

# The closure of experience

*Kant, Goodman, and the aesthetic approach*

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**K**ant ends traditional epistemology and founds the aesthetic approach. – One can say that epistemology is supposed to investigate how an appearance comes about. »Appearance« is one of the key words in Kant. A table, for example, is an appearance for you and me. Epistemology asks how it comes about that we see this table. The point is that one cannot explain the table by something that is not, like the table, an appearance.

This insight is the end of epistemology and the beginning of aesthetics. Or, to avoid confusion, it is better to speak of »the aesthetic approach«, although I am not altogether satisfied with this phrase. For the aesthetic approach, our world consists of experience. Our task is to find out what follows from this starting point.

## *1. Kant's aesthetics*

We are focusing on the first critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the first edition, which was published in 1781. This book is – among other things – an intersection of two approaches, the epistemological and the aesthetic. Two ways of theorizing cross in the book, and their models of thought are intertwined. Kant inherits epistemology and founds the aesthetic approach.

The relevant text for both is a chapter in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, entitled »Transcendental Aesthetics«. Why is it called »Aesthetics«? In ancient Greek *aisthesis* means perception, and »Aesthetics« is thus concerned with what relates to *aisthesis*. Following the idea of the word Kant deals with perception and sensibility. In a footnote he even complains about those who use the word »aesthetics« to refer to a philosophy of art or the beautiful. In German there is only one word – *Aesthetik* – whereas English offers the distinction between *aesthetic* and *aesthetics*. I stick to »aesthetics«, for several reasons,<sup>1</sup> one of them being that we thus can preserve the confusion that surrounds this concept in German and in French. Furthermore, *aesthetics* was the word the Edinburgh Review chose in 1803 to refer to Kant's »Transcendental Aesthetics«.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The meaning of »aesthetic« in modern English is not closer to Kant's project than the one of »aesthetics«. Furthermore, the aesthetic approach is both changing the philosophy of art and informed by art itself.
2. Vol. I, ii, 253. – In London, »aesthetic« was preferred, e.g. by F.M. Willich, *Elements of*

Kant's aesthetics is about our intuitions of objects. We intuit objects either empirically or through imagination. For example, reading this very page means that you are having an empirical intuition of a page.

Intuition is thus either experience or imagination. The basic unit is the intuition and an intuition is either empirical – then it is called »appearance« – or it turns out to be imagination and illusion. These are the basic notions of Kant's aesthetics, with »appearance«, that is empirical intuition, being the most important one.

Kant's aesthetics is not simply a part of his philosophy but the groundwork of his philosophical edifice. This is so because »all thought must, directly or indirectly, relate ultimately to intuitions, therefore, with us, to sensibility, because in no other way can an object be given to us« (A19).<sup>3</sup> Thus even thought rests in the end upon intuition. Kant's philosophy is therefore a fundamentally aesthetic philosophy.

## 2. Reflection on objects

Beginning with Kant and his work, we quickly came to talk about intuitions and appearances. This is a step into a reflexive stance.

In philosophy we do not use this page *as* a page but do other things to it, calling it, for instance, an appearance. Doing philosophy we talk about talking, observe observers and the like. In philosophy, the standard behaviour of our daily life looks rather strange. Take a sentence like »It is raining«, which is a sensible and often true remark, put it into a philosophical discourse and suddenly the whole universe is said to consist of rain. This process is more common with physical objects than with rain. So, an unproblematic phrase can change its nature when entering philosophy. What is true in daily life, can become metaphysics when transferred to philosophy. A commonsensical statement turns into a philosophical dogma. That is the reason why any appeal to so-called common sense is such a tricky thing in philosophy. Nobody would deny that one should usually follow common sense in everyday life, but from this it does not follow that common sense is a reliable guide for philosophy.

This step from daily life to reflexion affects all language used in philosophy. Whether a philosophical text is written in an idiom that is close to ordinary language or not – it is jargon. All philosophy is written in jargon, by definition, so-to-speak. It is not necessary to voluntarily give new meanings to the words to make them jargon. They change their meaning simply by virtue of entering philosophy.

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*Critical Philosophy*, p. 65 and p. 139. The world has seen worse introductions to Kant's philosophy than this very early one.

3. I quote the translation by the Edinburgh philosopher Norman Kemp Smith and restrict myself to the edition from 1781. – Italics in quotations are italics in the original.

Kant acted in accordance with this peculiarity of philosophical discourse. When he wanted to speak of things of the kind of this page or this issue of the *Filozofski vestnik* here, he used the strange sounding expression »appearance«. This page is in front of you, that is, it appears to you and is therefore an appearance. He never doubted that this is empirically a page, but in philosophy we have to call it an appearance. Otherwise we would be led to make the same mistake that, Kant thought, his predecessors had made. On Leibniz, for example, he wrote: »The conditions of sensible intuition, which carry with them their own differences, he [Leibniz] did not regard as original, sensibility being for him only a confused mode of representation, and not a separate source of representations. Appearance was, on his view [that is, on Leibniz's view], the representation of the *thing in itself*« (A270).

According to Kant, Leibniz assumed that the thing and the representation of it are two distinct phenomena. We have a representation of an object. Now we *think* that this object must exist somewhere apart from being the object of our representation. Our understanding forms a concept of the object in our representation and believes that there must be a correlate of this concept somewhere outside, apart from all intuition.

For Kant, this is a mistaken approach. Turning against it, Kant pushes understanding back into its proper limits and shows that a thing apart from any intuition, that is, a thing that is not and could not be an appearance, is inconceivable. Kant formulates this insight by saying: »nothing whatsoever can be asserted of the thing in itself, which may underlie these appearances« (A49). But the notion of a thing in itself is not a part of Kant's own teaching, but stands for Leibniz's view.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, his own philosophy is developed in opposition to this kind of philosophy. Kant denies the possibility of an experience of a Leibnizian thing in itself.

Kant tries to avoid Leibniz's mistake. He therefore *starts* with the perspectivity of our standard view of the things. »It is ... solely from the human standpoint that we can speak of space, of extended things, etc« (A26). An extended thing – for instance a table – is an appearance, as we already saw. An appearance is always an appearance for someone. Our standpoint is in front of the appearances.

Doing philosophy, we have to take into account the fact that we operate from a perspective, from a certain standpoint. Statements lose their validity when separated from the situation they belong to, or, as Kant puts it: »The proposition, that all things are side by side in space, is valid under the limitation that these things are viewed as objects of our sensible intuition« (A27). To speak of this table makes sense only under the limitation that the table is seen from a human perspective.

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4. See Walter Patt, *Transzendentaler Idealismus*, 20.

Kant offers several formulations of this limitation thesis. Of appearance in general he says, that it »always has two sides, the one by which the object is viewed in and by itself ... , the other by which the form of the intuition of this object is taken into account« (A38). Either we look at the appearance as it is apart from its being an appearance, or we take the appearance simply as an appearance. If »viewed in and by itself« the nature of the appearance always remains, as Kant says, »problematic« (A38). An appearance appears to someone, it is always under the limitation that it is someone's intuition. To look at the appearance »in and by itself« amounts to looking at it when it is not seen. Kant speaks of a thing in itself but only to show that it does not make sense to do so.

Kant was aware that he had led the meaning of the word »appearance« to its limits. To prevent misunderstanding, he discussed the example of a rainbow. »The rainbow in a sunny shower may be called a mere appearance, and the rain the thing in itself« (A45). This is true if we use these terms in a physical sense. But this is not what Kant wants. Kant does not talk about appearance and reality in a physical sense. On the contrary, Kant continues the discussion of the rainbow like this: »if we take this empirical object in its general character ... [we] ... realise that not only are the drops of rain mere appearances, but that even their round shape, nay even the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves« (A45f). Kant here says explicitly that »the drops of rain« are, philosophically speaking, »mere appearances«.

Kant is not talking about appearance in opposition to reality, but about reality *in* appearance.

If we know only appearances, we cannot look behind the appearances. This is the closure of experience. Looking for more, we can only come across other appearances. Any claim to go beyond to some sort of underlying reality, is mere speculation. We are confined to appearances, »because that which is not appearance, can never be an object of experience«.<sup>5</sup>

This limitation to appearances I take to be the true spirit<sup>6</sup> of Kant's philosophy. We are limited in our knowledge because we can deal reasonably only with appearances. We do not know what these appearances are besides being appearances for us. But for us they are tables, symphonies and lions. They are real although it is we who in a certain sense make them. Because we exist, there are also appearances, that is things for us. The spirit of Kantian philosophy is thus our aesthetic confinement to appearances which are relative to us.

5. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, »Über den transzendentalen Idealismus«, p. 302 (my translation).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 301: »Geist seines Systems«.

### *3. The breakdown of epistemology*

So how does the limitation thesis relate to epistemology? Epistemology asks, how this journal here, this appearance, comes about. Epistemology operates with the distinction between representation or knowledge on the one hand, and the object on the other. Whatever kind of epistemology it may be, it works with the distinction between representation or knowledge of the object on the one hand and the object on the other. Thus epistemologists first take for granted our everyday view that there is a clear distinction between experience and an object. Then they work with it and test each side separately. For instance, they deny that we can know about the objects of our knowledge or they say that these objects out there are physical or spiritual or whatever.

Kant ruins epistemology. He does so by working on the distinction between representation and object. Kant denies the separability of representation and its object. According to Kant, the distinction does not work as well as the epistemologists assumed. Representation and object are not separable because one cannot have an object without a representation whereas there are representations without objects. How would one know about an object without either experiencing it or getting a message from someone else that there is an object? And what would this experience or the message be if not another representation? What could there be that is not itself an experience?

The following three remarks may clarify the breakdown of epistemology.

#### *First remark*

The end of epistemology does not lead to realism in the common sense of the word. Realism claims that there are objects, materialist realism claims that there are ultimately only physical objects. Kant says that we are limited to our experiences. Within this limitation, we operate with a real-unreal distinction which Kant describes as empirical realism.<sup>7</sup> But this is more a description of how we act than a thesis about what there is.

#### *Second remark*

The collapse of epistemology does not end in idealism. This point Kant was much concerned about. Relevant passages in Kant are the fourth paralogism in the A-edition, the refutation of idealism in the B-edition and the reflections 6312 to 6317. In 6315 Kant says: »The claim, that we can never be certain, whether all the experience that seems to be outer experience is not mere imagination, is idealism.«<sup>8</sup> Idealism thus plays on a principal difference between what we call inner mental experience and experience of outer objects. The underlying conception is that we can rely on our private inner life whereas the outer world may be sheer illusion.

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7. Kant's notion of »empirical realism« is close to Hilary Putnam's »internal realism«, mentioned by Nelson Goodman, who adds: »there is only one world but this holds for each of the many worlds« (*Of Mind and Other Matters*, pp. 32-33).

8. *Werke*, XVIII, p. 618 (my translation).

Kant denies this crucial difference. Outer and inner experience are fundamentally of the same kind. In the »Transcendental Aesthetics« he writes »that both are in the same position; in neither case can their reality as representations be questioned, and in both cases they belong only to appearance« (A38). Kant, therefore, subscribes to neither to realism nor idealism, but, instead, founds aesthetics, that is the study of the objects in our experience.

### *Third remark*

The Kant I am presenting here is a bit slimmer than the one generally known. My Kant has lost, after several slimming diets,<sup>9</sup> all the synthesis talk, the distinction between intuition and concept, and any a priori access to the transcendental. Some of these teachings stem directly from the epistemological heritage, in so far as Kant dares to talk about factors that contribute to the coming about of experience. To this belongs his tenet that thought is not an experience. As I do not think that this part of Kant's work leads very far, I leave it aside in order to concentrate on what is still revolutionary in Kant, namely his aesthetics. Furthermore, I hope it is being understood that notions like »appearance« are, strictly speaking, discarded (because it is before experience). But the argument does not depend, for instance, on the distinction between »appearance« and »experience«. Both refer to what we usually call tables, rain and rainbows.

After these three remarks, it is, I hope, a little clearer in what sense epistemology broke down and aesthetics as the study of experience arose.

### *4. Goodman's irrealism*

Nelson Goodman is an American philosopher, born in 1906. He was a colleague of Quine's at Harvard and is considered, at least in Germany and France, to be one of the most important analytical philosophers.

How does aesthetic Kantianism, as I have presented it, go together with Goodman's irrealism? In the following I make an attempt to show that they do go together quite well. Goodman's philosophy could even be of some help in coming to a more relaxed attitude towards Kant – against the vast majority of the books on Kant.

#### *a) Only versions*

Kant and Goodman seem to diverge in the very names of their philosophies, as Kant uses terms like »transcendental idealism« to describe his position, whereas Goodman speaks of constructionalism and irrealism. But compare the

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9. This is an attempt to present a version of Kant that escapes criticism made from Jacobi to Rorty. Compare the latter's »Strawson's Objectivity argument«, pp. 238-244 and his »The World Well lost«, p. 4f. With Hamann and Beck one may call this kind of criticism »metacritical«; see Beck, p. 25.

fundamentals. On the one hand, Kant says »that objects in themselves are quite unknown to us« and adds that »in experience no question is ever asked in regard to it« (A30).

On the other hand, Goodman resumes »We do better to focus on versions rather than worlds«. <sup>10</sup> The reason he gives is our confinement to versions. »We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described«. <sup>11</sup> We cannot reach things or worlds if not through versions: »things and worlds and even the stuff they are made of – matter, anti-matter, mind, energy, or whatnot – are themselves fashioned by and along with the versions«. <sup>12</sup>

One cannot jump out of the versions of the world. Thus the old epistemological question loses its interest. Goodman proudly confesses: »I am an anti-realist and an anti-idealist – hence irrealist«. <sup>13</sup>

Goodman's irrealism is »not one more doctrine – does not say that everything or even anything is unreal – but is rather an attitude of unconcern with most issues between such doctrines«. <sup>14</sup> The question, for instance, as to how much of these versions of our worlds is self-made, and how much is an import from some outer reality, cannot be answered and – more important – does not matter. Just leave these »broad metaphysical issues« <sup>15</sup> aside and focus on the ways these world-versions work. If you do want to bother with these issues, then »Have it« – to quote Goodman once more – »your way; it matters not«. <sup>16</sup>

#### *b) Versions make worlds*

But Kant and Goodman seem to differ in their basic notions. Kant talks of experiences and representations whereas Goodman speaks of versions and of true (or right) versions. Kant obviously uses a more mentalistic language whereas Goodman works with symbols, signs and the like. But, if one cuts Kant's philosophy down, as I have tried to do, then the decisive point of agreement becomes obvious.

On the one hand, there is the object we are interested in, in our daily life. On the other hand, this object is, philosophically speaking, an experience, or, as Kant sometimes says, a representation. It would be mistaken to speak of an object apart from its being a representation or experience. It is »through« them that we encounter objects. »It is a proposition which must indeed sound strange, that a thing can exist only in the representation of it« (A375n).

Goodman argues the other way round but arrives at the same point, saying that »we make versions, and true versions make worlds«. <sup>17</sup> Worlds relate to versions

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10. *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 96.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

13. *Of Minds and Other Matters*, VII.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

as objects relate to experiences. »The world of a true version is a construct; ... the version may have features – such as being English or consisting of words – that its world does not. But the world depends upon the version«. <sup>18</sup>

Goodman claims that we cannot get rid of the versions because the worlds and their features emerge from them: »we cannot find any world-feature independent of all versions. Whatever can be said truly of a world is dependent on the saying – not that whatever we say is true but that whatever we say truly (or otherwise present rightly) is nevertheless informed by and relative to the language or other symbol system we use«. <sup>19</sup>

The German philosopher Günter Abel has formulated the agreement of Kant and Goodman in this respect. According to Abel, both claim »that a logical gap between our symbol-related 'versions' of the world and our worlds cannot be made intelligible; ... [and] that we can thus treat our world-versions as our worlds«. <sup>20</sup>

Just as the world depends on the version, the object depends on the appearance. Not any version, but only true (or right) versions make worlds, is Goodman's thesis. Not imagined intuitions, but only empirical intuitions, that is, appearances, make objects, is Kant's point. Both hold that we are operating within intuitions or versions respectively. This is the closure of experience. Experience closing on itself could turn out to be some sort of condition of the possibility of experience.

### *c) The incommensurability of worlds*

Having discussed differences between Kant and Goodman that turned out to be similarities, I now want to mention a true difference. This difference becomes obvious if one asks for the relation of appearances to other appearances, or of true versions to other true versions. For Kant this is not even a problem. Only Goodman comes across the possibility of conflicting worlds. That worlds conflict is even an important point for him. He insists on those experiences that clash, on the moments of irritation and confusion.

## *5. The aesthetic approach*

At this point we can summarize and say something about where the aesthetic approach might lead to.

In the first section we saw that Kant's philosophy is fundamentally aesthetic. The second section introduced appearances and experiences as the realm of our actions. In the third section epistemology was confronted with the insight of aesthetics. Epistemology turned out to take the distinction between an object and a representation for granted. Kant displaced this distinction by

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

20. »Logic, Art and Understanding«, p. 313.



showing that the object is »in« the representation. Kant's philosophy is therefore, if properly slimmed, beyond realism and idealism. Section 4 then, compared Goodman and Kant. Both resist the seduction to assume anything beyond versions or appearances. Both take worlds and objects to be phenomena within versions and appearances. In this section we look at consequences of the aesthetic approach and at examples of its application.

#### *a) Text*

Goodman uses the notion of meaning to make understandable how facts or worlds relate to versions. There is no meaning without some kind of text and whenever one tries to catch pure meaning, one ends up with another string of words or other signifiers. For Goodman, »meanings vanish in favour of certain relationships among terms«.<sup>21</sup>

Not every text succeeds in producing a stable meaning. Furthermore, one is often confronted with several competing meanings. A sentence may say that the sun shines. Can we say that the meaning of the sentence »The sun is shining« is exactly and nothing but what it says about the sun? Imagine two agents of a foreign intelligence service. They might use this sentence to signal the start of operation X. Then the meaning of »The sun is shining« is »Begin with operation X«.

The always surprising thing about language is that strings of letters can »transport« thoughts and emotions which we would say have a quality radically different from that of the letters. Neither *is* philosophy printing ink, nor *is* love on paper. This gap, which is nevertheless a gap in one phenomenon, is a major topic for the aesthetic approach.

#### *b) Materiality*

Having considered the example of language – no meaning without text – we can appreciate much better why Kant wrote the following sentence: »If our subjective constitution be removed, the represented object, with the qualities which sensible intuition bestows upon it, is nowhere to be found, and cannot possibly be found« (A44).

Our subjective constitution is an intrinsic part of the whole of which an object is only a part. If the appearance is being destroyed, the object goes with it. By subjective constitution Kant meant sensibility and understanding. This means a »nobilitation of the sensible«.<sup>22</sup> Traditionally, sensibility was regarded as a means of communication with a so-called external world. In Kant's aesthetics, it gets a fundamental role.

An analog change happened to text, as we already saw. What were mere words, turned out to be the element of sense. Text and sensibility were traditionally considered to be only the material side of the phenomena. Now

21. *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 93.

22. Welsch, *Aesthetisches Denken*, p. 27n17.

materiality finds the phenomena of meaning and objectivity – but not as separable and pure phenomena. »No firm line can be drawn between world-features that are discourse-dependent and those that are not«,<sup>23</sup> says Goodman. The meaning in the text is an impure meaning and the object in the appearance is an impure object – if one takes these words in the old sense.

If words are the element of sense and if only materiality can give rise to objects, then everything that there is is in some kind of text or matter. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida said: »Il n'y a pas de hors texte«.<sup>24</sup>

The sphere of idealities depends on materiality in the same way as the ambiguous meaning of a Joycean sentence depends on its words. Logic needs chalk. But logic is a very successful and seductive abstraction of the conditions of its own possibility. Logic works for instance with the assumption that there may be two identical sentences ( $p \ \& \ p$ ). Deny one of them and you have a contradiction in the strictest possible sense ( $p \ \& \ -p$ ). Aesthetic theory, however, teaches that such a kind of a contradiction can be conceived only within the space of the construction called logic. In reality, that is, in appearance, no such contradiction can be found because of a fundamental lack of transportable sameness. Still, this insight into the impossibility of real contradictions will not change very much in areas where the standards of precision are different. If sameness is defined in practical terms, contradiction is possible indeed.

### c) Art

Interestingly enough there is one human activity that is most concerned about the object being »in« the appearance, the world »in« the versions and the meaning »in« the text, namely art. There was never any doubt that in art, the work is done under the condition that meaning and matter are inseparable. At least modern art has made this condition its subject matter.

The German philosopher Wolfgang Iser is one of the few philosophers who have paid attention to the reflective work done in art. In an essay from 1979 entitled »At the limits of sense« he investigates how far the paintings of Jean Dubuffet contribute to philosophical problems.

Here, however, it is important to note the general point about art working with material. Suppose a precise portrait of a person. The picture or meaning of the portrait and the one of the person can be assumed to be the same. But even in this extreme case, one crucial difference cannot be overcome: the material is not the same. This is a very crude example for the condition under which art always works. Artists have played with it and used the structure of the canvas as an element of their painting. But the problem is a principally unavoidable one for the artist because the material has to be chosen. It may be

23. *Of Minds and Other Matters*, p. 41.

24. *De la grammatologie*, p. 227.

marble, wood or sound. It is the artist's choice to represent a face in one of those materials which have only one thing in common: they are not the same as the represented.

The importance of the material is even more obvious where there is no representation of something else. Looking at a monochrome canvas, one is not helped by the command to imagine something that is not there. On the contrary, one is left alone with two materials, the canvas itself and the paint on it. There is no »picture« to hide the paint on the canvas. Are both »only« materials? What is the meaning-side of such a work of art? Is not the material already the meaning and the message? Or is one to contemplate the lack of sense?

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