

Critiquing critics' emphasis on personal taste: a comparison of pope and kant



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The literary critics Alexander Pope and Immanuel Kant put critics to the test as they perform the task of critiquing critiques. In Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, he provides the readers and critics with critique of critics in poetry form which in itself is a work of art. Similarly, Kant expresses his views on judgement in *Critique of Judgement*, in which Kant teaches one how to judge. Both authors demonstrate to the reader how to critique something through knowledge and example in that their lessons are actually critiques in themselves. Through their works, both Kant and Pope successfully prove that personal taste is not a way for someone to judge works of art when referring to the works quality but rather should be used to judge their own likes and dislikes.

Pope and Kant both want to emphasize that critics should not let personal taste get in the way of their judgements. In *Essay on Criticism*, Pope begins by critiquing false and bad critics. While doing so, he is teaching the reader what not to do while critiquing. He explains taste, telling the reader that each person will have personal taste in things and whatnot but something that a critic personally does not like does not necessarily make it bad. This is an important distinction he makes because, for example, if a food critic hates onions and tries something with onions, he cannot say that the dish is badly made based on the onions but rather only that he personally did not like that part. Likewise, if a critic does not like allegories, he cannot say that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is badly written simply because he does not like the literary device. Pope is right in making this distinction and insulting such critics that do otherwise. He tells the reader that most of these false critics are being educated by these poets whom they seem to hate: Against the

poets their own arms they turn'd, Sure to hate most the men from whom they have learn'd. So modern 'pothecaries, taught the art By doctor's' bills to play the doctor' part, Bold in the practice of mistaken rules, Prescribe, apply and call their masters fools.[1] To help the critic, Pope tells the former to first know himself before he judges works of others; that way he is able to distinguish between his own personal taste and bad writing or other works of art.

Similarly, Kant begins his essay in an attempt to teach the critic how to judge by also going over the importance of taste. Kant tells the reader that the perfect judge is completely indifferent about the thing, as in the previous example: the food critic that hates onions would not be a proper critic of that chef's dish. He writes, "Everyone has to admit that if a judgement about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. In order to play a judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it." [2] Kant is teaching the critic that he can never be biased if he is going to judge and like Pope he too emphasizes the problem with human's natural response to having personal taste.

Though both Kant and Pope are working towards the same goal, one thing that Pope does that is superior than Kant is when he goes over nature. Pope says the second rule of the critic is to learn nature, while Kant instead teaches about the different types of likings. While both methods work in teaching, Pope's writing on nature is superb in its clarity. While both authors arrive at the same goal in teaching the critic, Pope teaches more how the critic should go to learn about nature and what to focus on while Kant gives <https://assignbuster.com/critiquing-critics-emphasis-on-personal-taste-a-comparison-of-pope-and-kant/>

more of a list of definitions on different types of likings. While everyone learns differently, one may say that it helps more when Pope says: Of all the causes which conspire to blind Man's erring judgement, and misguide the mind What the weak head and strongest bias rules, Is Pride, the never failing vice of fools.[3] This method teaches far better than Kant's constant definitions; Kant writes, " Interest is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object's forgiveness." [4] Furthermore, he says, " When [something determines the feeling of pleasure or displeasure and this] determination of that feeling is called sensation, this term means something quite different from what it means when I apply it to a presentation of a thing (through the senses, a receptivity that belongs to the cognitive power)." [5] However, this is an unfair assessment of Kant because he does write examples and explanations of these definitions but the impression left by the reader upon reading Kant is the same as one gets after a dull class lecture. Dissimilarly, upon reading Pope, one is very engaged and interested because Pope successfully critiques as he tells one to critique.

Pope then begins to tell the reader what kind of character he needs to have in order to become a good critic and also he needs to know what an ideal person must be. He writes: Learn then what morals critics ought to show, For' tis half a judge's task to know. ' Tis not enough taste, judgement, learning join; In all you speak let truth and candour shine; That not alone what in your sense is due All may allow, but seek your friendship too.[6] These characteristics give a person something to pursue in order to be a critic. With these virtues in mind, a person is able to know if he is lacking in anything when judging the worth of someone's work. While Kant seems to

give the reader the rules, Pope gives the direction. Both of these are necessary and while Pope's approach might be more helpful, knowing Kant is still important. When learning a skill like a sport for example, one must be in shape and also know the rules of the game so too does one need to know Pope as well as Kant in order to be a good critic. This is how one can learn to not use their own personal taste when judging the worth of something, by becoming the honest and courageous person in which Pope describes along with following the rules set by Kant.

Kant and Pope effectively prove that personal taste is not a way to judge works of art when referring to the works quality but rather should be used to judge their own likes and dislikes. Even though both have different styles, they both demonstrate from the start of their essays that one should never let personal taste affect their judgements. While Pope's style appears to be superior to Kant's in that Kant lacks in keeping the reader entertained, both successfully teach what it is to be a good critic. It is important to read both of them because upon hearing just one, one will find himself lacking in character without Pope or lacking in knowledge without Kant.

WORKS CITED Kant, Immanuel. " Critique of Judgement." In *Criticism: Major Statements*, edited by Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2000. Pope, Alexander. " Essay on Criticism." In *Criticism: Major Statements*, edited by Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2000. [1]Alexander Pope, " An Essay on Criticism," in *Criticism: Major Statements*, ed. Kaplan, Charles and William Davis Anderson (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 185.

[2]Immanuel Kant, " Critique of Judgement," in *Criticism: Major Statements*, <https://assignbuster.com/critiquing-critics-emphasis-on-personal-taste-a-comparison-of-pope-and-kant/>

ed. Kaplan, Charles and William Davis Anderson (New York: Bedford/St.

Martin's, 2000), 234. [3]Pope, 187. [4]Kant, 234. [5]Ibid., 235. [6]Pope, 195.