The Practical Significance of Taste in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*: Love of Natural Beauty as a Mark of Moral Character

In § 42 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant expatiates on the relation between taste and morality when he explains that we have an intellectual interest in natural beauty.¹ He insists that taking such an interest in natural beauty is always a mark of a good soul (*Kennzeichen einer guten Seele*) and that if a person’s capacity to feel pleasure in contemplating the beautiful in nature is habitual, this indicates that he or she has a mental attunement favorable to moral feeling (*moralischen Gefühl günstige Gemüthsstimmung*) (KU 5: 299; 165–166).² Further, Kant declares that we do and in fact should require others to take a direct interest in the beautiful in nature, thereby suggesting that we are in some sense obligated to cultivate taste (KU 5: 302–303; 169).³

This paper attempts to analyze and assess this particular feature of Kant’s account of the practical significance of taste, namely, his theory that an aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty is intimately connected with moral character.⁴ Section I addresses the very concept of an intellectual interest in the beautiful in nature and explains what is involved in loving natural beauty in this particular way. Section II attempts to determine why Kant thought that a direct, intellectual interest in natural, but not artistic, beauty is a sign of a good soul. The concluding section, Section III, explores one puzzle this analysis raises, which is whether Kant ultimately grants a merely instrumental value to natural beauty, insofar as he suggests that we take pleasure in the existence of beauty in nature only because our experience of it (somehow) contributes to our moral vocation.

I. THE INTELLECTUAL INTEREST IN NATURAL BEAUTY

Given Kant’s well-known thesis that pure judgments of taste are devoid of all interest, his claim that we do—and should—take any kind of interest in the beautiful should strike us as surprising. To be precise, Kant has argued, in the first moment of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” that aesthetic judgments are disinterested in two distinct senses. In the first place, no interest can serve as the determining ground or basis for a judgment of taste because any such dependence would undercut both the autonomy and purity of taste. In the second place, Kant insists, in a note appended to the former claim, that “judgments of taste, of themselves, do not even give rise to any interest” (KU 5: 205n; 46).⁵ Having initially defined interest in the *Critique of Judgment* as “the liking we connect with the representation of an object’s existence” (KU 5: 204; 45), Kant later remarks that “all interest consists in pleasure in the existence of an object” (KU 5: 296; 163).⁶ The direct implication of Kant’s thesis that pure aesthetic judgments of reflection are entirely disinterested, then, is that the pleasure we feel in contemplating the beautiful (in art and nature) is in no way connected with any concern we might have for the existence of beautiful objects. This is precisely Kant’s point in noting that the question of
whether some given object is beautiful is altogether distinct from the question of whether one cares for the existence of objects of that kind (KU 5: 204; 45). According to one famous formulation: “In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least bit biased in favor of the thing’s existence but must be wholly indifferent about it” (KU 5: 205; 46).

This conception of aesthetic judgments as disinterested has struck many readers as suspect, for it seems that one who delights in beauty would, as a matter of course, be pleased by the fact that beautiful objects exist. That is, it is difficult to comprehend how one could be indifferent toward—or not find interesting—the existence of the objects that are the very source of the pleasure one feels in the judgment and experience of beauty. But, bracketing this question about the plausibility of Kant’s view that the liking for the beautiful is of this nature, the immediate issue concerning us at the outset of this paper is the compatibility of this thesis with Kant’s claim later in the *Critique of Judgment* that we have both an empirical and an intellectual interest in the beautiful.7

It is the second aspect of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgments in particular that appears to pose a problem for Kant in the context of the discussion in § 40–42 (which follows on the conclusion of the “Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments” and precedes the “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment”). Here he asserts that we must be able to assume that the universal communicability of our feeling in a judgment of taste necessarily brings with it an interest if we are to explain “how it is that we require from everyone as a duty, as it were, the feeling in a judgment of taste” (KU 5: 296; 162).8 To reiterate, if the merely contemplative pleasure we feel in a judgment of taste does not produce a further pleasure in the existence of the beautiful object, the prospect that our disinterested liking of taste carries with it an interest seems to be ruled out *ex hypothesi*.

Kant immediately informs us that the problem that his own analysis appears to raise is, in effect, only apparent, for what he is committed to is merely the claim that a judgment of taste does not of *itself* give rise to an interest, leaving open the possibility that it might do so *indirectly*, that is, when conjoined with something else. In his words:

That a judgment of taste by which we declare something to be beautiful must not have an interest as *its determining basis* has been established sufficiently above. But it does not follow from this that, after the judgment has been made as a pure aesthetic one, an interest cannot be connected with it. This connection, however, must always be only indirect. In other words, we must think of taste as first of all connected with something else, so that with the liking of mere reflection on an object there can be connected, in addition, a pleasure *in the existence* of the object (and all interest consists in pleasure in the existence of an object). (KU 5: 296; 163)

There are three initial points to keep in mind regarding the connection Kant aims to establish between a pure aesthetic judgment and a further interest in the object of aesthetic evaluation. First, if judgments of taste are themselves disinterested in the two senses stipulated, any link between taste and a liking for the existence of beautiful objects will be an indirect connection, one routed through some third, mediating term. Second, Kant hopes to show not just that the liking of taste *could* carry with it an interest, but in fact why it *must* (müsse) do so. The connection to be determined is, therefore, supposed to be a necessary one. Third, this connection will be one of two pleasures: the initial disinterested pleasure in a pure judgment of taste (merely contemplative or desire-independent pleasure) and a further pleasure in the existence of an object deemed beautiful (practical or desire-dependent pleasure).

In § 41, Kant identifies two possible candidates for this third term with which the disinterested liking for the beautiful might be linked: something empirical, described as “an inclination inherent in human nature,” or something intellectual, characterized as “the will’s property of being determinable a priori by reason” (KU 5: 296; 163). Insofar as both of these candidates themselves involve an interest, we are told, both could in principle provide the third term connecting the disinterested pleasure in a judgment of taste with a further pleasure in the existence of the beautiful object.

Kant first considers the empirical interest we have in beauty, namely, an interest in the universal communicability of our liking for the beautiful, which is itself based on an assumed inclination for society inherent in human nature.
The general idea here, introduced by Kant’s assertion that “only in society is the beautiful of empirical interest” (KU 5: 297; 163), is that we have a natural propensity (Hang) to society, leading us to take an interest in the universal communicability of our evaluations and feelings. In virtue of our sociability, we desire to share with others the initial pleasure we feel in beautiful objects—our disinterested delight in the formal features of an object judged beautiful gives rise to a further pleasure in its existence because we want to convey to others the feeling of pleasure that beauty instills in us (which we recognize as universally communicable). In short, we like to enjoy our liking for beautiful objects in community with others.

I suggest that we understand Kant’s “critique” of this empirical interest in beauty by analogy to his critique of inclination in Groundwork I. On one plausible reading of the first section of the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant’s main criticism of inclination is not that inclinations are inherently problematic and serve no useful purpose whatsoever, but rather that inclination alone is never a sufficient motive for moral action and fails to qualify as a pure moral motive, the very thing that Kant is trying to isolate in his explication of what constitutes a morally good mode of willing. Similarly, in § 41 of the third Critique, Kant’s fundamental charge is not that an empirical interest in beauty is something to be avoided or without any beneficial results to recommend it. Rather, he claims that it is simply an unfit candidate, given his main concern, characterized in this context as “with what may have reference a priori, even if only indirectly, to a judgment of taste” (KU 5: 297; 164). In other words, the issue as Kant perceives it concerns what type of interest or liking on our part is capable of being brought into a universal and necessary connection with the disinterested liking of taste, because only a universal and necessary connection would be capable of generating a duty to take an interest in the existence of beautiful objects and, by extension, to develop the aesthetic capacity to appreciate their beauty (or taste). It is thus unsurprising that Kant announces that this empirical interest in the beautiful (based on an inclination for society) is simply irrelevant to his main concern, since he holds that inclination, even one presumed to be inherent in human nature, is always conditional and, consequently, incapable of grounding either an a priori connection or a duty.

Having set aside an empirical interest in the beautiful as unsuitable given his overriding aim in this portion of the text, Kant turns in § 42 to his alternate candidate, an intellectual interest in the beautiful, which is the central focus of this paper. As Henry Allison points out, Kant begins his discussion of this morally-based interest in the beautiful by referring to the debate between adherents of the widely shared Enlightenment belief in an intrinsic connection between love of beauty and moral goodness and proponents of the Rousseauian thesis that “virtuosi of taste” are generally morally corrupt. At least initially, Kant appears to side with Rousseau. He rejects the idea that taking an interest in beauty in general is a sign of a good moral character. Moreover, he denies that there is even an inner affinity (innere Affinität) between the feeling for the beautiful and moral feeling, and states that it appears difficult to reconcile the two. Nonetheless, Kant immediately qualifies his apparent endorsement of the Rousseauian thesis by explaining that it holds only for an interest in artistic, not natural, beauty:

Now I am indeed quite willing to concede that an interest in the beautiful in art (in which I include the artistic use of natural beauties for our adornments, and hence for vanity’s sake) provides no proof whatever that someone’s way of thinking is attached to the morally good, or even inclined toward it. On the other hand, I do maintain that to take a direct interest in the beauty of nature (not merely to have the taste needed to judge it) is always a mark of a good soul; and if this interest is habitual, if it readily associates itself with the contemplation of nature, this indicates at least a mental attunement favorable to moral feeling. (KU 5: 298–299; 165–166)

This passage raises three obvious questions. First, what does it mean to take a direct interest in the beauty of nature, to desire its existence in this particular way? Second, why would Kant think that this kind of love of natural beauty is connected with a moral disposition? Third, what accounts in his eyes for the privileged status of natural over artistic beauty, such that only love of the former signifies a good soul and provides evidence that a person is inclined toward the morally good?
Since the direct interest at issue is an intellectual or nonempirical one, Kant reminds us that this interest is in the beautiful forms of nature and has nothing to do with the many charms that nature tends to associate with those beautiful forms. He then appeals to an example to illuminate what this intellectual interest is like. We are asked to imagine someone alone in nature, contemplating the beautiful form of a wild flower, bird, or insect, with love and admiration for it, and without any interest in communicating his observations to others. As Kant describes him, this person takes pleasure in the existence of beautiful objects in nature independently of any benefits or advantages they may happen to incur. Moreover, he would not want nature to be without these things even if they threatened him with harm. His interest in natural beauty is direct, because the pleasure he takes in its existence is not tied up with any intention to use it for any purpose whatsoever. The (desire-dependent) pleasure he takes in beautiful natural objects does not, for example, result from the fact that their existence is a vehicle enabling him to appear refined in the eyes of people who might be impressed by his aesthetic appreciation of nature. As already indicated, his interest is intellectual because he cares about natural beauty for its forms alone, and so his interest is not conditional on any assumed inclination he may happen to have that is tied up with nature’s charms. In short, to appreciate natural beauty in this way—to take a direct, intellectual interest in it—amounts to liking it for itself, independently of any empirical inclination it might satisfy. Kant then goes on to explain that if we had tricked this lover of the beautiful in nature by planting artificial flowers in his garden or placing artfully crafted birds in his trees, the direct interest he had previously taken in the beautiful would vanish completely at the very moment he realized he had been deceived. What this example shows, Kant maintains, is that the thought that the beauty in question was produced by nature must accompany the intuition and reflection involved in a judgment of taste; therefore, the direct interest one takes in natural beauty must, as he puts it, be “based on that thought alone” (KU 5: 300; 166). Presumably, without some awareness that “this is nature,” one could have either a mere judgment of taste with no interest or, possibly, a judgment of taste connected with an indirect interest that refers to society—as Kant describes it, one of vanity to use the beautiful object for decoration for the eyes of others (KU 5: 299–166).

Echoing his claim in § I of the *Groundwork* that his analysis of the good will as good irrespective of any results it might bring about in the world is agreed on by common human understanding, here, in § 42 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant insists that this proclamation of the superiority of natural over artistic beauty is not some idiosyncratic point of view particular to him, but is instead the considered view of people with a “refined and solid way of thinking” who have cultivated their “moral feeling” (KU 5: 299; 166). He alleges that a connoisseur of fine art, a person able to judge products of art with the greatest correctness and refinement, may be glad to leave a room replete with beautiful artifacts that “minister to vanity and perhaps to social joys” and to turn instead to the beautiful in nature (KU 5: 300; 167). Further, Kant says that we regard this person’s preference for natural beauty with esteem and assume that he has a beautiful soul “such as no connoisseur and lover of art can claim to have because of the interest he takes in his objects of art” (KU 5: 300; 167).

II. THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS INTELLECTUAL INTEREST IN NATURAL BEAUTY

What, then, does this noninstrumental love of the beautiful forms of nature have to do with morality, and what accounts for the precedence of natural over artistic beauty in Kant’s theory of the systematic or moral significance of taste? To anticipate, Kant’s analysis is that natural beauty arouses in us a direct interest because the moral interest we have in realizing our moral ends entails an interest in any traces or hints of nature’s harmony with those ends. Presumably, nature’s presentation of beautiful forms (or aesthetic purposiveness) provides us with some indication of this harmony (or nature’s moral purposiveness) and, as a result, we take pleasure in natural beauty’s existence. Hence, if a person is directly interested in natural beauty in the sense described above, we have grounds for assuming that he or she is attuned to a moral
way of thinking, because the very condition of feeling this particular kind of practical pleasure in natural beauty in the first place is that one have an interest in nature’s harmonizing with one’s moral projects in the world. In § 42 Kant appears to provide the schema of an argument supporting this (admittedly complicated) account of a morally-based interest in natural beauty. He begins by spelling out the parallels between aesthetic and moral judgments and their corresponding capacities. (1) Aesthetic judgments are concerned with forms of objects, just as moral judgments are concerned with forms of maxims. (2) Both involve a liking that is made into a rule or universal law for everyone. (3) Neither the feeling of pleasure associated with aesthetic judgments (taste) nor the pleasure associated with moral judgments (moral feeling) is based on an antecedent interest, either in the existence of the object of aesthetic evaluation, or in the existence of the object or state of affairs an agent aims to bring about through action. However, Kant now reminds us that they differ in one crucial sense. Moral judgments, in contradistinction to aesthetic judgments, directly give rise to an interest, and this fact that moral judgments on their own give rise to an interest provides the clue for thinking that the intellectual interest we have in natural beauty is intimately connected with our moral vocation. 17 In a dense passage, Kant explains:

But reason also has an interest in the objective reality of the ideas (for which, in moral feeling, it brings about a direct interest), i.e., an interest that nature should at least show us a trace or give a hint that it contains some basis or other for us to assume in its products a lawful harmony with that satisfaction of ours which is independent of all interest (a liking we recognize a priori as a law for everyone, though we cannot base this law on proofs.) Hence reason must take an interest in any manifestation in nature of a harmony that resembles the mentioned [kind of] harmony, and hence the mind cannot meditate about the beauty of nature without at the same time finding its interest aroused. (KU 5: 300; 167).

Although there is much of importance in this cryptic passage, what is of greatest immediate significance is Kant’s claim that reason has an interest in the objective reality or realization of its various ideas and is thereby interested in any signs of nature’s possible harmony with those ideas. In other terms, rational agents have certain aims, and, by extension, any indication that nature is amenable to the realization of those aims is significant to us. Just as we take pleasure in the fact that nature appears receptive to our cognitive aims in aesthetic experience and seems to accord with our intellectual needs by providing us with beautiful objects that appear designed for the way the mind works (or for judgment), so, too, any indication that nature harmonizes with our practical aims and accords with our intentions in the moral realm will please us.

Underlying this view that we have an intellectual, morally-based interest in natural beauty are certain features of Kant’s moral theory that need to be foregrounded if we are to make any sense of his suggestion that the disinterested pleasure we feel in the judgment and experience of natural beauty, when conjoined with some purported moral interest we have, gives rise to a further practical pleasure in natural beauty’s existence. To begin with, in spite of Kant’s indication in the Groundwork that possessing a good will is compatible with never accomplishing any real results in the world, a central theme of Kant’s substantive moral theory, set out in rich detail in The Metaphysics of Morals and the various versions of his lectures on ethics, is that the moral law dictates the pursuit of certain ends. These include the two ethical ends of one’s own perfection and the happiness of others, in addition to the political or juridical ends of a civil society under a republican constitution and a condition of perpetual peace between states. On Kant’s fuller conception of ethics, our overarching task as practical, rational agents involves not only striving to acquire a morally good empirical character and to become fit for civil society, but also working to bring about the various material ends that pure practical reason enjoins (and, more generally, the Highest Good, as the ultimate end of pure practical reason). Second, Kant holds that the realization of these obligatory ends is in no way a matter of indifference to us. We have a vested interest in their realization (or promotion), and this implies that we ought to cultivate whatever capacities are instrumental in making them effective. Third, the promotion of these various
ends involves bringing about changes in the sensible world. Given the explicit starting point of the third *Critique* that there is an “immense gulf” between nature and freedom, we have, as Kant sees it, a serious practical problem, for this gulf between freedom and nature seems to imply that the laws of freedom and the ends that we ought to strive to actualize in the world might not have an effect in the realm of appearances. Nevertheless, Kant insists that, insofar as we are genuinely committed to our moral ends, we must assume that they are at least in principle realizable, and this involves thinking of nature in a particular way. As he puts it in the introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*: “Hence it must be possible to think of nature as being such that the lawfulness in its form will harmonize with at least the possibility of the purposes that we are to achieve in nature according to the laws of freedom” (KU 5: 176; 15). In short, because rational agents cannot be expected to pursue ends whose realization or promotion is thought to be impossible, a condition of the coherence of moral life is the presupposition of at least the possibility of the realization of the ends dictated by the moral law (or the laws of freedom).

With this brief sketch of key Kantian moral principles in view, we can understand the fundamental claim Kant is making in § 42 in the following way. Because we have an interest in making effective in the sensible world our moral ends, and because we have to presume the amenability of nature and its lawful order with our moral projects as a condition of moral life, we have a stake in nature’s harmonizing with our moral ends, and thus have an additional interest in any signs of this purported harmony (that is, nature’s moral purposiveness). Further, because natural beauty in some yet unspecified way apparently gives us an indication that nature is in this sense “on our side,” it satisfies an interest (of reason) we have and arouses in us a feeling of (intellectual) pleasure in its existence.

It is natural at this juncture to expect that Kant will claim straightforwardly that natural beauty *in fact* provides an indication of its harmony with our moral ends. Yet, he would consider that to be an unwarranted, dogmatic assumption about the teleology of nature, one contradicting his thesis that the principle of the purposiveness of nature is a regulative idea governing how we have to think about nature, and not a constitutive claim about what nature in fact is like apart from our cognitive aims. The critical suggestion Kant makes instead is that rational agents whose way of thinking is oriented toward the morally good will interpret natural beauties in this way and take a direct intellectual interest in the beautiful in nature on that basis.

The obvious question Kant’s analysis raises, of course, is whether he gives us any reason to think that we are justified in interpreting nature’s presentation of beauty in this way. Otherwise put, are there grounds for assuming that the purposiveness of nature apparently made manifest in nature’s presentation of beautiful forms indicates anything about nature’s *moral* purposiveness? The warrant for reading nature this way appears to lie in what Kant characterizes as a two-fold analogy between nature’s presentation of beautiful forms and the moral purposiveness in which we have a stake and, further, in how we naturally think about this analogy, for Kant insists that we are “led by this analogy to an interest in the object of the pure judgment of taste which is just as strong and direct as [one’s] interest in the object of moral judgment” (KU 5: 301; 168). First, Kant claims that aesthetic purposiveness, like moral purposiveness, produces a liking that is distinct from the one produced by the satisfaction of our ends based on inclinations. Second, Kant claims that the aesthetic purposiveness in nature is a form of purposiveness in which nature seems to favor us and that for us to make sense of this favoring, we naturally connect it to our moral vocation. In his words:

Consider, in addition, how we admire nature, which in its beautiful products displays itself as art [i.e., as acting] not merely by chance but, as it were, intentionally, in terms of a lawful arrangement and as a purposiveness without a purpose; and since we do not find this purpose anywhere outside us, we naturally look for it in ourselves, namely, in what constitutes the ultimate purpose of our existence: our moral vocation. (KU 5: 301; 168)

In sum, Kant’s analysis of the moral significance of taste in § 42 implies that a person with a morally good way of thinking (*moralischgüte Denkungsart*) who has the taste to appreciate...
natural beauty aesthetically will view any manifestations of aesthetic purposiveness as an indication of nature’s moral purposiveness and be directly interested in the beautiful in nature on that basis.  

There are several points to keep in mind about this connection between morality and taste. In the first place, it presupposes a prior attachment to morality. Kant reminds us that the kinship between nature’s aesthetic and moral purposiveness is “moral”; thus, moral interest is a necessary condition for taking an interest in beauty in the particular way described. This suggests that a person unconcerned with the morally good and the realization of the obligatory ends that Kant thinks we ought to strive to fulfill may not care one way or the other whether nature harmonizes with those moral aims, even if he or she has the taste to appreciate natural beauty aesthetically. By contrast, a person with a morally good disposition who has the capacity to take pleasure in beauty will purportedly interpret any manifestations of purposiveness as an indication of nature’s moral purposiveness and take a direct, intellectual interest in natural beauty. This accounts for Kant’s claim that “if someone is directly interested in the beauty of nature, we have cause to suppose that he has at least a predisposition to a good moral attitude” (KU 5: 300; 167). In addition, it enables us to make sense of his remark that such a direct interest in the beautiful in nature is “actually not common,” insofar as it is “peculiar to those whose way of thinking is either already trained to the good or exceptionally receptive to this training” (KU 5: 301; 169).

In the second place, careful attention to the language Kant uses when he characterizes the connection between a good soul and an intellectual interest in natural beauty reveals that he is making, in effect, a minimal claim. What Kant asserts is that an aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty is a sign or mark of a morally sound way of thinking or a predisposition to a good moral attitude, which is to say that we have reason to infer that someone who habitually takes pleasure in contemplating the beauty of nature is oriented to the morally good. But to claim that an interest in natural beauty is an indicator of a morally sound way of thinking is in no way to suggest that such an appreciation is a necessary ingredient in a virtuous character. With respect to this point, we might consider Kant’s concession to Schiller in the famous note in Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason concerning what Kant calls the “aesthetic” side of morality. There Kant agrees that a cheerful demeanor in the performance of one’s duty is a mark (Zeichen) of virtue and that performing one’s duty grudgingly indicates that one has failed to internalize moral principles. Nonetheless, it does not follow, on his view, that one is obligated to develop a cheerful disposition in following the moral law. Similarly, even if taking an intellectual interest in natural beauty is an indicator (of indeterminate reliability) of a moral disposition, it is perfectly conceivable that one could have a good will or a fully developed virtuous character and lack such an interest.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in light of our analysis of this connection between taste and morality at the heart of § 42, it is unclear that Kant needs to be committed to any strong version of the thesis that natural beauty is superior to artistic beauty. As we have seen, Kant insists that an interest in the beautiful in art provides no indication of a morally sound way of thinking. Of course, this is not to say that a love of art is a sign of a deficient character. Nevertheless, a clear implication of Kant’s thesis that a direct, intellectual interest is limited to natural beauty is that there is no such thing as a direct, intellectual interest in artistic beauty, which would appear to imply that it is not possible to love artistic beauties for their own sake. This really does appear to capture Kant’s considered view in § 42. After accounting for natural beauty’s privileged status and explaining why we hold an appreciation of it in higher regard, Kant returns to the subject of art and proclaims that the fact that our liking for the beautiful in art in a pure judgment of taste is not connected with a direct interest is easily explained. Kant reasons that either art imitates nature and thereby produces a direct interest through deception (in which case the direct interest is really in natural beauty) or we are aware of the object as art and therefore are conscious of the artist’s intention to please us involved in its construction (KU 5: 301–303; 168). In the latter case, our interest is merely indirect—we desire the beautiful artistic object not for the sake of the object itself, but for the
sake of the intention that brought it into existence. In sum, Kant seems to say that artistic beauty deceives us (by appearing as nature) or tells us about the human intentions of the artist, and the outcome of this is that it never interests us directly.

This objection that Kant might be committed to the view that our interest in the beautiful in art is always indirect is well founded, given his further claim throughout § 42 that the lover of art is a connoisseur whose interest in artistic beauty is always grounded in inclination, in particular, a desire to communicate his or her taste to others in society. One might try to defend Kant on this point by noting that his intuitions about some sort of connection between love of natural beauty and a moral disposition seem plausible at least “aesthetically,” for, while we have little trouble imagining morally reprehensible aesthetes (such as Adam Verver in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* or Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris’s series), it seems more difficult to conceive of morally reprehensible lovers of natural beauty. This concession aside, the further notion that we cannot love and admire artistic beauties for their own sake and that they never interest us in themselves seems implausible. Moreover, it seems directly inconsistent with Kant’s account of beauty as a symbol of morality in § 59, which presumably applies to both artistic and natural beauty, and arguably at odds with his theory of fine art in § 46, which defines fine art as “the art of genius,” and characterizes it as a gift from “the hand of nature.” Finally, and most importantly, it is simply unnecessary to account for the special status of natural beauty with which Kant is concerned in § 42. Kant holds that natural beauty is practically significant in a unique sense. To summarize the basic view: to say that an object is beautiful for Kant is to say that by virtue of its mere form it exhibits qualities that make it compatible with the way the mind works, or with judgment. It thereby accords with our own intellectual needs and pleases us. Kant holds, further, that there is a close kinship between the harmony of nature with our cognitive aims made manifest in nature’s presentation of beautiful forms and an analogous harmony of nature with our moral aims (which we take to be suggested by any manifestations of nature’s aesthetic purposiveness). As moral agents striving to pursue our moral ends in the world, these “hints” or “traces” of nature’s moral purposiveness undoubtedly interest us and give us pleasure, because they give us reason to suppose that our moral efforts are not completely in vain. But, since objects of art are, after all, products of art, not nature, by definition they could provide no such indications about nature’s moral purposiveness. This might be all that Kant needs and ought to say about the essential difference between the beautiful in art and nature in § 42 of the *Critique of Judgment*.

III. DOES NATURAL BEAUTY HAVE A MERELY INSTRUMENTAL VALUE FOR KANT?

As was clear from Section I of this paper, in his discussion of the intellectual interest in the beautiful, Kant insists that such an interest is direct, and his own example suggests that to be directly interested in natural beauty amounts to valuing it for its own sake, that is, noninstrumentally. That, in turn, seemed to imply that what distinguishes the lover of natural beauty who takes an intellectual interest in it from the person whose interest in the beautiful is indirect is that the former desires the beautiful object for its own sake, whereas the latter desires it because it is useful for some other end he or she desires. Yet, our further analysis of this morally-based interest in natural beauty (in Section II), may belie the promise that according natural beauty an intrinsic value is possible in Kant’s aesthetic theory. For it appears that what interests us about natural beauty (when we care about its existence) is that it tells us something we want to hear, namely, that nature is morally purposive and thus “on our side” in the sense of harmonizing with our moral aims. This might indicate that we ultimately take pleasure in the existence of natural beauty for the sake of something else we desire and hence value it instrumentally, namely, for the sake of the moral message it gives us and that we find pleasing—the fact that nature “unintentionally” provides objects that “favor” us, or please us with their beauty, signifies that our moral aims to realize the Highest Good might not be futile, that nature might be amenable to our moral purposes. If this is correct, then the worry is that,
Kant’s claims to the contrary, this intellectual interest in natural beauty seems after all indirect.

Interestingly, Kant himself considers just this possible objection when he asks whether it will be said that his account of an intellectual interest in the beautiful in nature really reduces to the view that natural beauty interests us only in some mediated sense, “insofar as we link it to an accompanying moral idea” (KU 5: 302; 168). His response is to insist that the link between taste and morality is not what grounds this intellectual interest; rather, we are directly interested in the beauty of nature as a result of its “own characteristic of qualifying for such a link, which therefore belongs to it intrinsically” (die ihr innerlich zukommt) (KU 5: 302; 169). Here Kant reminds us that natural beauty has certain features that belong to it irrespective of any human interests and that make it suitable for being linked to this accompanying moral idea; and it is the fact that it, on its own terms, can be brought into kinship with morality that pleases us, which presumably is different from being interested in it because of the moral message it gives us.

As it stands, Kant’s direct response is not an entirely satisfactory answer to the objection under consideration because he has expressly claimed that the interest we take in the existence of natural beauty is indeed grounded in the fact that taste and morality are linked—recall that the key idea in § 42 is that natural beauty arouses in us a direct interest because there is an intimate kinship (Verwandschaft) between the moral interest we have in realizing our moral ends and an interest in any traces or hints of nature’s harmony with these ends. Because nature’s presentation of beautiful forms allegedly provides us with an indication of this harmony, we take pleasure in its existence. Moreover, the obvious rejoinder to Kant’s own reply is that the very reason we are interested in natural beauty’s qualifying for such a link is that we ultimately care about what is at the end of the chain, namely, the message that nature harmonizes with our aims as practical agents, that is, that nature exhibits in its products some lawful accord with our moral interests. Another way of formulating this rejoinder is to insist that Kant’s own view seems to be that we are interested in natural beauty because it is a sign of something else (for example, that our moral tasks are in principle realizable), which is the thing that is of intrinsic value to us.

Although Kant himself does not provide an adequate answer to the legitimate objection that his account of the moral significance of an intellectual interest in natural beauty implies that natural beauty has a merely instrumental value for us, there is, I think, a plausible and appealing Kantian answer to his objection, one that is at least in part alluded to by Kant’s own reply. Here we must distinguish two things: (1) the initial disinterested pleasure we take in a pure aesthetic judgment, where the object of aesthetic evaluation is valued for its own sake; and (2) the further morally-based interest we take in the existence of the object deemed beautiful, where the object whose existence we take pleasure in is, ultimately, valued for the sake of something else.

Since Kant, from the very beginning of his account of aesthetic judgment, maintains that pure judgments of taste are wholly disinterested, he explains at the outset of his discussion of this morally-based, intellectual interest in the beautiful that if the disinterested delight we feel in the presence of beautiful objects gives rise to a further interest, it does so in connection with some third thing, which provides the mediating link between a pure aesthetic judgment and an interest. This very setup, then, implies that any interest in beauty will, in some sense, be an indirect one, insofar as we need to appeal to some third term—some other interest—to explain why we take pleasure in its existence.32

Yet, this in no way implies that Kant allows a merely instrumental value to the beautiful in nature. Again, at the very beginning of his discussion of how a judgment of taste could be connected with an interest in beauty, Kant expressly reminds us that it is only after a judgment of taste has been made as a purely aesthetic one that an interest might be connected with it (via some third thing). In other words, on Kant’s theory of taste, the beautiful (in nature and art) pleases us independently of all interest (whether of cognition, self-love, or morality); and it is this original independence of taste from all human interests—its autonomy—that makes it subsequently possible to connect taste with morality. On the systematic account of beauty central to the third Critique, then, the beautiful
(in both art and nature) has its own intrinsic value, and so it would be wrong to think that the moral significance of the beautiful supercedes the aesthetic, or that aesthetic value is displaced by moral considerations on Kant’s view.

In conclusion, I submit that, as Kant sees it, we value natural beauty both for its own sake (insofar as it is an object of pure aesthetic appreciation that evokes in us a universally communicable feeling of contemplative pleasure) as well as for the sake of something else (insofar as its existence pleases us because of the moral message we take from it). Since the “for the sake of” relation for Kant (at least in this context) is not a merely instrumental relation, an intrinsic valuing of natural beauty is at least possible on Kant’s account of the practical significance of taste in the Critique of Judgment.33

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1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2001 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Pacific Grove, California and at the 2002 Eastern Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia. I am grateful to my commentators and audiences on both occasions for helpful discussion, especially to Paul Guyer, Kenneth Rogerson, Amelie O. Rorty, and Rachel Zucker; and to Jordanna Bailkin, Frances Ferguson, and Iain Thomson for their comments on the penultimate version of the paper. My views about the moral significance of taste in Kant’s aesthetic theory are indebted to Henry Allison; in particular, my analysis of Kant’s account of an intellectual interest in natural beauty has been shaped by discussions in Allison’s seminar on Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, taught at the University of California, San Diego in the spring of 2000. The National Endowment for the Humanities supported research for this project.

2. “KU” refers to Kritik der Urthelkraft in Kants gessamlte Schriften (KGS), herausgegeben von der Deutschen (formerly Königlichen Preussischen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter (and predecessors), 1902—). The Kritik der Urtheilskraft appears in vol. 5 of KGS. In this paper I refer to Werner Pluhar’s English translation (Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987)) and occasionally draw on my own translation when relevant. In the parenthetical references to Kant’s work that appear in this paper, the page number in the English translation is referred to immediately following the reference to the volume and page number of the German text.

3. Since (for Kant) taste is a necessary condition of taking an interest in objects because of their beauty, the requirement to develop taste is entailed by the requirement to take an interest in the beautiful.

4. It is widely agreed that the connection between taste and morality is central to the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” (the first part of the Critique of Judgment). As Henry Allison has argued, there are two distinct ways in which cultivating taste and our experience of beauty contribute to morality. In § 59, Kant is concerned to show that taste and morality are connected insofar as beauty (in art and nature) symbolizes morality. In § 42, however, Kant explains that natural beauty holds a particular interest for us because we take the beautiful in nature as providing some intimation of nature’s moral purposiveness, which is itself morally significant to us. This second aspect of Kant’s account of the connection between taste and morality is the focus of this paper. Thus, what I offer here is by no means intended as a complete account of Kant’s views on the practical significance of taste. For Allison’s analysis of these issues, see Henry Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pt. 3. Paul Guyer’s account of the connection between aesthetics and morality in Kant’s philosophy can be found in Kant and the Experience of Freedom (Cambridge University Press, 1993), chaps. 6–10.

5. In this way, judgments of taste are distinct from not only judgments of the agreeable but also judgments of the good (or moral judgments). Even moral judgments, which are grounded in pure practical reason alone independently of any interest, immediately give rise to an interest and, thus, as Kant puts it, are “still very interesting” (KU 5: 205n; 46). Elsewhere, he reiterates this point by explaining that, as the object of a will determined by reason, the morally good “carries with it the highest interest” (KU 5: 209; 51). The interest we have in the morally good is discussed at length in Section II of this paper.

6. Kant expands on this initial definition of interest in the third Critique by adding that “such liking always refers at once to our faculty of desire,” indicating that to be interested in something is to desire its existence (KU 5: 204; 45). Although Kant tends to focus more exclusively on the connection between interest and existence in the third Critique, his basic view about the relations between interest, pleasure, desire, and judgment is consistent with the account set out in fuller detail in his moral theory. (On this point, see Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, chap. 4. Allison explains that any apparent differences between the account of interest in the third Critique and the one in Kant’s moral theory are reconcilable if one allows for their different contexts and emphases of the discussions [Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, p. 360 n.6].) Section II of the introduction to The Metaphysics of Morals contains Kant’s most extended treatment of the various connections between interest, pleasure, desire, and judgment (MS 6: 211–213; 373–374). (References to The Metaphysics of Morals [MS] are to Die Metaphysik der Sitten [KGS 6].) In this paper I have used Gregor’s English translation as it appears in the Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant, Practical Philosophy, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.) There he claims that pleasure or displeasure
is always connected with desire (Begehren), although the converse does not hold, because one can have a feeling of pleasure that is connected only with the mere representation of an object (regardless of whether this object exists). This merely contemplative pleasure is called “inactive delight” or “taste.” Since this kind of pleasure has no necessary connection with desire for an object, Kant explains that it is not “at bottom a pleasure in the existence of the object of a representation but is attached only to the representation itself” (MS 6: 212; 374).

Whereas merely contemplative pleasure belongs to the domain of aesthetics and is investigated in the Critique of Judgment, the pleasure involved in practical philosophy proper is the type necessarily connected with desire for an object, that is, practical pleasure (praktische Lust).

7. Among commentators who have criticized the disinterestedness thesis along these, and other, lines are Karl Ameriks, “Kant and the Objectivity of Taste,” The British Journal of Aesthetics 23. (1983): 4–5; Donald Crawford, Kant’s Aesthetic Theory (University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. 50–54; Paul Guyer, Kant and the Claims of Taste (Cambridge University Press, 1979), chap. 5; and Jens Külkenkampff, “The Objectivity of Taste: Hume and Kant,” Noûs 24 (1990): 108–109. Allison has attempted to present Kant’s view in a more plausible light by arguing that we can distinguish between a liking that incidentally gives rise to an interest and one whose very nature depends on its doing so. Whereas giving rise to an interest cannot be a condition of the liking for the beautiful itself (as it is for the morally good), because the purely contemplative nature of this liking would be lost and, with it, the purity of the judgment of taste, the pleasure of taste may nonetheless produce a liking for the existence of an object in an incidental way. Allison contends that some such distinction is compatible with Kant’s overall conception of interest (and disinterest) and that, consequently, the disinterested thesis can accommodate our intuitions about the kinds of interest lovers of beauty have in the existence and accessibility of beautiful objects. See Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, chap. 4.

8. On my reading, the deontic claim introduced here at the end of § 40 is importantly different from the one that Kant takes himself to have established in the official deduction of taste. What the deontic claim attempts to account for is why I am justified in saying: “You ought to find this beautiful.” Hence, there is the question of the social nature of taste. Allison contends that some such distinction is compatible with Kant’s overall conception of interest (and disinterest) and that, consequently, the disinterested thesis can accommodate our intuitions about the kinds of interest lovers of beauty have in the existence and accessibility of beautiful objects. See Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, chap. 4.

9. Earlier, in the first moment of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” where he explains that judgments of taste do not of themselves give rise to an interest, Kant remarks that “[o]nly in society does it become interesting to have taste” (KU 5: 205n; 46), noting that the grounds for this will be explained later. This claim about the social nature of taste is now taken up in § 41.

10. Indeed, he thinks that such an empirical, inclination-based interest in beauty is a means for furthering an inclination inherent in us (our sociability), which he portrays as “a requirement of man as a creature with a vocation for society” (KU 5: 296–297; 163). Moreover, he suggests that the universal communicability of the pleasure of taste with which this empirical interest is connected is “something that everyone expects and demands from everyone else, on the basis, as it were, of an original contract dictated by [our] very humanity” (KU 5: 297; 164).

11. Kant tells us, further, that it is important to establish such an a priori connection between taste and an interest because taste would then “reveal a transition of our judgmental faculty from sense enjoyment to moral feeling” (KU 5: 297; 164), and we would “then have better guidance in using taste purposively” (KU 5: 298, 164).


13. More accurately, the inclination for society gives rise to a merely empirical interest of inclination; since such an interest is always conditional and contingent, it cannot ground a necessity claim. In addition to highlighting the fact that this empirical interest in the beautiful is conditional— for one, it is only operative in society—Kant also comments on what he sees as the potentially corrupting effects of its full-fledged development. He claims that the value we attach to it attains its maximum when civilization has reached its peak; this seems to be worrisome for two reasons. First, he suggests that at this stage aesthetic pleasure is valued solely to the extent that it is communicable, indicating that we are interested in the beautiful mainly because we want to appear refined. Second, he says that inclinations and passions reach their height and variety at the most advanced stages of society and that our interest can easily attach to these (supposedly with deleterious effects).
These further remarks about the corrupting effects of an empirical interest in beauty parallel some of Kant’s (perhaps gratuitous) comments about the potential problems with sensible inclinations in the Groundwork. For a more detailed discussion of this empirical interest that raises some of these same points and contextualizes Kant’s remarks in terms of the overarching themes of the third Critique, see Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, pp. 223–227.


15. Much more could be said about the pleasure this lover of natural beauty feels in beauty’s existence. As already noted, in § II of the introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant explains that the species of pleasure necessarily connected with desire for an object is “practical pleasure.” But practical pleasure can be connected with desire in two ways, which means that desire-based pleasure, on Kant’s view, can take two forms. When practical pleasure precedes desire and is the cause of desire for an object, pleasure is sensuous. In this case, the resulting desire is an inclination; if one adopts a policy of acting on that inclination, one has an interest of inclination (ein Interesse der Neigung), that is, an interest of inclination in whatever satisfies that desire. If, however, practical pleasure follows on the antecedent determination of the faculty of desire—in which case the faculty of desire is the cause of pleasure—pleasure is intellectual (intellektuelle Last), stemming directly from the faculty of desire or rational will itself. Kant holds that the pleasure one takes in morality is of this kind and that any resulting interest in the object of desire is an interest of reason (Vernunftinteresse). Whereas an interest of inclination is based on the senses, an interest of reason, Kant claims, is based “on pure rational principles alone” (MS 6: 213; 374). Kant adds that, in order to conform to ordinary speech, we might refer to this inclination for what can be an object only of an intellectual pleasure as a “habitual desire from a pure interest of reason” (MS 6: 213; 374). These considerations enable us to say that the intellectual interest in the beautiful that Kant is concerned with in § 42 is an interest of reason and the practical pleasure this lover of beauty feels for nature is an intellectual pleasure.

16. There are two points to keep in mind here. First, Kant is not saying that one could no longer find the object beautiful. The aesthetic evaluation may remain, but in this case a pure aesthetic judgment would not give rise to a further interest in the object. Second, Kant is not committed to the view that an indirect, empirical interest in the beautiful is to be avoided or that it is inherently problematic. He does, however, insist that such an empirical interest based on society provides no “safe indication of a morally good way of thinking” (sichere Anzeige auf moralisch-gute Denkungsart) (KU 5: 299; 166).

17. Kant also notes that they differ insofar as aesthetic judgments are based on feeling, as opposed to concepts, but it is the difference noted above that concerns us here.

18. See, especially, the second introduction to the Critique of Judgment for Kant’s discussion of this problem.

19. See Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, p. 203.


21. Again, the assumption seems to be that the rational orderliness and purposiveness of the beautiful object that I am admiring gives me reason to think (by analogy) that nature is amenable to the tasks incumbent on me as a moral agent. In the process of making an aesthetic reflective judgment about a beautiful object I incidentally feel the need for the existence of the object. That practical pleasure cannot be accounted for in terms of the purely disinterested (or desire-independent) pleasure I feel in the initial judgment and experience of beauty. Instead, my desire for the existence of natural beauty has to do with my own intellectual need to find a “hint” in nature that my moral aims are not in vain, and, purportedly, I glean such a hint of nature’s moral purposiveness from nature’s aesthetic purposiveness, which is exhibited by the rational orderliness and purposiveness of the beautiful object I am contemplating. One obvious objection Kant’s analysis raises concerns the reason for a morally predisposed person to take an interest in natural beauty. The main issue would be whether the analogy between nature’s aesthetic purposiveness and the moral purposiveness in which we have a stake is sufficient for reading nature this way—that is, is the way in which nature favors us in providing beautiful objects that seem to be designed according to the needs of judgment sufficiently similar to the way in which nature would have to favor our moral goals to warrant a moral interest in natural beauty? Although there is reason to doubt that this is so, in § 42 Kant at least treats the analogy as valid. In each case, he thinks, there is some reason to think that nature is “on our side” in the sense of harmonizing with our intellectual needs, either as cognizers or as practical subjects.

22. It is, however, important to note that this leaves room for the possibility that one could have (what Kant would call) an empirical interest in natural beauty, and yet not be attached to the morally good. So a love of natural beauty in general does not necessarily signify a moral disposition, which implies that a moral disposition is not necessary for any kind of love of natural beauty. One could take pleasure in the existence of natural beauty insofar as one is interested in it for some other purpose, or values it for the sake of something else (for example, vanity, the “play” of conversation, communication with others). For example, the beautiful shape of a wildflower might interest me because I want to communicate my taste and appear refined and sophisticated in the eyes of the people in my garden club. Again, Kant’s analysis is simply that such an interest in natural beauty is an empirical one and that taste here caters to inclination. In this case, we have no cause to infer that someone has a good moral disposition.

23. As noted in the introduction to this paper and in the discussion in Section I, Kant does go on to say that we are in some sense obligated to take an intellectual interest in natural beauty, but he actually offers no explicit argument in § 42 in support of this notion that we have a moral mandate to cultivate taste. Reconstructing such an argument on Kant’s behalf, which involves explaining how taking such pleasure in the existence of natural beauty is not just a mark, but a facilitator, of moral character, is the task of another paper, as is specifying in detail just what nature would have to be like in particular for our moral ends to be in principle realizable. For one promising reconstruction that deals with both of these issues, see Allison, Kant’s Theory of Taste, chaps. 9–10.

24. In § 42 Kant makes the following claims about an intellectual interest in natural beauty: it provides “proof that someone’s way of thinking is attached to the morally good”; it is “always a mark of a good soul”; it indicates “at least a
mental attunement to moral feeling”; it provides “a safe intimation of a morally good way of experiencing” (KU 5: 298–310; 165–167). He nowhere indicates that an intellectual interest in beauty or, more generally, taste is required for virtue. After all, whether the mind finds itself in the presence of the beautiful in nature in the first place, or has the leisure to meditate on natural beauty when in its presence, is not within our control. (On this point, see Jane Kneller’s helpful discussion in “The Interests of Disinterest,” in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995], vol. I., p. 782.) Were Kant committed to the view that taste is strictly a requirement for possessing a virtuous character, this would appear to raise the specter of moral luck—that the very possession of a virtuous character is subject to fortune—which Kant generally wants to deny.

25. This is precisely what Kant claims twice when he notes that the privileged status of natural beauty has nothing to do with aesthetic ranking, but consists in the fact that only the beautiful in nature gives rise to a direct interest (KU 5: 299, 320; 166, 168).

26. On this point, see Kneller, “Interests of Disinterest.”

27. I am indebted to Rachel Zuckert for raising this very point and suggesting these examples in her helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. As a specific example she thought closer to Kant’s concerns, Zuckert noted that it seems aesthetically comprehensible that the narrator of Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, who inhabits a world of reversed time and morality—violence, for example, cures people of their wounds—would find the beauty of the stars hateful, since such beauty symbolizes a harmony in nature that is belied by human behavior. We might consider the Nazi preoccupation with natural beauty as a counterexample to our intuitions about some sort of (at least loose) connection between morality and love of natural beauty.


29. Again, it might turn out that Kant’s theory of genius complicates matters for him on this point.

30. For a helpful discussion of the interpretive issues involved in the distinction Kant seems to draw between artistic and natural beauty and the evaluative significance of this distinction, see Kenneth F. Rogerson, “Art and Nature in Kant’s Aesthetics,” in *Akten des Siebten Internationalen Kant Kongresses*, Kurfürstliches Schloß zu Mainz, 1990, ed. G. Funke (Bonn: Bouvier, 1991), pp. 735–744. Rogerson rightly insists that both art and nature are of moral interest on Kant’s view in the third *Critique*.

31. Jane Kneller explores this issue and concludes that a case can be made that Kant allows for an intrinsic valuing of nature. See Kneller, “Beauty, Autonomy and Respect for Nature,” in *L’Esthétique de Kant/Kants Ästhetik/Kant’s Aesthetics* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 403–414. For an opposing interpretation of Kant’s view, according to which nature is ultimately subordinate to the unconditioned end of human morality, see Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, p. 334.

32. This very point may indicate that the distinction Kant goes on to draw between a direct and indirect interest might be somewhat narrower than that of “for its own sake” versus “for the sake of something else.” The empirical interest in beauty discussed in § 41 is clearly an indirect interest. Since that inclination-based interest is in the universal communicability of the pleasure one feels in the experience and judgment of beauty, which is itself based on an inclination for society inherent in human nature, one cares about the beautiful because it is instrumental for satisfying one’s desire to communicate one’s feelings and evaluations with others in society. By contrast, the intellectual interest in the beautiful cannot be put to use in such an immediate way—natural beauties are not useful in any obvious way for realizing the Highest Good, but merely give us some comforting, global sense that nature is amenable to its realization. Once again I am indebted to Rachel Zuckert for raising this extended point about Kant’s distinction between the two types of interest in the beautiful in her helpful correspondence regarding an earlier version of this paper.

33. The notion that the “for the sake of” relation is not always a merely instrumental one is a fundamental insight of Aristotle’s, and I think it provides a useful way of thinking about Kant’s account of the value natural beauty holds for us. On Aristotle’s taxonomy in EN i, a complete good is chosen for its own sake, whereas an unconditionally complete good is chosen only for its own sake alone—for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. This distinction between a complete and an unconditionally complete good suggests that some goods chosen for the sake of others are intrinsically good, as opposed to merely instrumentally good. They are intrinsically good, or good in themselves, because they are proper parts of happiness and are valuable for their constitutive contribution to happiness. The relevant lesson here is that for Aristotle “for the sake of” is not always an instrumental relation. We might apply some such distinction to Kant’s account of taste and its systematic or moral significance in the following way. Even though it appears that the intellectual interest we take in the beautiful in nature is ultimately explained in terms of the interest we have in our moral vocation—which Kant explicitly conceives of as “the ultimate purpose of humanity” (KU 5: 298; 165)—natural beauty nonetheless has an intrinsic value, belonging to it independently of any concerns we have regarding our moral vocation (or anything else). In other words, even if we did not take a morally-based interest in natural beauty (and thus value it in some mediated sense for the sake of its contribution to our moral aims), it would still please us in the experience and judgment of taste, and possess a value not subordinate to any independent end or aim.