

# Review of: "Symbolic art of the highest Artist: natural purposes in Kant's third Critique"

Rex Butler<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Monash University

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

I noted that the author of this essay works at the Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University and was intrigued by the subtle “scientific” pressure he wanted to place on Kant’s third Critique. And why not? Kant studied the “natural sciences” before becoming a philosopher and the two fields were in much closer contact with each other back then than they are now. Of course, all through the long period of artistic modernism and the taking up of Kant’s work by figures like Clement Greenberg, the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* was used to argue for the specificity of the various art forms and more generally the separation of art from life. Now with the end of modernism and the renewed interest of art with science and technology, the author’s emphasis can appear extremely timely. Particularly relevant here is the attempt by the author to put together, much more closely than usual, the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgement’ (§§ 1-60) and the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgement’ (§§ 61-91). Indeed, even more particularly, a substantial part of this essay is devoted to the ‘Appendix’ of the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgement’, ‘The Theory of the Method of Teleological Judgement’ (§§ 87-88) and the two ‘Remarks’ that follow this (§§ 87-88 and 89-91).

Early on in his essay the author writes “*CPJ* [the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*] argues that the purposiveness of organised beings is evident in the interdependence of their parts in a unity of purpose in which each part supports and unifies the whole”, and of course he means by this to speak of *CPJ* itself. As opposed to all of the centuries’-long attempts to interpret it merely as an “aggregate of disconnected parts”, the author wants to read Kant’s book as a whole. It both speaks of the way that “purpose is the mutual interdependence of parts of a harmonic whole” and *is* this purposiveness in the mutual interdependence of its parts in a harmonic whole.

And, needless to say, the same self-reflexiveness characterises this essay as well: it speaks (only) of itself and its own methodology throughout. The author at once unexpectedly remarks on Kant’s “occasional humor” in the context of *Zwecke* or end, and we see the same “humour” in this essay itself when, after an exhaustive discussion of the notion of teleology in Kant’s conception of art, the author begins a section ‘Approaching the End’, as though this “end” could never be attained or understood. (And in some ways this is the author’s argument.) And perhaps the other way of putting this is that we must read Kant’s text backwards or that upon arriving at its end we are once again at its beginning, so that forms an endless circle in which, precisely because it is always trying to catch up with itself and state what makes it possible, there is nothing outside of it.

Altogether this is a satisfying, coherent, self-contained and indeed circular essay. It can only be read in its own terms, as can Kant’s text. It is self-justifying and self-explanatory. It does indeed form its own “intelligible” universe that, to quote

Kant, “will become intelligible before the production of a single herb or a caterpillar by mechanical causes will be distinctly and completely understood”. It thus makes any argument and evaluation beside the point if not impossible. This is both the essay’s power and its limit. But where would we have to stand in order to remark its limit? This is also a question that the essay seeks to address. It can only be read against itself, as can Kant. But in its own terms it is perfect. Or there are only the three smallest imperfections so far as I can see. It should be “with what is granted to us” instead of “with what is granted to us (p. 18). It should be “of a thing” and not “of a things” (p. 33) And it should be “in the production of art” and not “in production of art” (p. 35). These are the only amendments I would make before publication. Then let us see whether this essay finds “universal assent”.

Rex Butler