



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## The normativity of nature. Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgment

**Citation for published version:**

Massimi, M 2015, 'The normativity of nature. Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgment', *Intellectual History Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2015.1060740>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/17496977.2015.1060740](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2015.1060740)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Intellectual History Review

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Intellectual History Review on 13/07/2015, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17496977.2015.1060740>.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Review of Hannah Ginsborg's *The Normativity of Nature. Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgement* (OUP, 2015)**

**Michela Massimi, University of Edinburgh**

Kant's *Critique of Judgement* has long been at the centre of interpretive debates among Kant scholars. With a first part dedicated to aesthetics and a second part focused on teleology, Kant's third Critique has traditionally posed a puzzle to Kant's interpreters: namely, how to reconcile the two parts, and where to locate the underlying unity of the overall project. This seeming lack of unity has often led Kant scholars to a selective engagement with the third Critique. Kant's aesthetics and Kant's reflections on teleology have often attracted the attention of distinct, and somehow orthogonal scholarly communities, with only a few exceptions.

Hannah Ginsborg is one such exception. Over the past two decades, Ginsborg has elaborated a sophisticated interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* that brings together aesthetics, cognition, and teleology under a thoroughgoing *normative* reading of Kant's project. The wonderful book *The Normativity of Nature* collects fourteen essays by Ginsborg produced over a twenty-five year span. The book is structured in three Parts: Part I Aesthetics, Part II Cognition, and Part III Teleology. In what follows, I concentrate my attention on two salient and representative aspects of Ginsborg's interpretive stance.

The five essays in Part I tackle the central dilemma that besets Kant's aesthetics: namely, how it is possible for our aesthetic judgments to 'demand universal assent' while also being subjective. In other words, how it is possible for aesthetic judgments to have universal validity, given that they are based on a subjective feeling of pleasure (e.g. my own feeling of pleasure when I make the judgment: "Botticelli's *La primavera* is beautiful"). Ginsborg considers and rejects some prominent views to this effect (from Ameriks to Guyer, among others), which in different ways have provided possible answers to this central dilemma. Key to Ginsborg's approach is the rejection of any objective take on aesthetic judgments, i.e. the temptation to read aesthetic judgments as based on a so-to-speak dispositionalist reading of how beautiful objects may trigger in us a universally shared aesthetic response. She also rejects Guyer's influential two-acts view, whereby aesthetic response and aesthetic judgment are two separate and distinct moments.

Ginsborg argues instead that the central dilemma in Kant's aesthetics can be resolved if we come to view judgments of taste as akin to cognitive judgments in demanding universal assent. The main difference between the two kinds of judgments—as Ginsborg sees it—is the following. The universal validity of cognitive judgments is based on everyone's sharing the same empirical concept under which spatio-temporal manifold gets subsumed—so that we collectively come to judge an object in a specific way (e.g. when I judge that "This stone is heavy"). By contrast, the universal validity displayed by aesthetic judgments is not based on any similar activity of subsuming spatio-temporal manifold under a specific empirical concept. Aesthetic judgments manifest instead an 'exemplary necessity' based on a free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding. In aesthetic judgments, imagination exercises a lawfulness (*Gesetzmäßigkeit*) "characteristic of understanding, yet in a way which is at the same time 'free' or 'without a law' (CJ, First Remark on the First Section of the Analytic, 5:240–1" (Ginsborg, op. cit, p. 54).

Ginsborg identifies this exemplary necessity of aesthetic judgments with *normative* necessity. Under this normative reading, we would acquire the ability of judge objects as beautiful by forming perceptual images and synthesizing them as they *ought* to be

synthesized. This rule-governed synthesizing activity does not require any previous grasp of any rule or specific empirical concept. It displays instead a ‘free lawfulness’ of imagination, akin to a Wittgensteinian rule-following. We learn how to judge Botticelli’s *La primavera* as beautiful, or to judge an organism as a tree, or as a dog, or else, in a way analogous to the way in which we learn how to speak our native tongue (i.e. by following rules without antecedently grasping these same rules until much later in life, when we learn grammar in school). This ‘primitive’ normativity, as Ginsborg calls it, brings along with it a kind of *exemplary* necessity, very different from the necessity typically associated with the constitutive activity of the understanding. For no specific rules or antecedently grasped concept is here involved, by contrast with the synthesizing activity of the faculty of determining judgment.

Primitive normativity in judging an object as it *ought* to be judged provides also the seemingly missing link between Kant’s aesthetics and Kant’s teleology, under Ginsborg’s reading of the third Critique. In the case of aesthetic judgments, the normativity has to do with the relation between the object and our cognitive faculties, i.e. our judging the object *as it ought to be judged*; namely, we take our cognitive faculties to be functioning as they ought with respect to the object. In the teleological judgments, instead of thinking of how our cognitive faculties ought to be functioning with respect to the object, or how the object ought to be judged by us, we think instead of how the object ought to be *tout court*. Our ability to judge organisms as natural (as opposed to products of art), and yet as purposive, should not be understood as implying a designer, Ginsborg warns us. For Kant is adamant in rejecting the inference from the purposiveness of nature to God (or other minds) as the designer of nature. Instead, our ability to judge an organism as having a function (e.g. the heart has the function to pump blood), and hence as purposive, is nothing but our ability to judge the organism in normative terms. Not surprisingly, we take some organisms (e.g. the drosophila) as ‘model organisms’ (as contemporary philosophers of science would call them) for kind membership. Ginsborg develops in details her account of primitive normativity in Part III of the book, in the context of the broader discussion of how to understand biological regularities as lawlike.

The lawlikeness of biological phenomena poses an obvious problem for Kant’s natural science. For it cannot be explained mechanically, i.e. in terms of Kant’s fundamental forces of attraction and repulsion, the same two fundamental forces from which Kant (pre-Critical and Critical) appealed to in the explanation of a variety of physical phenomena (from the formation of planets to the cause of the winds). The complexity and regularity of organisms in nature requires instead a principle of purposiveness of nature, which Ginsborg understands as “normative lawlikeness without design” (essay 11): “to regard something as a purpose is to regard it as subject to normative laws, standards, or constraints” (op. cit, p. 275); “it is thus to think (...) that there is a way it ought to be; yet without invoking the thought of an intelligent producer whose actions are governed by the idea that it ought to be that way” (p. 277). Thus, the regularities displayed by living organisms can be regarded as lawlike (despite their mechanical inexplicability) because they conform to *normative* constraints and standards. Acorn ought to grow into oaks, and tadpoles into frogs—it is this normative *ought* that Kant’s idea of natural purposiveness is meant to capture.

Ginsborg’s interpretive analysis of the *Critique of Judgement* is masterful, thought-provoking, and timely. It has the capacity of bringing unity to a seemingly disunified corpus of Kant’s reflections on aesthetics and teleology. It is attentive to Kant’s text without ever being exegetical. It is an essential contribution to contemporary trends on normativity, as much as it speaks to contemporary debates in aesthetics and philosophy of biology too. This is Kant scholarship at its best.

In philosophy of biology, debates on ‘function’ in biology, on model organisms, and on the status of laws continue to animate lively discussions.<sup>1</sup> Most contemporary discussions on biological regularities and organisms are not cashed out in terms of normative rules or standards, but in terms of mechanisms. After all, biological regularities are rife with exceptions, and involve very sophisticated mechanisms to the point that disfunctions (such as pathological amino acids sequencing at work in cancer) are often as lawlike as normal cell functions. And the explanatory burden does not often lie on laws as such, but on the specific mechanisms at work in the relevant phenomenon we are interested in studying.<sup>2</sup> The contemporary vast literature on mechanisms in philosophy of biology is still to establish how entities (e.g. APC gene) and their activities (e.g. cell growth) combine to form the explanatory mechanisms we associate with, say, the origin of colorectal cancer, among many other relevant phenomena. Some philosophers of science (e.g. Cartwright) use the word “constitutive” to designate how entities and activities combine into well-defined mechanisms. Perhaps, Ginsborg’s primitive normativity comes closer. Biological regularities may be regarded as due to mechanisms (irreducible to the sheer physical laws of inorganic matter) that display rules or norms for the kind of activities (e.g. cell growth) involving specific entities (e.g. APC gene). Understanding the lawfulness of living organisms then means unearthing the rule-governed behavior of such entities in given conditions and environments, without yet knowing in advance or having antecedently grasped the rules themselves governing such behavior. This is the exemplary necessity at work in the lawfulness of the contingent realm of living organisms. After all, it is not the rule itself, but the rule-governed behavior that matters most. Studying defective organisms is often the best way of investigating such rule-governed behavior. Contemporary biomedical research is precisely of this nature. Credit should be given to Ginsborg’s careful reading of the third Critique for unraveling so far unexplored possibilities in Kant’s legacy for contemporary debates in the life sciences, among many others.

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example A. Levy (2014) “What was the Hodgkin and Huxley’s achievement?” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 65, 469-492; E. Kingma (2015) “Situation-specific disease and dispositional function”, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, first published online January 2015; R. Ankeny and S. Leonelli (2011) “What’s so special about model organisms?”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 42, pp. 313-323; S. Mitchell (2003) “Laws”, *Biological Complexity and Integrative Pluralism* (CUP), ch. 5.

<sup>2</sup> For example, researchers investigate how amino acids sequencing maps onto functional domains, such as oligomerization and catenin binding I. And how anomalous sequencing maps onto diseases, such as polyposis, in the mechanisms underlying the germline mutations of the APC gene responsible for colorectal cancer, for example.