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The Figurative Language of Nature: Expression and Meaning in Kant's Aesthetic Judgment

ABSTRACT: Drawing on the intimate connection between beauty and morality in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the aim of this paper is to elucidate Kant's doctrine of the moral meaning that natural beauty is said to carry for us in the act of aesthetic judgment. I propose that the key to this meaning lies in the *expressive* nature of beauty. "Expression" is to be analyzed in terms of the way in which nature, according to Kant, "figuratively *speaks* to us in its beautiful forms" when we experience it aesthetically. Such language that nature brings to us, as Kant states, "seems to have a *higher* meaning". I propose that there is a triadic connection between 1) the figurative language of natural beauty, 2) the expression of the judgment of natural beauty, and 3) its higher (moral) meaning. This connection is most clearly demonstrated by the intellectual interest that a person of a "good moral disposition" takes in the presentation of beauty in nature.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic Judgement; Figurative Language; Intellectual Interest; Moral Meaning; Natural Beauty

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between beauty and morality in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* has long been the subject of scholarly study. The vast majority of these studies have tended to focus on the following: the contribution of judgments of beauty to an account of moral feeling, the analogy between beauty and morality that allows the former to be a symbol of the latter, the claim of judgments of beauty to universal validity as based on an appeal to the moral 'ought', and the relationship between beauty and moral ideas.¹

The common motivation of all these accounts is to present the essentiality of aesthetic judgments in grounding the possibility of morality for human beings, in accordance with Kant's famous reference to the faculty of judgment as bridging "the great chasm" between the concept of nature and that of freedom.²

1. Prominent accounts of the connection between beauty and morality include Allison 2001; Chignell 2007; Crawford 1974; Cohen 1982; Guyer 1979 and 2003; Henrich 1992; Nuzzo 2008; Rogerson 2004. More recent accounts include: Matherne 2019; Savile 2021; Tinguely 2017.

2. See *CJ* 5: 195.



Against this ample background, the present paper endeavors to draw attention to a somewhat overlooked convergence between beauty and morality.³ The aim of this paper is to elucidate Kant's doctrine of the *moral meaning* that natural beauty supposedly carries for us in the act of aesthetic judgment.⁴ By "moral meaning" I refer to Kant's description of natural beauty as containing a "language that nature brings to us and that seems to have a *higher* meaning".⁵ What "meaning" would this be? I suggest that the key to this meaning is the *expressive* nature of beauty. "Expression" is to be analyzed in terms of the way in which nature, according to Kant, "figuratively *speaks* to us in its beautiful forms" when we experience it aesthetically.⁶ Several questions arise here: What precisely does nature express in its beautiful forms? Does the beauty of nature possess semantic power, or is it merely our interpretation of nature? If nature does indeed speak to us, how do we know how to respond to that expression in a manner that aligns with the meaning embodied in its beautiful forms?

Kant does not provide a direct response to these questions. Instead, he leaves the ambiguity around them through his use of enigmatic terminology of 'cyphers', 'hints', 'traces' and 'signs' in regard to our aesthetic experience of nature and its meaning.

This paper proposes to examine these questions through the language and response embodied in the act of aesthetic judgment of natural beauty. On the one hand, the paper examines the *expressive* nature of the figurative language of natural beauty, which is composed of 'cyphers', 'hints', 'traces' and 'signs'. On the other hand, it considers the manner in which we must be attentive to these hints and signs and recognize them in order to provide those beautiful forms a *response* by aesthetically judging them. This peculiar dialogue, I argue, has a moral meaning.

I propose that there is a triadic connection between 1) the figurative language of natural beauty, 2) the expression of the judgment of natural beauty, and 3) its "higher" moral meaning.⁷ This connection is made most clearly by the intellectual interest that a person of a "good moral disposition" takes in the presentation of beauty in nature.⁸

3. The objective is to delineate a more specific connection between aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty and moral character. As will be demonstrated throughout this paper, my proposed account addresses the majority of the aforementioned accounts.

4. There are several accounts that take the meaning of aesthetic judgment to be justified by epistemological or normative considerations alone, without any reference to morality, e.g., Crawford 1970; Kneller 1986; Rind 2000. Against these accounts, I argue that while the first sections of the *CJ* are indeed primarily epistemological (see especially §§1-22 and §§30-40), the moral meaning of aesthetic judgment is to be found in the later sections of the "Deduction" and the "Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment" (§§41-60), which proceed in terms of the relation of aesthetics to morality.

5. *CJ* 5: 302. Emphasis mine.

6. *CJ* 5: 301.

7. *CJ* 5: 302.

8. *CJ* 5: 301.

I find textual support for my proposed line of argument in the “Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments”, or rather in what is taken to be its justification.⁹ In particular, I focus on §42, “On the Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful”, where I take Kant to be drawing precisely on the moral significance that natural beauty has for human beings as moral agents, through the intellectual interest that we take in nature’s beautiful forms. In what follows, I suggest that the intellectual interest in the beautiful plays a more significant role in aesthetic judgment than merely explaining why taste can demand a universal agreement, and thus I point to its ramifications beyond the mere justification of the deduction of aesthetic judgments.

I proceed as follows: I begin by asking what is being *expressed* in judgements of natural beauty? I examine first, what kind of ‘expression’ is nature making when it “figuratively speaks to us in its beautiful forms”?¹⁰ And second, how is the same meaning that nature expresses articulated into the form of the expression of aesthetic judgment: “this X is beautiful”?

Then I draw a connection between what is *expressed* in the judgment of natural beauty and its moral meaning through the *intellectual* interest we have in it, as Kant claims in §42.¹¹

Finally, I suggest that the intellectual interest in the beautiful is essentially bound up with our interpretation of nature’s presentation of its beautiful forms as an aesthetic expression of nature’s subjective formal purposiveness. That is, a form of purposiveness in which nature seems to conform to our moral way of thinking. In doing so, I will try to answer the question of whether Kant provides any reason to think that we are justified in interpreting nature’s presentation of beauty in this particular way, and on that basis, in taking an immediate interest in it.

9. The “Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments” (§§30-38) consists in our “peculiar ability” (*sonderbares Vermögen*) (*CJ* 5: 281), to make universally valid judgments about particulars on the basis of feeling alone, and without recourse to concepts. Its justification lies in Kant’s assertion that this peculiar ability makes certain demands on us, i.e., on how we aesthetically appreciate nature. Kant argues that it would be easier for us to grasp the deduction of judgments of taste if we saw that the demand for universal agreement expressed in these judgments “must already carry with it an *interest* for us”, *CJ* 5: 296. According to Kant, this interest helps us to understand why we demand that others experience the pleasure *we* take in beauty. This understanding is based on the affinity between beauty and morality. That is, similar to our understanding that reason has an interest in the morally good, and that this interest is in some way bound up with our duty to be moral, our interest in the beautiful will be bound up with a kind of *duty* to be attuned to beauty by being sensitive to its hints. *CJ* 5: 296, 300.

10. *CJ* 5: 301.

11. In §42 Kant argues that an immediate interest in the beauty of nature is always a mark or sign of a good moral disposition. And that nature must manifest in itself at least a “trace or give a hint” (*CJ* 5: 299) that it provides a ground for our assumption of a harmony between nature’s products and reason’s moral interest in realizing its ideas in nature. By emphasizing elusive terms such as ‘mark’, ‘trace’, and ‘hint’ in Kant’s discussion of natural beauty, I further emphasize Kant’s attempt to bring out the implicit expressive nature of beauty as well as its moral significance.

2. EXPRESSIVE BEAUTY

The expression of the judgment “This X is beautiful” is arguably the most identified with Kant’s aesthetics. Nevertheless, the precise meaning of this expression remains unclear.¹² When I judge a rose to be beautiful, I am predicating something about the object before me. Yet, being beautiful is not a fact about the rose in the same way that having four thorns is a fact about the rose. This means that when we judge something to be beautiful, we are not trying to understand beauty in the conventional sense of expressing some content about the object. The idea is that the very *act of articulating* our experience of beauty, i.e., the utterance “this rose is beautiful”, is in itself an expression of beauty.¹³

There are two points here that need to be clarified: one refers to what exactly nature presents to us when we experience it aesthetically. The other refers to our aesthetic response to this presentation in nature which is embodied in the judgment “this X is beautiful”. These two points complement each other and together constitute what I call *the expression of the beautiful*.¹⁴

2.1 Nature Speaks

In §42, Kant claims that nature *speaks* to us “figuratively” in its beautiful forms.¹⁵ On the basis of Kant’s careful choice of words, it can be assumed that this description is not merely a figure of speech, but a genuine attempt on Kant’s part to find *in* nature the possibility of perceiving the *meaning* of beauty in accordance with the way in which human beings aesthetically respond to it. The obvious question, then, is what exactly does nature express in its beautiful forms? The answer lies in the meaning of the unique form of the beautiful, which Kant refers to as *subjective formal purposiveness*.¹⁶

In §23 Kant states that natural beauty “carries with it a purposiveness in its form, through which the object seems as it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment, and thus constitutes an object of satisfaction in itself”.¹⁷ This means that because we have an actual experience of natural beauty, our judgment must take as its own principle the view that nature sets up its empirical laws for the purpose of judgment. In other words, it is as if natural beauty were designed to suit our own cognitive faculties.¹⁸

12. It clearly expresses a certain kind of pleasure we feel in relation to the object as I discuss in 1.2. Nevertheless, the meaning of the expression remains opaque, as it does not provide any information about the object.

13. Cf. Chaouli 2017: 20; Friedlander 2015: 32.

14. I discuss the moral dimension of that expression in Part 2.

15. *CJ* 5: 301. See original text: “die Natur in ihren schönen Formen figürlich zu uns spricht”.

16. I have scrupulously examined the principle of subjective formal purposiveness of nature in my Godess-Riccitelli 2020. In the present paper I focus on its complementary aspect, namely, the nature of the expression “this X is beautiful”.

17. *CJ* 5: 245.

18. Cf. Förster 2002: 10.

Kant's basic idea is that although "beauty" itself is not actually in nature, we judge certain objects that we encounter in aesthetic experience as beautiful, *as if* nature itself is purposive to our cognitive faculties. This means, that when nature "*speaks* to us figuratively in its beautiful forms" it *actually* expresses its own subjective purposiveness, i.e., its purposiveness with respect to our faculties. It follows, that the principle of subjective formal purposiveness indicates a connection between nature's form and our own, insofar as nature is now perceived as compatible with our capacity to judge it and thus perceive it.

It turns out that the compatibility between the beautiful forms in nature and our cognitive powers is accidental in the sense that it does not occur intentionally, as Kant claims in the introduction: "one cannot determine *a priori* which object will or will not suit taste, one must *try it out*".¹⁹ From the perspective of the aesthetic judge, in my experience of the subjective formal purposiveness of nature, my own abilities are revealed, namely my capacity to evaluate and judge nature.

Before proceeding to the moral implications of this correspondence, it is necessary to consider the complementary aspect of the figurative expression of nature. This entails an account of aesthetic expression from the point of view of the aesthetic judge when she asserts that something is beautiful in response to nature's presentation of its own purposiveness. Moreover, it is also necessary to clarify the manner in which this expression of the judgment of beauty has meaning for us when it is based on a *feeling* rather than a predicate.

2.2 Predictive Pleasure

The first point to note for our purposes is that judgments of beauty predicate their object in a non-determining manner. In contrast to determinate judgments, which contribute to our knowledge of objects of experience, Kant emphasizes that reflective judgments contribute *nothing* to our empirical knowledge.²⁰ Thus, when I judge that "this rose is beautiful", I do not add any information about the quality of the rose in terms of its objectively determined properties. However, the fact that I am not determining anything *objective* about the rose, does not mean that aesthetic judgment has no part whatsoever in determination. The point is that aesthetic judgment does not determine the object, as in the judgment "this rose has four thorns", but rather the *subject* and its feeling.²¹

This peculiar determination of the subject and its feeling means, for Kant, that instead of standing for an object, "the predicate [of beauty in aesthetic judgment] expresses the relation of the representation *immediately to the feeling of pleasure* and not to the faculty of cognition".²² Stated differently, although in judgments of beauty, "the

19. *CJ* 5: 191. Emphasis mine.

20. See *CJ* 20: 222; 5: 169; 5: 194.

21. See *CJ* 20: 223.

22. *CJ* 20: 224. Emphasis mine.

predicate of the judgment *cannot be* a predicate of an *object*,²³ it can be predicated *aesthetically* in the literal sense. That is, it is immediately connected with the feeling of pleasure. The question thus arises as to how a mere feeling can be the predicate of a judgment.²⁴

Unlike judgments of what Kant refers to as “the agreeable”, which also entail a feeling of pleasure by which we express a mere liking for the object, judgments of beauty are not merely expressions of personal or private feeling at a given time. Rather, as Kant states, “[to] say ‘This flower is beautiful’ is the same as merely to ascribe its own claim to *everyone’s* satisfaction”.²⁵ Put another way, the feeling of pleasure expressed by judgments of beauty is attributed to everyone.

If we think of the feeling of pleasure in terms of a predicate,²⁶ we may say that the difference between the two judgments lies in the kind of connection that is predicated between the subject and the object. Judgments of agreeableness relate an object to a particular subject at a particular moment, whereas in judgments of beauty the object is related to the feeling of the subject, which in principle can (and should) be shared by everyone at all times.²⁷ This means that the judgment “this rose is beautiful” consists

23. “[B]ecause it does not belong to the faculty of cognition at all”, *CJ* 20: 224. Emphasis mine. See also *CJ* 5: 286: “The judgment of taste differs from logical judgment in that the latter subsumes a representation under concepts of the object, but the former does not subsume under a concept at all, for otherwise the necessary universal approval could be compelled by proofs”.

24. Or as Kant puts it in the “Deduction”: “How is a judgment possible which, merely from one’s own feeling of pleasure in an object, independent of its concept, judges this pleasure, as attached to the representation of the same object in every other subject, a priori?”, *CJ* 5: 288.

25. *CJ* 5: 282. Emphasis mine. Translation modified, see original text: “Sagen: diese Blume ist schön, heißt eben so viel, als ihren eigenen Anspruch auf jedermanns Wohlgefallen ihr nur nachsagen”.

26. As Kant himself does in §36 when he presents contrary to a perception of an object that “can be immediately combined with the concept of an object in general, for which the former contains the empirical predicates, for a judgment of cognition, and a judgment of experience can thereby be produced”, a perception that can “be immediately combined with a feeling of pleasure (or displeasure) and a *satisfaction that accompanies the representation of the object and serves it instead of a predicate*, and an aesthetic judgment, which is not a cognitive judgment, can thus arise”, *CJ* 5: 288. My emphasis.

27. See *CJ* 5: 237: “whoever declares something to be beautiful wishes that everyone should [*solle*] approve of the object in question and similarly declare it to be beautiful”. Kant claims that when we make judgments of beauty, we not only expect the agreement of other people, but to a some extent also consider it “as if it were a duty”, *CJ* 5: 296. There are three main interpretive approaches that have addressed Kant’s description of general agreement in terms of “demand”. The first holds that the demand should be understood as a rational expectation or ideal prediction: someone who judges an object to be beautiful is claiming that, under ideal circumstances, everyone *will* share his or her pleasure. See, for example, Guyer 1979; Savile 1987; Chignell 2007. The second emphasizes the normative language that Kant uses to describe the demand for general agreement so that the “should” is to be understood as rational, and more specifically moral, rather than merely predictive. See, for example, Rogerson 1982. The third approach, on the other hand, takes the “should”, and the corresponding claim to agreement to be non-moral, but still genuinely normative as opposed to predictive. See, for example, Ginsborg 2016; Rind 2002; Kalar 2006. I support the interpretive positions of the

not only in having a certain response to the rose in question, but also in taking one's response to that rose to be valid for all judging subjects.²⁸

What is claimed (*a priori*) in a judgment of beauty, then, is Kant's familiar 'universal validity' of the judging subject's liking for an object.²⁹ The expression of beauty, thus, must be valid by virtue of something that is universal and at the same time aesthetic. It follows that what is being *expressed* in judgments of beauty is a feeling of pleasure, which is universally communicable because it serves "instead of a predicate", as Kant puts it.³⁰ Its significance lies in the fact that the pleasure one feels in the presence of the beautiful is not a feeling that merely accompanies the judgment but can also be seen as its determining ground.³¹

Kant characterizes the peculiar nature of the pleasure we take in beauty as 'disinterested pleasure'. For Kant, a disinterested pleasure is a pleasure that is not connected with desire (*begehren*) in the sense that it is neither based on desire, nor does it produce desire. Such a pleasure can thus satisfy the claim to universal validity, since it involves *no* sensuous, cognitive, or moral interest in the empirical object. See:

The agreeable and the good both have a relation to the faculty of desire, and to this extent bring satisfaction with them, the former a pathologically conditioned satisfaction (through stimuli, *stimulos*), the latter a pure practical satisfaction, which is determined not merely through the representation of the object but at the same time through the represented connection of the subject with the existence of the object. [...] Hence the judgment of taste is [...] a judgment that, *indifferent* with regard to the existence of an object, merely connects its constitution together with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure.³²

If 'disinterest' is defined as a complete indifference to the object, how are we to explain the nature of the connection between the empirical object and the subject's disinterested pleasure in it? A clear understanding of this relationship is essential if we are to explain how judgments of beauty refer to natural objects in the first place, and, perhaps more importantly for our present purpose, how we derive their moral meaning from nature itself.

first and second approaches by arguing that the moral terminology Kant uses is an integral part of the predicate of the beautiful. To understand this claim, one must examine the *indirect* connection between beauty and morality. Kant describes the possible basis for this connection in §§41-42. I expand on this in Part 2 of this paper.

28. See *CJ* 5: 289: "It is an empirical judgment that I perceive and judged an object with pleasure. But it is an *a priori* judgment that I find it beautiful, i.e., that I may require that satisfaction of everyone as necessary".

29. See: *CJ* 5: 190.

30. *CJ* 5: 288.

31. See: "a perception can also be immediately combined with a feeling of pleasure (or displeasure) and a satisfaction that accompanies the representation of the object and serves it instead of a predicate, and an aesthetic judgment, which is not a cognitive judgment, *can thus arise*", *CJ* 5: 288. My emphasis.

32. *CJ* 5: 209. My emphasis.

Rather than focusing on the “Analytic of the Beautiful”, which is the conventional approach to analyzing the disinterested pleasure we take in the beautiful, I would like to direct attention to the one aspect in which disinterested pleasure does not signify total indifference to the beautiful object. It refers to the intellectual interest we take in the beautiful object, which helps us to understand why we demand that others experience the pleasure *we* take in the beautiful.

3. DISINTERESTED INTEREST

As noted above, Kant contrasts the pleasure involved in judgments of beauty with the pleasure involved in judgments of the agreeable and judgments of the good. One of the main differences is that in the latter two, the pleasure is in one way or another bound up with our representation of the *existence* of the object,³³ whereas aesthetic judgment is described as “merely *contemplative*, i.e., a judgment that [is] indifferent with regard to the existence of an object”, thus the feeling of pleasure involved in it is disinterested.³⁴

Later in the text, however, in §42, Kant argues that we *can* find a basis for an interest in the beauty of nature which is “an immediate [*unmittelbar*] and certainly intellectual interest”.³⁵ Kant states that such intellectual interest in natural beauty takes place insofar as we take the natural *existence* of beautiful objects, which serve our basic cognitive purpose, as a kind of evidence that nature is also hospitable to the realization of our ultimate moral purpose.

Before looking more closely at this argument and at the broader implications it has for the *moral* meaning of the beautiful, it is necessary to briefly discuss Kant’s doctrine of “interest” and the notion of “existence” referred to here.

At the beginning of *CJ*, Kant describes interest (*Interesse*) in general as “the satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the *existence* [*der Existenz*] of an object”.³⁶ Further on in §41 he repeats this description with a slight modification that emphasizes its aesthetic character by saying that all interest consists in “*pleasure in its* [the object’s] *existence*”.³⁷ An interest, according to Kant, can be considered either immediately (*unmittelbar*), when something is desired for its own sake – in which case the interest appeals to the senses,³⁸ or mediately (*mittelbar*), when something is desired for its usefulness for some other end – this interest usually refers to the good (in the sense of something useful) and is referred by reason to ends.³⁹ Against the background

33. See *CJ* 5: 209: “Not merely the object but also its existence please”.

34. *CJ* 5: 209.

35. *CJ* 5: 299.

36. *CJ* 5: 204. Emphasis mine. Later we shall see that Kant sometimes uses different words for existence in the context of beauty. Thus, while we are being *indifferent* to the *Existenz* of the beautiful object in the empirical sense, we take an immediate intellectual interest in its *Dasein* which relates to the disinterested pleasure we take in it. Cf. *CJ* 5: 299.

37. *CJ* 5: 296.

38. Kant calls this immediate interest ‘pathological’ (§5) and identifies it with the agreeable. See *CJ* 5: 208.

39. See *ibid.*

of this distinction, Kant describes two things in which we take an interest that is both immediate *and* universalizable: the morally good and the beautiful.⁴⁰

In the moral nexus, Kant describes interest as “that through which reason becomes practical, i.e., becomes a cause determining the will. Hence one says only of a rational being that it takes an interest in something”.⁴¹ It follows, that to take “an interest in something” (in a general sense and not merely in a moral sense) is to *rationally* desire its existence.⁴² Thus, when Kant describes judgments of natural beauty as being “*indifferent* with regard to the existence of an object”⁴³ he is referring to both rational desire and empirical inclination to possess the object due to some pleasurable stimulus. Stated differently, in judging natural beauty we are interested in the representation of the object *regardless* of whether its existence would be useful to us (not even in a practical-moral sense), and *regardless* of whether or not we are inclined to respond to the sensuous pleasure we derive from its existence. It can be argued that the kind of interest we have in beautiful objects is the result of our disinterest in them in all other respects.⁴⁴

In what follows, I take a closer look at the peculiar interest we take in the beautiful in nature, as it is described in §42. My aim is to demonstrate that the connection between what is *expressed* in the judgment of natural beauty, i.e., disinterested pleasure, and its moral meaning is best illustrated by the intellectual interest we take in it.

3.1 On the Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful

After characterizing aesthetic judgments of beauty as devoid of *all* interest, Kant states that “to say that it [the representation of an object] is *beautiful* [...] what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object”.⁴⁵ As previously discussed, the direct implication of this characterization is that, according to Kant, our *pleasure* in the object of the judgment of beauty is not bound up with the desire for the object’s existence. This is what it means to say that we take a disinterested pleasure in the beautiful.

“But” Kant continues to argue in §41, “from that it does not follow that after it has been given as a pure aesthetic judgment no interest can be combined with it”. And he immediately clarifies:

40. See *CJ* 5: 208-209. ‘Immediate’ here means that the interest is not mediated by a purpose of communication.

41. *G* 4: 459.

42. In the aesthetic sense, to take an interest in something is to *feel* the need for its existence, where this feeling is itself determined by reason. Cf. Kneller 2007: 61. This definition does not exclude empirical desire. Indeed, in the *CJ*, Kant defines “interest” to include a desire for the existence of something that is determined directly by the sensation that arouses a desire for the object rather than by reason (e.g., *CJ* 5: 207-208).

43. *CJ* 5: 209.

44. I am not suggesting that aesthetic disinterest is a form of interest in itself (cf. Crawford 1974; Kneller 1986), but rather that it arises against the background of the absence of other kinds of interest in the existence of natural beautiful objects.

45. *CJ* 5: 205.

This combination, however, can always be only *indirect*, i.e., taste must first of all be represented as combined with something else in order to be able to connect with the satisfaction of mere reflection on an object a further *pleasure* in its *existence* (as that in which all interest consists).⁴⁶

Kant explains here that the judgment of beauty does not produce an interest *of itself*, so to speak, but can only do so *indirectly*,⁴⁷ that is, when it is “combined with something else”.⁴⁸ This means that if judgments of beauty are themselves disinterested (in the sense discussed above), then any connection between the initial disinterested pleasure we feel in pure aesthetic judgment, which is merely contemplative, and a further pleasure in the existence of the beautiful object must *necessarily*⁴⁹ be an indirect connection, namely, mediated by some third element.

Kant offers two possibilities for this third element: it can be “something empirical” or “something intellectual”. The first is described as “an *inclination* that is characteristic of human nature” the second as “a property of the will of being determinable *a priori* through reason”.⁵⁰ Since Kant characterizes both options as involving interest, both can, in principle, serve as the mediating element between disinterested pleasure in the beauty of nature and pleasure in its existence.

Kant links the empirical interest we have in beauty to an interest in the universal communicability of our pleasure in the existence of the beautiful object, which is based on an (assumed) inclination to society as something *inherent* in human nature.⁵¹ Since the empirical interest is described as a mere inclination, albeit a deeply rooted one, it is easily confused with other social inclinations and desires, and thus could provide “only a very ambiguous transition from the agreeable to the good”,⁵² as Kant put it. Thus, empirical interest is incapable of establishing an *a priori* connection between disinterested pleasure and pleasure in the existence of the beautiful object.⁵³

Put differently, Kant’s main concern is the kind of interest that can be brought into a *universal* and *necessary* connection with the disinterested pleasure we take in the beautiful. The reason for this is that only such a connection (i.e., universal and necessary) would be capable of generating a *duty* to also take an interest in the existence of the beautiful object, and, as a result, to develop the aesthetic human capacity to appreciate its beauty. The kind of interest Kant has in mind is the second option he raises, i.e. *something intellectual*, which he elaborates on in section §42.

46. *CJ* 5: 296. My emphasis.

47. *Ibid.*: “Diese Verbindung wird aber immer nur indirect sein können”.

48. *Ibid.*

49. See *CJ* 5: 299. Kant’s position seems to be that not only is the pleasure in judgments of beauty *can* be connected with an intellectual interest in the existence of beautiful objects, but that it *must* be inextricably linked to this intellectual interest, as he further claims in §42. I will further discuss this point below.

50. *CJ* 5: 296.

51. *CJ* 5: 297.

52. *CJ* 5: 298.

53. For a helpful discussion of the role of the empirical interest in beauty, see Allison 2001: Chapter 4; Baxley 2005: 34-35; Guyer 1979: Chapter 5.

It is here in §42 that we find the link Kant draws between the interest in natural beauty and the moral interest.⁵⁴ Kant asserts that

[T]o take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature (not merely to have taste in order to judge it) is always a mark of a good soul, and that if this interest is habitual, it at least indicates a disposition of the mind that is favorable to the moral feeling, if it is gladly combined with the *viewing of nature*.⁵⁵

When Kant asserts that an immediate (i.e., non-instrumental) interest in the beautiful “is always a mark of a good soul”, he does not imply that interest in beauty, even if it is an a priori interest, is identical to moral interest.⁵⁶ Rather, their affinity lies in the fact that both moral judgment and aesthetic judgment are disinterested, that is, neither judgment is *grounded* in interest.

Although not grounded in interest, we know from Kant’s moral theory that moral judgment *gives rise* to an interest that we call ‘moral feeling’, which is an interest in acting according to the moral law.⁵⁷ This moral interest in the moral law is also a practical interest of reason in doing what the moral law commands. This is to bring about (or promote the realization of) its ‘object’ (i.e., the highest good). In other words, to paraphrase Kant, reason has an interest, in the “objective reality” of its moral ideas.⁵⁸

Kant returns to this issue in §42, arguing that when we contemplate the beauty in nature, we cannot be indifferent to the fact that nature “show some trace or give a sign [*Wink*] that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our [disinterested] satisfaction”.⁵⁹ Kant insinuates here that natural beauty gives us indications that it is ordered in a way that can contribute to our moral interest (our striving to realize the highest good), so that we cannot be indifferent to it. “We thus”, Kant continues, “have cause at least to suspect a predisposition to a good moral disposition in one who is immediately interested in the beauty of nature”.⁶⁰ Before delving into the relationship between immediate interest in natural beauty and moral disposition in more detail (3.2), let me briefly delineate the pivotal distinction between aesthetic and moral interest.

Kant articulates this difference by saying that the intellectual interest in the beautiful is a “free interest”, while the intellectual interest in the moral is “grounded on

54. Kant begins his discussion of the morally based (intellectual) interest in the beautiful in §42 by referring to the opposite interest we take in artistic vs. natural beauty, arguing that an *intellectual* interest can only be taken in regard to beauty in *nature*, see *CJ* 5: 298.

55. *CJ* 5: 299.

56. See: “the feeling for the beautiful is [...] specifically different from the moral feeling”, *CJ* 5: 298.

57. Kant here refers to the feeling of respect for the moral law, and says that “it produces an interest in compliance with the law which we call moral interest – as, indeed, the capacity to take such an interest in the law (or respect for the moral law itself) is, properly, moral feeling”, *CPR* 5: 80.

58. *CJ* 5: 300.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *CJ* 5: 300-301.

objective laws”.⁶¹ Indeed, this difference is precisely why Kant can call our interest in the beautiful an *immediate* interest, since we care about the existence of the object simply because of what it is, not because of its instrumental connection to our own moral interests, as Kant puts it:

One will perhaps say that this is also the case if an object of nature interests through its beauty only insofar as a moral idea is associated with it; but it is not this, but rather the quality inherent in it by means of which it qualifies for such an association, which thus pertains to it internally, that interests immediately.⁶²

Kant states here that what we are immediately interested in is the *quality* of beauty that qualifies for such a connection between our interest in the natural beautiful object and our moral interest, *in itself*, which therefore belongs to it intrinsically.

This can be explained as follows, since the immediate interest is an intellectual one, i.e., non-empirical, Kant reminds us that it is an interest in the *forms* of beauty in nature and not in the many sensory charms (*Reize*) that nature tends to associate with those beautiful forms.⁶³ Kant illustrates this by telling us to consider a person alone in nature, contemplating on some of its beautiful forms, with no interest in communicating his or her observations to others. This person takes pleasure in the *existence* of these beautiful objects in nature regardless of any benefit or harm they might bring to them.⁶⁴ In other words, their interest in natural beauty is immediate because the pleasure they take in its existence is independent of any purpose it might serve for them. This means that to take an immediate, intellectual interest in natural beauty is to value it for its own sake, independent of any empirical inclination it might satisfy.

But this explanation is not complete. Its complement lies in the idea that beauty must be produced by *nature itself*. Kant claims that “[t]he thought that nature has produced that beauty must accompany the intuition and reflection, and on this alone is grounded the immediate interest that one takes in it”.⁶⁵ Kant explains this claim with another illustration. He says that if we were to deceive the person from the first example by planting artificial flowers in her garden or placing artistically carved birds on her trees, the immediate interest she had previously taken in the beautiful would disappear at the moment she realized she had been deceived. This example shows that the immediate, intellectual interest one takes in natural beauty must be based solely on the thought that nature has produced that beauty. “Otherwise”, Kant continues, “there remains either a mere judgment of taste without any interest, or only one combined

61. *CJ* 5: 301.

62. *CJ* 5: 301-302.

63. See: “It must be remembered, however, that I mean here strictly the beautiful forms of nature, and by contrast set to one side the charms that it usually combines so abundantly with them, since the interest in them is to be sure also immediate, but nevertheless empirical”, *CJ* 5: 299.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

with a mediate interest, namely one related to society: which latter affords no sure indications of a morally good way of thinking”.⁶⁶

Both scenarios are undesirable: “a mere judgment of taste without any interest” removes from the table the immediate interest in the *existence* of the beautiful object, leaving us with a pure aesthetic judgment with no way of justifying it as universally valid. And a judgment of taste that *is* linked to a mediate interest cannot, as we have seen, guarantee any connection to morality.

The two explanations above can be summarized as follows, the reason why we are able to desire the natural object for its own sake, has to do with our intellectual and moral need to find *in nature* “*at least some trace or [...] a sign [Wink]*”⁶⁷ that our moral actions are not in vain.

3.2 Interest in Nature's Hints

As discussed earlier, Kant presents the intellectual interest in beauty as being an *immediate interest*. This means, based on Kant's own examples, that we value natural beauty for its own sake and not for any other purpose it may serve us.⁶⁸ To put it another way, according to Kant, the beauty of nature is pleasing to us independently of *all* interests, including moral interests. It is this abstraction of beauty from all human interests that subsequently makes it possible to associate beauty with morality. Kant explains this in a somewhat puzzling way:

But since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling) also have objective reality, i.e., that *nature should at least show some trace or give a sign [Wink]*⁶⁹ that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize *a priori* as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs), reason must take an interest in every manifestation in nature of a correspondence similar to this; consequently the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of *nature* without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it. Because of this affinity, however, this interest is moral.⁷⁰

The idea is that natural beauty arouses an immediate interest in us because there is an intimate “affinity” (*Verwandtschaft*) between our moral interest in the realization of our moral ends and the interest we take in any traces, signs or hints of nature's harmony with those ends. Since nature's beautiful forms gives us a hint of this harmony, through the idea of subjective formal purposiveness that underlies this assumption,⁷¹ we take pleasure in their existence. In other words, similar to the pleasure we feel in

66. *Ibid.*

67. *CJ* 5: 300. My emphasis.

68. See *CJ* 5: 299.

69. My emphasis.

70. *CJ* 5: 300.

71. As previously stated in 2.1 of this paper.

the fact that nature in aesthetic experience is amenable to our cognitive ends and seems to satisfy our intellectual needs, so too any hint, trace, or sign that nature is amenable to the realization of our practical ends and is in accord with our moral intentions is significant to us and will please us.

This means that when we take an intellectual interest in natural beauty we experience pleasure not only in the form of natural beautiful objects, but also in their very existence, even though “no sensory charm has a part in this and [we do] not combine any sort of end with it”.⁷² In this manner, we feel as if nature itself is giving us hints of its possible correspondence with “the ultimate end of our existence”, namely, our moral vocation.⁷³ “We thus have cause at least to suspect”, Kant goes on to argue, “a predisposition to a good moral disposition in one who is immediately interested in the beauty of nature”.⁷⁴ This is a somewhat more careful way of arguing “that to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature [...] is always a mark of a good soul”.⁷⁵

The final step in establishing the view that we have an intellectually and morally grounded interest in natural beauty is to consider certain aspects of Kant’s practical philosophy that underpin it. In particular, it must take into account the substantive idea that the moral law dictates the pursuit of certain ends, and that the impact of the moral law depends on whether these ends are realizable.⁷⁶ In other words, our overarching task as practical rational agents, in Kant’s account, is not only *to have* various moral ends, as a definition of pure practical reason, but also to strive to realize (or promote the realization of) them. In this context, the reference is to the final end of pure practical reason, which is the “highest good”.⁷⁷ Consequently, it can be posited that our moral disposition is imbued with an “immediate interest” in beauty.

The rationale is that if the highest good is to be realized in the world of nature, nature must be constituted in such a way as to make possible the realization of this moral order. That is to say, nature must manifest in itself at least “a trace or give a sign” that it provides a ground for our assumption of a harmony between the products

72. *CJ* 5: 299.

73. See the full quote: “[N]ature [...] in its beautiful products shows itself as art, not merely by chance, but as it were intentionally, in accordance with a lawful arrangement and as purposiveness without an end, which latter, since we never encounter it externally, we naturally seek within ourselves, and indeed in that which constitutes the ultimate end of our existence, namely the moral vocation”, *CJ* 5: 301.

74. *CJ* 5: 300-301.

75. *CJ* 5: 299.

76. There are several commentators who argue that the effect of the moral law cannot depend on whether moral ends are possible or not see, e.g., Beck 1960: 242-245. I challenge this view in my Godess-Riccitelli 2019.

77. Towards the end of the *CJ* (§84) Kant describes the highest good as the final end of *nature*. In order to be an end of nature, men in their moral capacity must be conceived of as *existing* in nature. This means that it cannot be merely human virtue that is the end of nature, but a *natural* condition, namely human happiness. The connection between the significance of the highest good as the final end of nature and our aesthetic experience of natural beauty I draw in my Godess-Riccitelli 2019.

of nature and our disinterested aesthetic feeling of pleasure in its forms. By attending to those “traces and signs” and by recognizing the affinity between our moral and aesthetic interests, we can discern our attempt to *interpret* nature through ascribing a “higher [moral] meaning” to the way nature “speaks” to us in its beautiful forms, as Kant put it.⁷⁸

In conclusion, I endeavor to ascertain whether Kant provides any rationale for the assumption that we are justified in interpreting nature’s presentation of beauty in this specific manner and, consequently, in taking an immediate interest in it.

4. CONCLUSION: THE AESTHETIC AND MORAL PURPOSIVENESS OF NATURE

As we delve deeper into section §42 it seems to draw a clear outline for the argument supporting the account of the connection between the intellectual interest in natural beauty and its *moral* significance. At one point, Kant seems to provide a kind of analogy between aesthetic and moral judgments and their corresponding capacities by saying that

We have a faculty of merely aesthetic judgment, for judging of forms without concepts and for finding a satisfaction in the mere judging of them which we at the same time make into a rule for everyone without this judgment being grounded on an interest or producing one. – Alternatively, we also have a faculty of intellectual judgment, for determining a priori for mere forms of practical maxims (insofar as they qualify in themselves for universal legislation) a satisfaction which we make into a law for everyone without our judgment being grounded on any interest, although it produces one. The pleasure or displeasure in the first judgment is called that of taste, in the second that of moral feeling.⁷⁹

To formulate this paragraph in the form of an analogy,⁸⁰ the first parallel would be 1) aesthetic judgments are concerned with the *forms* of objects, just as moral judgments are concerned with the forms of practical maxims. The second would be that 2) both judgments involve a satisfaction that is made into a rule or law for everyone. The third parallel would be that 3) neither of the pleasures involved in the two judgments – the feeling of pleasure in the case of aesthetic judgments and the moral feeling in the case of moral judgments – is based on an antecedent interest, that is, either in the existence of the object of aesthetic evaluation or in the existence of an end that the agent seeks to realize through her action.

78. *CJ* 5: 302.

79. *CJ* 5: 300.

80. I follow Baxley’s 2005: 37 helpful division of this paragraph. In contrast to Baxley’s analysis, I argue elsewhere that when we experience the beauty of nature we are not yet engaged in analogical representation. For, there is a difference between *having* an intellectual interest in the beautiful and *articulating* it. While the articulation of the intellectual interest requires culture and the perfection of one’s abilities, *having* an intellectual interest is integral to the very fact of practical reason. See, Godess-Riccitelli 2020: 345-346.

Despite these compelling similarities, there is one point where aesthetic and moral judgments differ, as discussed above (3.1). For reason has an interest in the “objective reality” of its moral ideas.⁸¹ Following Kant in §42, I have shown that insofar as we take the natural existence of beautiful objects, which serve our basic cognitive purpose, as an indication that nature is also hospitable to the realization of our ultimate moral purposes, we can find a ground for the moral significance of the beautiful.⁸² This means, that insofar as we are truly committed to our moral ends, we must assume that they are (at least in principle) realizable, and this involves interpreting nature in a certain way. Namely, as compatible with the realization of our final moral end, which embodies all other moral ends and is thus referred to as our moral vocation, i.e., the highest good.⁸³

With this in mind, we can now sketch the crucial claim that Kant makes in §42 as follows: since we have a moral interest in realizing the highest good in the natural world, and since we must assume that nature and its lawful order are amenable to our moral vocation as a condition for its realizability, we have an intellectual interest in any sign, hint, or trace that nature gives us that it is in harmony with our final moral end. Moreover, since natural beauty apparently gives us a hint of this alleged harmony, i.e., that nature is hospitable to the realization of our final moral vocation, it satisfies both intellectual interest and the disinterested pleasure in its existence.⁸⁴

The main critical argument that emerges from this is that rational agents whose way of thinking is morally oriented toward the highest good, will inevitably interpret natural beauty in the particular way mentioned above, and for this reason will take an immediate intellectual interest in it. The obvious question is whether Kant gives us any reason to think that we are justified in interpreting nature’s presentation of beauty in this particular way? Kant himself raises this concern by saying that some people might

81. *CJ* 5: 300.

82. This moral significance, taken from a broader perspective on the *CJ*, could be further related to Kant’s well-known description in the introduction to the *CJ* of the ‘incalculable gulf’ between the realm of the concept of nature and the realm of the concept of freedom. This ‘incalculable gulf’ seems to imply that the moral ends that we should strive to realize in the world of nature, culminating in the highest good, may not have any effect in nature. But, Kant insists that “the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world; and nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom”, *CJ* 5: 176.

83. In the final sections of the *CJ* Kant makes the same claim, only this time from the ‘side’ of nature. He argues that what begins as a purely scientific experience, the observation of organisms in nature, inevitably leads us to the idea of a purpose for nature that can only be provided by morality. I elaborate on this in my Godess-Riccitelli 2020: 349-353.

84. This is demonstrated by the principle of subjective formal purposiveness of nature, as I discussed in 2.1. The purposiveness of nature is not a constitutive principle about what nature really is apart from our cognitive aims, but Kant describes it as a regulative idea that governs how we *should think* about nature, cf. *CJ* 5: 176. The crucial point is that this regulative principle finds itself in correspondence with nature in an exemplary way. Thus, the significance of the beautiful is not that it should be subjectively purposeful, but that it *is*.

take the interpretation that nature's presentation of beauty is an indication of our *moral* purposiveness, to be "too studied to be taken as the true interpretation [*wahre Auslegung*] of the cipher by means of which nature figuratively speaks to us in its beautiful forms".⁸⁵ Nevertheless, despite his reservations, Kant persists in employing the terminology of nature's expressiveness through its beautiful forms, and asserts that this expression of nature has meaning for us.

He then goes on to explain that the immediate intellectual interest in beauty in nature is not very common, but

belongs only to those whose thinking is either already trained to the good or especially receptive to such training; and then, even without clear, subtle, and deliberate reflection, the analogy between the pure judgment of taste, which, without depending on any sort of interest, allows a pleasure to be felt and at the same time to be represented a priori as proper for mankind in general, and the moral judgment, which does the same thing on the basis of concepts, leads to an equally immediate interest in the object of the former as in that of the latter.⁸⁶

Kant reminds us here that moral interest is a condition for taking an immediate interest in beauty in the particular way described. From this, we can deduce that a person who is not morally purposive, that is, someone who is not concerned with the realization of his or her moral ends, may not care whether nature is in harmony with those ends, and thus will not take an interest in the hints, traces, and signs that nature expresses in its beautiful forms of such harmony.⁸⁷ However, a person with a good moral disposition who is striving to realize her moral ends (as she ought to do in Kant's moral view) will *necessarily* interpret any manifestation of nature's subjective formal purposiveness as an indication of nature's *moral* purposiveness and will take an immediate intellectual interest in its beautiful forms.

Kant emphasizes this last point by adding that

the admiration of nature, which in its beautiful products shows itself as art, not merely by chance, but as it were intentionally, in accordance with a lawful arrangement and as purposiveness without an end, which latter, since we never encounter it externally, we naturally seek within ourselves, and indeed in that which constitutes the ultimate end of our existence, namely the moral vocation.⁸⁸

Kant's claim is that what nature shows in its beautiful products is that it is not organized "by chance", but is made in the way that art is made, according to a structure that we know from purposes. This kind of *aesthetic* purposiveness presented in nature is a form of purposiveness in which nature seems to be in tune with us, in accordance with

85. *CJ* 5: 301.

86. *Ibid.*

87. In this case, we have no reason to assume that someone has a good moral disposition simply because he or she finds, say, a rose beautiful. Kant would classify such an interest in natural beauty as empirical.

88. *CJ* 5: 301.

our moral way of thinking. The way that we can understand the meaning of this attunement, is to relate it to our moral vocation.⁸⁹

The moral meaning of beauty, then, implies that a person with (1) a morally good way of thinking, and (2) the capacity for aesthetic judgment – that is, the capacity to appreciate nature aesthetically by asserting that something is beautiful – will *necessarily* interpret any manifestation of nature's aesthetic purposiveness as an indication of its moral purposiveness and be immediately interested in it.

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ABBREVIATIONS

All citations from Kant are according to the Akademie edition by reference to volume and page number: the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA), *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by *Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften* 29 vols., Berlin, De Gruyter, 1902-1923.

I use the following abbreviations:

CJ = Kant, I. 2002. *Critique of the Power Judgment* (1790), ed. and tr. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, New York, Cambridge University Press.

CPR = Kant, I. 2002. *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), tr. by W. S. Pluhar, with an introduction by S. Engstrom, Indianapolis-Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Co.

G = Kant, I. 2002. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), ed. and tr. by A. W. Wood, New York, Yale University Press.

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89. This reading could be a way to better understand the symbolic relation between beauty and the morally good presented in §59. Here, Kant presents the analogical function of reflection that allows him to establish beauty as a symbol of morality. This relation is famously read as Kant's *aesthetic* solution to the problematic demand to realize the highest moral good in the natural world. I suggest that the intellectual interest described in §42 already hints at the possibility of a higher congruence of humans' moral ends and nature. Rather than providing us with an *analogical* experience of moral freedom, however, it shows how our *immediate* interest in the beauty of nature can suggest precisely of this higher vocation.

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