of the object to be as it ought to be" (88). Aesthetic judgments are crucially self-reflexive. The advantage of this reading,

Ginsborg argues, is that it solves a dilemma which arises for Kant. On the one hand, Kant grounds the universality of aesthetic judgments in the fact that they rely on universal cognitive capacities. On the other hand, he denies that all uses of these capacities result in aesthetic pleasure. The dilemma thus consists in linking aesthetic judgement to universal cognitive capacities without, however, making the link too tight. Ginsborg's solution is that aesthetic pleasure arises only when our primitive normative judging is free from the restriction of any particular norm. No aesthetic pleasure is associated with the determinate judgment that this is a tree, since that judgment cannot be regarded as appropriate *as such*, but only as appropriate to the determinate concept 'tree'.

Ginsborg's reading makes sense of Kant's suggestion that the idea of subjective purposiveness guides reflective judgment. In cognition, we regard the object as purposive for understanding, or as amenable to being cognised. In aesthetic judgment, we regard the object as subjectively purposive as such, or as fitting the needs of human understanding without being "bound to the achievement of any particular cognitive purpose" (235). This account of the underlying connection, but also the important difference, between cognition and aesthetic judgment is very appealing. But I would like to get clearer on what exactly this neat distinction entails for the domain of aesthetic judgment. Specifically, I am interested in understanding why, on Ginsborg's account, we might not be able to find aesthetic pleasure in such contexts as empirical reflection. If the attitude of primitive normativity characterises all cases of reflective judgment, then I see no reason to deny that we could become aware of the primitive appropriateness of such judgments even in the context of empirical reflection. Our search for concepts and laws that determine empirical phenomena is often characterised by reflective judgments

that do not, or not immediately, result in determinate cognition. If no determinate concept is available, however, then our reflection – and hence the appropriateness of our judging – cannot be restricted to any particular norm. Why, then, does my reflecting on an unknown tree for the sake of determining its species, or my attempts at understanding how two apparently disunified scientific theories may be related, leave no room for aesthetic pleasure?

A response might be that, in empirical reflective judging, *some* concepts guide our judgments. Even if I have not yet determined the particular species of which this tree is a specimen I do cognise it under concepts. For instance, I cognise it as a tree with leaves that have a strikingly pointy shape and light colour. One might thus argue that aesthetic pleasure is excluded from empirical enquiry because such enquiry is always bound to *some* empirical norm. According to Ginsborg, however, this reply is unsatisfactory. It does not account for the acquisition of empirical concepts in the first place (see 70ff.). On her reading, even such cases as my search for the species concept of an unknown tree involve a more primitive form of my regarding my judging as appropriate. But if that is correct, why can I not become aware of, and take pleasure in, the very appropriateness of my judging as such? More generally, why can I not feel aesthetic pleasure in the context of scientific reflection by focusing attention on the very appropriateness of my judging activity, and not on the conceptual norm such judging seeks to discover?

Although Ginsborg does not endorse this more expansive view of aesthetic pleasure, extending her account in this way would follow quite naturally from her reading of Kant. It would be in line with the thought that anything, in principle, could become the object of aesthetic appreciation. And it would defend Kant against the

objection that his aesthetics leaves no room for the beauty we may associate with cognitive enquiry.⁶ And, in my view, this would highlight a great advantage of Ginsborg's reading.

⁶ This objection is raised, e.g., in Alexander Rueger, 'Kant and the Aesthetics of Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (1997), 138-155. I have suggested an alternative reading in my 'Aesthetics in Science: A Kantian Proposal', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 113 (2013), 83-100.