

The Cipher of Nature in Kant's Third Critique: How to Represent Natural Beauty as Meaningful?

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Abstract

What is it that we encountered with in our aesthetic experience of natural beauty? Does nature “figuratively *speaks* to us in its beautiful forms”,² to use Kant’s phrasing in the third *Critique*, or is it merely our way of *interpreting* nature whether this be its purpose or not? Kant does not answer these questions directly. Rather, he leaves the ambiguity around them by his repeated use of terminology of ciphers when it comes to our aesthetic experience in nature. This paper examines Kant’s terminology of ciphers in the *Critique of Judgment* and demonstrate through it the intimate link aesthetic experience in natural beauty has with human morality. A link whose culmination point is embodied in the representation of beauty as a symbol of morality.

Keywords

Aesthetic experience; Aesthetic judgment; *Critique of Judgment*; Figurative language; Morality; Natural beauty

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² *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:301. Emphases mine. 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, 1900). I use the following abbreviations: CJ = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Rel = *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

“Beautiful things *show* [anzeigen] that human beings fit in the world”

Kant, *Reflexionen zur Logik*, n. 1820A, 16:127³

Introduction

One of Kant's most occult insights regarding our aesthetic experience in the third *Critique* is reflected in his repeated use of terminology of ciphers (this terminology includes, inter alia, terms such as: hint, trace, sign, mark, guideline, *Ahnung*),⁴ suggesting our experience of beauty is so cryptic that it requires the intervention of *interpretation*. Thus, Kant inquired into the “true interpretation [Auslegung] of the *cipher* [Chiffreschrift] by means of which nature figuratively *speaks* to us in its beautiful forms”.⁵

The notion of *Chiffreschrift* and the term *Auslegung* incline us to think along narrowly exegetical lines, making something obtuse into something comprehensible and conclusive, as in a process of bringing to light a meaning concealed in an object.⁶ While it is true that Kant's terminology, in principle, tends to the idea of interpretation in this conventional manner, in the aesthetic experience of natural beauty Kant's reference to the “interpretation of the cipher of nature” proceeds in an *opposite* direction to that required by signs or symbols of a given language. It does not follow the usual path “from a clear knowledge of letters to the discovery of their meaning”, to use Gernot Böhme's words “but – if expressed in these terms – inversely, from the meaning *experienced* to the discovery of the letters” (Böhme, 2017, p. 97). Thus, it seems to suggest a conception of interpretation as essentially open.

However, interpretation is not open in the sense of being arbitrary or offering up just any meaning, nor by endlessly adding new meanings to old ones. Rather, its openness consists in *attuning* us to certain ideas, i.e., moral ideas, which no language can fully attain.⁷

³ Quoted in Arendt 1992, p. 30, emphasis mine. In this paper I demonstrate how the idea that Kant is expressing around 1770 in the above quote is ‘cashed out’ and transfigured in his transcendental philosophy in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790). I thank Johannes Haag for illuminating this point for me.

⁴ In several instances, especially with the difficult word *Ahnung*, I have opted to leave the term in the original German. The concept *Ahnung* (often translated as “presentiment” or “suspicion”, and sometimes even as “aesthetic sense” e.g., see K. Richter's introduction to his translation of J. F. Fries 1989, p. 11) is of special interest to me because I believe it best conveys the significance of Kant's use of cipher in the context of aesthetic experience, particularly of natural beauty. I elaborate on the term *Ahnung* in section 2. of this paper.

⁵ CJ, 5:301. Emphases mine.

⁶ Just before the above quote Kant uses also the term *Deutung* to indicate our need to provide an explanation to aesthetic judgment of natural beauty. Cf. CJ, 5:301.

⁷ This description is employed by Kant on aesthetic ideas, see: “[B]y an aesthetic idea, (...), I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.” CJ, 5:314. I see a great affinity between aesthetic and moral ideas however I do not

The vast majority of scholars tend to disregard Kant's reference to 'cipher' or 'language of nature'.⁸ Kant himself seems to be backed down from his remarks by giving them the status of an analogy (i.e., his famous *als-ob* terminology) at least in the way we interpret nature, whether this be its purpose or not.⁹ By shifting the focus back to the terminology of ciphers in the third *Critique*, I wish to show aesthetic experience in natural beauty as intimately linked with themes that are considered 'cryptic' in Kant's moral philosophy, such as the realizability of moral ideals in the natural world, moral progress, the moral proof for the existence of God, and the supersensible substratum of both human nature and nature at large.¹⁰

My intention is *not* to crack the mystery by bringing us closer to a true interpretation of the cipher of nature, but rather to delve into its necessity for our aesthetic experience of natural beauty as one of its essential features.¹¹ I will argue that it is from this vantage point of our experience *in* nature that it is possible to extend our reflections beyond the boundaries of nature to nature as a whole and to the assumption of a final end of nature as Kant argues further in the 'Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment'.¹²

I proceed as follows: I start by examining *nature's figurative language* in the 'Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment'. Particularly I am interested in the link Kant draws between beauty and morality through the notion of "hint" [*Wink*]. The very existence of beauty in nature, Kant argues, gives us *actual* hints that nature is hospitable to human morality.¹³ I wish to understand the peculiarity of the hint as an encrypted form of communication that does not rely upon analogical relation, unlike the symbol, for instance, but prepares the ground for it. Why are beautiful forms necessarily perceived as *hints* when we experience them aesthetically? And how can a mere hint be granted genuinely significant to the domain of morality?

address it in the present paper. For an elaborative account of aesthetic ideas and their similarities to moral ideas see Makkreel 1990, pp. 111-129.

⁸ Exceptions in this regard are Angelica Nuzzo (Nuzzo 2008, pp. 229, 242); Andrew Chignell, (Chignell 2008, pp. 99-110); Eli Friedlander, (Friedlander 2015, p. 92); Michel Chaouli (Chaouli 2017, pp. 101-109).

⁹ CJ, 5:302.

¹⁰ In the present paper I focus primarily on the 'cryptic' aspect of aesthetic experience itself. I have treated extensively its intimately related themes listed above in my 2019 paper (Godess-Riccitelli 2019, pp. 117-144).

¹¹ As opposed to some scholars that signal the language of ciphers in the third *Critique* as offering a romantic reading of Kant, see in particular Chaouli 2017, I do not intend to point to aesthetic judgment as a mystical experience. Rather, I wish to claim precisely on what basis this experience allows us to represent [*darstellen*] nature as meaningful to us.

¹² This possibility being due, *inter alia*, to the idea of culture presented within the context of natural teleology (as the ultimate end of nature). I discuss this theme extensively in my 2017 paper. (Godess-Riccitelli 2017, pp. 107-115).

¹³ CJ, 5:300.

I then turn to the 'Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment'. I examine Kant's claim that there *must* be a certain presentiment [*Ahnung*] of our reason, or a hint [*Wink*] given to us by nature that we could, by means of the concept of the ultimate end of nature, be led *beyond* our reflection on natural purposiveness to "the highest point in the series of causes".¹⁴ I wish to dwell on the connection between *Ahnung* and *Wink*, arguing that the fact that nature is giving us *Wink* is supported and complemented by an *Ahnung* of our reason.

Finally, I propose that nature's language of ciphers presented in the third *Critique* (in both its parts) suggests a preparatory link to Kant's moral theology by granting a complementary outlook on notions associated with it from nature's perspective.¹⁵ I suggest that in the cipher of nature Kant implies that human beings have something more concrete than the ideality of the postulates to indicate that practical reason could be satisfied. For, it points towards nature's underlying accord with our moral vocation. We can find a *ground* for this underlying accord only insofar as we take the natural *existence* of beautiful objects, which serve our cognitive end, as *a kind of evidence* that nature is hospitable also to the realization of our ultimate moral end.¹⁶

1. Nature's Figurative Language

In order for us to be able to appreciate Kant's description of nature as possessing its own (figurative) language we must first, to use Friedlander's phrasing, attentively elucidate "the inner articulations of the *grammar*"¹⁷ of the aesthetic judgment so as to make evident that Kant captures central aspects of our *experience* of beauty" (Friedlander 2015, p. 6). Stated differently, our task is to elaborate Kant's aesthetic vocabulary from the *expression* of the judgment: 'this (this rose, this nightingale's song, this landscape) is beautiful' – which articulates the entirety of our aesthetic experience – towards the question of *what* exactly it communicates.

Whereas the *expression* of the judgment is perhaps what is most identified with Kant's aesthetics, its meaning remains deeply enigmatic: when I judge a flower to be beautiful, I predicate something *about* the object in front of me. Nonetheless, being beautiful is not a fact about the flower in the same way that having a certain number of petals is a fact about it. "The aesthetic judgment", using again Friedlander's words "is to be understood *over and above* the assertion (which is always a determinate state of affairs),

¹⁴ CJ, 5:390.

¹⁵ E.g., the postulate of God, moral faith, and the highest good. The way we can ultimately point to these objects of practical reason is through symbolization. My point is that nature's language of ciphers paves the way for these symbolic presentations.

¹⁶ Cf., CJ, 5:300.

¹⁷ My emphasis

insofar as it presents or opens a *space of meaning* in the reflection on the object” (Friedlander 2015, p. 31).

This implies that in judging something to be beautiful, we do not try to understand beauty in the conventional sense of communicating a certain content about the object. But our very *engagement* with the object must induce our susceptibility to that “*space of meaning* in the reflection on the object”. The idea is that the very *act* of articulating the experience of beauty, by uttering ‘this is beautiful’, is in itself an expression of beauty. Thus, more than what aesthetic judgment actually communicates, what it is supposed to convey must be *presented* (instead of merely being said).¹⁸ The point is that this kind of presentation always presents *more* than what is actually given to the senses in perceiving the object since it is the presentation of a form: a form of purposiveness.

A Crucial Hint: Subjective Formal Purposiveness (SFP)

In section VII of the published introduction to the third *Critique* Kant argues that natural beautiful objects satisfy the fundamental subjective purpose of cognition without being brought under a determinate concept, particularly of any determinate end. Thus,

[T]he pleasure [in natural beauty] can express nothing but its *suitability* to the cognitive faculties that are in play in the reflecting power of judgment, [...] and thus merely a *subjective formal* purposiveness of the object.¹⁹

The principle of SFP is a condition in which a fundamental purpose of the judging subject is satisfied in such a way that it is accompanied by a feeling of pleasure. This pleasure, Kant argues, is the only kind of sensation that we do *not* automatically transform into a predicate of objects and thus interpret exclusively as a *sign* of our own mental condition.²⁰

The main point for our purpose is that we do not merely identify or heuristically discover the form of purposiveness *in* the object, but we also, at the same time, make it present by our *engagement* with the object.²¹ More specifically, this principle of SFP is not revealed in any teleological reflection but in natural beauty *itself*. For it is natural beauty that

reveals to us a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it [nature] as a system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter

¹⁸ Cf. Friedlander 2015, p. 32; Chaouli 2017, p. 20.

¹⁹ CJ, 5:189-190, emphasis mine.

²⁰ CJ, 5:191.

²¹ As Kant famously argues in the published introduction: “one cannot determine *a priori* which object will or will not suit taste, *one must try it out*” CJ, 5:191. Second emphasis is mine.

anywhere in our [...] understanding.²²

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”.²³ This means that because we have an *actual experience* of natural beauty, our judgment must adopt *as its own* principle the view that nature sets out its empirical laws for the purpose of judgment. In other words, it is as if natural beauty was designed with a view of our own cognitive faculties. “And it is precisely this fact”, as Eckart Förster puts it clearly in his 2002, “that underlies Kant’s ‘discovery’ that natural beauty ‘reveals’ to us a formal purposiveness of nature with regard to *our* power of judgment” (Förster, 2002, p. 10).²⁴

Kant’s basic idea is that even though natural beauty is not actually *in* nature, it is intuitively given by certain objects of experience that we judge as if nature *itself* is being purposive to our faculties. This means, that in exhibiting beauty, from nature’s perspective, nature is actually presenting its *own* subjective purposiveness, i.e. its purposiveness with respect to our faculties. From the aesthetic judge’s perspective, in presenting the purposiveness of nature, it is as if she becomes an integral part of nature since her aesthetic experience of the object is simultaneously an experience of her own capacities i.e., the capacity to judge.²⁵ It turns out that the principle of SFP indicates a meeting point between nature’s form and our own, as it were, for nature is now perceived as suitable for our capacities.

“The question is only”, Kant asserts “whether *there is* such a representation of purposiveness at all”.²⁶ He then goes on to elaborate:

What is strange and anomalous is only this: that it [SFP] is not an empirical concept but rather a *feeling* of pleasure (consequently not a concept at all) which, [...] is nevertheless [...] connected with its representation, just as if it were a predicate associated with the cognition of the object.²⁷

Kant’s point is that the connection between purposiveness and feeling of pleasure is not merely psychological but has a necessary and *a priori* character.²⁸ What we feel pleasure in is the accordance between nature and those faculties of the mind that made that contingent accordance possible. Stated differently, in Angelica Nuzzo’s articulation “What we feel pleasure in is the possibility of attributing *meaning* to the world we experience, and thereby of *responding* to its manifestations in our own *human way*” (Nuzzo 2008, p. 243).

²² CJ, 5:246.

²³ CJ, 5:245.

²⁴ Cf. CJ, 5:193.

²⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for clarification on this point.

²⁶ CJ, 5:189.

²⁷ CJ, 5:191, emphasis mine.

²⁸ Hence its unique universality.

To turn, in light of this, to the language of nature, it can be said that by presenting its own formal purposiveness, natural beauty already contains a crucial hint. We are able to make it explicit “in our own *human way*” only because it is already there. Thus, the fact that our encounter with natural beauty produces a feeling of aesthetic pleasure, indicates that nature’s hint is being received and responded to as a meaningful language.²⁹

But what is it that we encountered with exactly in our aesthetic experience of natural beauty: are we experiencing the actual *hint* of nature? Or are we experiencing nature *as* giving us hints? The first question implies that every experience of beauty already contains hints. The second implies that every human being is such that they are capable of taking these hints.

Taking a Hint

As stated, the principle of SFP of nature is described as being revealed only by aesthetic judgment concerning natural beauty. Nonetheless, in Kant’s account natural beautiful objects are not merely subjectively purposive for cognition, they are *also* subjectively purposive for practical reason, in the sense of serving the interest of morality without being subsumed under any determinate moral concept. Thus, Kant asserts that “to take an *immediate interest* in the beauty of *nature* [...] is always a *mark* [*Kennzeichen*]³⁰ of a good soul”.³¹

The idea is that, similar to the pure moral interest we have in the highest good as the final object of practical reason, which does not involve any personal interest and is thus universal, we have an intellectual interest in natural beauty.³² The point I find intriguing in this context is Kant’s enigmatic terminology in describing the intellectual interest in natural beauty as a *mark* of a moral soul. His emphasis is on the fact that this “mark” - later Kant employs similar terms e.g.: hint, trace, sign, cipher -³³ comes from nature *itself* and is expressed through its beautiful forms.

We are accustomed to thinking of hints, traces, signs, marks as evidence of something that has already materialized or happened (think of ruins, remains, fossils, etc..). But what do these notions mean for future possibilities? In what ways can natural beautiful

²⁹ The fact that nature gives us hints in a *figurative* way, i.e. through its beautiful objects, means that nature can ‘correspond’ with us in a way that our imagination understands. In other words, in presenting SFP, natural beauty exhibits the characteristics that make it able to become meaningful to us through our imagination. Cf. Nuzzo 2008, pp. 229, 242.

³⁰ My emphasis.

³¹ CJ, 5:298-299.

³² In the context of natural beauty, the idea of universality is articulated through the universal agreement that the judgment of the beautiful demands of everyone “as if it were a duty”. CJ, 5:296.

³³ CJ, 5:300-301.

objects indicate the realizability of our moral vocation? Moreover, how does this *figurative* language of nature enable us to reflect on something that *cannot* in principle be represented, i.e., our moral end?

The answer lies, I wish to suggest, in the idea of SFP of nature. The point is that when we take nature to “give a hint”, “show some trace”, “give a sign”, or “figuratively speak to us in its beautiful forms”³⁴, to use some of Kant’s formulations, what is finally at stake is the idea that

[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.³⁵

When we relate to nature as giving us hints, we in fact *embody* the idea that natural beauty reveals itself as having SFP. That is the decisive hint in which nature “shows itself as art”: it reveals itself as something made “as it were intentionally”. Stated differently, what nature shows in its beautiful products is that it is not organized “by chance”, but made in the way art is made, namely, according to a structure we know from purposes, “a lawful arrangement”, yet without there being an actual, determinable purpose in play.³⁶

The crucial point for our purpose is that this form of purposiveness presented in nature’s beautiful products is revealed by our engagement with nature through our aesthetic experience, as aforesaid, which, in turn, indicates the significance of the *existence* of the beautiful object in nature. More precisely, it shows the (pure) *interest* we have in the existence of beauty in nature.

The idea is that natural beauty is not merely beauty that we find in nature randomly “by chance” as it were, it is rather beauty that contains in itself something of what nature *means* to us.³⁷ Thus, in taking an intellectual interest in natural beauty man experiences pleasure not only in the *form* of natural beautiful objects but also in their actual *existence*, even though “no sensory charm has a part in this and he does not combine any sort of end with it”.³⁸ It is in this way in which we actually *sense* that nature itself is giving us hints of its possible correspondence with “the ultimate end of our existence” namely, our moral vocation.³⁹

In Kant’s words:

³⁴ CJ, 5:300-301.

³⁵ CJ, 5:301.

³⁶ Cf. Chaouli 2017, p. 96.

³⁷ CJ, 5:302. Cf. Friedlander 2015, p. 62.

³⁸ CJ, 5:299.

³⁹ CJ, 5:301.

[S]ince 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* [*Spur zeige*] or *give a sign* [*Wink gebe*] 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 [...], *reason must take an interest in every manifestation* [*Äußerung*] *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.⁴⁰

Kant's claim is that in exhibiting natural beauty, nature becomes an object of interest of our practical reason since it presents "a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction",⁴¹ i.e. it exhibits *in nature* a SFP that is similar to the interest of practical reason, namely the moral satisfaction in the striving for our highest human end.⁴² What is of interest for us in the beautiful object is, thus, not merely its form but its very *presence* in nature. This is what makes it an intellectual interest in the beautiful that is freely provided by nature.^{43 44}

The question is, how are we to *interpret* this intellectual interest in beauty? Kant himself is led to worry that his own interpretation of the matter may seem "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".⁴⁵ Kant is referring here to his explanation of aesthetic judgement of the beautiful in terms of their affinity with moral feeling so they can be related *analogically*.

The decisive point is that when we experience the cipher of nature we are *not yet* engaged in analogical presentation. For, there is a difference between *having* an intellectual interest in the beautiful and giving it *articulation*.⁴⁶ The thing that nature shows us in its beautiful forms is not a piece of *knowledge* about its structure or about our existence, but rather a *hint* whose decipherment remains occult.⁴⁷ Let me demonstrate this with Kant's

⁴⁰ CJ, 5:300. All emphases except the last one, viz. *nature*, are mine.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² i.e., the highest good.

⁴³ Think of Kant's example of the pleasure and interest we take in the nightingale's song, which completely vanishes when we discover that it is an artificial imitation. "It must be nature" Kant argues "or taken to be nature by us, for us to be able to take such an immediate interest in the beautiful". CJ, 5:302

⁴⁴ The complementary aspect of this argument is the appearance of nature in art, which Kant develops in §§43-46, §57. I do not address the question of 'art as nature' in the present paper. For an elaborative account of Kant's treatment of art see Guyer 1994, pp. 275-285.

⁴⁵ CJ, 5:301.

⁴⁶ While the articulation of the intellectual interest requires culture and perfection of one's abilities, *having* an intellectual interest is integral to the very fact of (practical) reason.

⁴⁷ The hint of nature carries the suggestion that Kant's analogical presentation in the 'Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment' - by describing beauty as the symbol of morality - has already been presented in the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' - the difference is that in the latter it is being *experienced*. We are

examples of colors and tones that cannot be illustrated analogically but perceived merely as hints.

Mere Colors

In §42 Kant underpins the affinity between the intellectual interest we take in natural beauty and the moral interest we have in the final object of practical reason, the highest good, via the examples of colors and tones. He writes:

[Colors and tones] are the only sensations which permit not merely sensory feeling but also *reflection on the form* of these modifications of the senses, and thus as it were contain a *language* [*eine Sprache*] that nature brings to us and that seems to have *higher meaning* [*höhern Sinn*].⁴⁸

Kant discerns colors and tones as the *only* sensations that constitute the ‘language of nature’. According to Kant the uniqueness of these sensations lies precisely in allowing “not merely sensory feeling but also *reflection on the form* of these modifications of the senses”.⁴⁹ In other words, colors and tones enable us to reflect on the *form* of their own operative mode on the senses, rather than being perceived as mere effects. I focus here mainly on the instance of colors while my aim is to point out its relation to the SFP of nature.⁵⁰

In §14 Kant argues that “a mere color, e.g. the green of a lawn, [...] is declared by most people to be beautiful in itself” although it seems to have at its basis merely the *matter* of the representation, viz. simply sensation, “and on that account deserved to be called only agreeable”.⁵¹ Kant’s idea is that judging a color to be beautiful demands abstracting it from its charm and emotion as a “mere sensation” and regarding it in its formal aspect. Thus, in contrast to the effect of sensory pleasure, we experience it as aesthetic pleasure, namely, the pleasure in the reflection on its form. Kant provides a physical explanation:

If one assumes, with Euler, that the colors are vibrations (*pulsus*) of the air immediately following one another [...], and, what is most important, that the mind does not merely perceive, by sense, their effect on the animation of the organ, but also, through reflection, perceives the regular play of the impressions (hence the

experiencing it via the presentation of nature’s SFP, which hints at the realizability of the highest good. More on this in section 3.

⁴⁸ CJ, 5:302. Emphases mine.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that for Kant human perception of color and tone is similar, thus my suggestion regarding colors can be valid for tones as well. For an elaborated account on Kant’s treatment of tones in the third *Critique* see: Matherne 2014, pp. 129-145.

⁵¹ CJ, 5:224.

form in the combination of different representations) [...], then colors [...] would not be mere sensations, but would already be a formal determination of the unity of a manifold of them, and in that case could also be counted as beauties in themselves.⁵²

Simply put, when we treat colors according to Euler’s theory,⁵³ i.e. as (empirically) *real* spatio-temporal entities manifested in sensation,⁵⁴ we can for example see the green of the lawn as intrinsically beautiful, namely as having a form.⁵⁵ This means that having a representation of a color is more than just a function of sheer receptivity of the senses being causally affected in one way or another. The main point for our purpose is that in order to play a role in judgments of beauty the ‘*real* existence’ of colors must be taken into the expanse of reflection, otherwise they will fall under the rubric of determinate judgments. The expanse opened by reflection on natural beauty is what Kant refers to as the purposive form of the object.

The point I wish to stress is that recognizing a formal aspect in colors is not enough in order for it to manifest the ‘language’ of nature. Rather, it has to be understood in terms of formal *purposiveness*. As stated above, nature’s SFP is necessarily connected with our reflection on natural beauty, i.e. with our intellectual interest in beauty. Since that intellectual interest is directed solely to the existence of nature’s *correspondence* to our faculties,⁵⁶ it follows that the most significant feature in our aesthetic experience is expressed in the mere charms [*Reize*] in beautiful nature, e.g. in colors (and tones) “which are so frequently encountered” Kant states “as it were *meltd together* [*zusammenschmelzend*] with the beautiful form”.⁵⁷

A mere color, in this regard, is viewed as being part of the SFP of nature, whose very existence *hints* at nature itself as having a purpose that conforms to our faculties. As such, one would not be able to appeal with pure color *analogically* to the domain of morality, or to moral ideas for that matter. But the formal aspect of colors could be, as it

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kant never fully settles the question whether he thinks Euler’s theory is correct. Indeed, following the above quotation he lays down his formalist strictures against counting colors (or tones) as elements of beauty. However, in subsequent sections especially in §42 he seems to endorse Euler’s theory by describing colors and tones as “the *only* sensations which permit [...] reflection on the form of [the] modifications of the senses” CJ, 5:302, emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ Instead of referring to Newton’s physical theory, which treats seeing colors as a mere result of causality of light. The causal effects of sheer receptivity are precisely what Kant has ruled out from being universally communicable. For elaboration, see Friedlander 2015, p. 89; Berger 2009, pp. 38-45.

⁵⁵ By ‘form’ Kant clearly means the perceptual form of an intuition as opposed to the matter of intuition. For, in order for an aesthetic judgment to be universally communicable, it must have as its ground not a mere sensation but rather a spatio-temporally organized manifold of sensation.

⁵⁶ This correspondence is reflected in the spontaneous activity of free play between imagination and the understanding.

⁵⁷ CJ, 5:302, emphasis mine.

were, that dimension through which nature itself *can* “speak to us”, i.e. communicate with us, “in its beautiful forms”. Because it does so *figuratively*, however, this communication remains cryptic to us yet in a way “that seems to have *higher meaning*”.⁵⁸

That is the sense in which “the white color of the lily” to use one of Kant’s examples of colors “seems to dispose the mind to ideas of innocence”.⁵⁹ There is no analogical relation here, where the same rule of reflection is applied on two different objects,⁶⁰ but rather a complete openness that the color grants us of an expanse of *meaning* in the reflection on the object.⁶¹

It follows, that when Kant affirms that colors (and tones) are sensations that “as it were contain a *language* that nature brings to us and that seems to have *higher meaning*”, which he then refers to the moral domain, the significance lies not in *what* this higher meaning may consist in, but *in* its very existence. Yet, as the sentence that follows makes evident, such higher meaning is not simply given, it is, rather, achieved: “At least this is how we *interpret* nature, whether anything of the sort is its intention or not”.⁶²

Does this mean that the beautiful forms we experience in nature that manifest our attunement with it, are in fact traces and hints of a higher, moral meaning of the world? Or is the fact that “this is how we *interpret* nature” means that the hints we find in nature are no more than accidental effects of mindless mechanism? I wish to examine these questions in proceeding from the beauty of nature to its purposeful arrangement in the ‘Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment’.

2. Nature’s *Wink* and Reason’s *Ahnung*

In the ‘Critique of Teleological Power of Judgment’ Kant suggests we follow yet another ‘hint’ which comes from nature itself. Such a hint is signaled by the assumption of the concept of “natural purpose” [*Naturezweck*]. In order for us to be able to regard our moral vocation as a real possibility, or as Kant puts it “to step beyond nature and even connect it to the highest point in the series of causes”, Kant argues that we must first attempt to discover “where that stranger [*Fremdling*] in natural science, namely the concept of natural ends, leads”.⁶³ Nature’s hint [*Wink*], in this sense, is supposed to indicate to us a supersensible basis for reflection upon our condition as sensible rational

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ As Kant famously argues in §59.

⁶¹ The idea of openness emerges most clearly around the notion of aesthetic ideas and entails thinking about an object “without it being possible for any determinate thought [...], which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible”. CJ, 5:314.

⁶² CJ, 5:302, emphasis mine.

⁶³ CJ, 5:390.

beings.

The idea is that the meeting point between nature and morality lies in the new possibility of thinking of the concept of natural purpose by means of reflection that conjoins our sensible and intelligible nature. It follows that nature's hint to us is accompanied and complemented by a 'presentiment' [*Ahnung*] of our reason, because reason is now learning to recognize itself as *part* of nature and to think in a way that is attuned to it.⁶⁴ I wish to elaborate the relation between nature's *Wink* and reason's *Ahnung* by focusing on the concept that is indeed a "stranger" in natural science, namely the concept of "natural ends".

Where Natural Ends Leads

We form the concept of 'natural ends', in Kant's account, on an analogy with the production of man-made objects according to their purpose. The idea is that in order for us to *not* regard nature's causality as a blind mechanism, we must *represent the possibility* of objects in it teleologically, i.e., as ends.⁶⁵ Kant argues that teleological judgments as such are required, *not* to provide a theoretical explanation on natural ends⁶⁶ but simply to recognize their existence.⁶⁷

Stated differently, the concept of 'natural ends' suggests that our capacity for purposeful action is irreducibly involved in our capacity for *making sense* of nature (or of parts of nature, e.g. organisms, for that matter). The idea is that the two activities: making sense of human action and making sense of organisms both rest on the same reflective structure, namely on our capacity for recognizing the form of purposiveness.

If in the 'Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment' we referred to the form of purposiveness of nature as opening the space of meaning in the reflection of the object, that is, as the opening of that dimension through which "nature figuratively *speaks* to us in its beautiful forms",⁶⁸ the concept of 'natural ends' suggests that there are objects in nature that *open up to us*, in the sense of their ability to become part of our experience, only when we recognize their affinity with objects made purposively by us. To this extent, as I

⁶⁴ Cf. Nuzzo 2008, p. 229.

⁶⁵ See: "we adduce a teleological ground when we [...] *represent the possibility* of the object in accordance with the analogy of such a causality (like the kind we encounter in ourselves), and hence we conceive of nature as *technical* through its own capacity" CJ, 5:360.

⁶⁶ Kant is referring here mainly to living organisms.

⁶⁷ The point is that even though it is *our* way of observing nature and conceiving objects in it, the presentation of purposiveness in this regard is nevertheless *objective*. This means that when we intuitively construct certain natural objects in imagination according to the concept of purposiveness, we actually observe *real* purposiveness *in* nature.

⁶⁸ CJ, 5:301.

suggested earlier, *reason can recognize itself as part of nature and to think in a way that is attuned to it.*

The important point here is *not* that we cognize natural objects as having the form of our reason.⁶⁹ Rather, Kant affirms that organic nature *elicits* or *induces* our employment of an *idea* of reason. Thus, when Kant says: “It must therefore be a certain presentiment [*Ahnung*] of our reason, or a hint [*Wink*] as it were given to us by nature, that we could by means of that concept of final causes step *beyond* nature”⁷⁰ he seems to suggest that there is something *more* in organic phenomena than the systematic structure that we discover in nature in general by way of our understanding. For, we *experience* certain objects (e.g., “crystal formations, various shapes of flowers, or the inner structure of plants and animals”)⁷¹ as not fitting into nature conceived mechanically and that they accordingly *intimate* an origin outside it: a supersensible ground for the object.⁷²

Stated differently, natural ends do not lead us to knowledge or cognition of anything transcendent in its transcendently *real* essence, as it is in itself. But we have, rather, an ‘*Ahnung*’ that there is a transcendent ground of the non-sensible form of appearances, i.e., the form of purposiveness. Since this form is not sensible, we are entitled to suppose that the purposive form exhibited in organic nature corresponds with the form of its (noumenal) grounding. The form of the grounding, in turn, can be cognized only as it is manifested in natural objects and it is thus a mere *hint*.

The question is how our teleological judgment of certain objects in nature is induced by “a certain *Ahnung* of our reason” or a hint “given to us by nature”, to the possibility of going beyond nature and even “connect[ing] it to the highest point in the series of causes”⁷³

Beyond Mechanical Causality

In the ‘Antinomy of the Power of Judgment’ Kant presents the difference between mechanism and teleology of nature in their logic of causality. The antinomy goes as follows:

⁶⁹ For ‘the purposiveness of nature’ or of objects in nature is a *regulative* principle rather than constitutive in that it does not state how nature really *is* but only presents itself as a principle that we must follow in exploring nature. Thus, we cannot infer from it whether plants or animals really are formed internally as we think of them. Cf. CJ, 5:388.

⁷⁰ CJ, 5:390.

⁷¹ CJ, 20:217

⁷² Cf. §70 the second maxim of the power of judgment in the antinomy suggesting that there are “particular experiences [of natural organisms] that *bring reason into play* in order to conduct the judging of corporeal nature and its laws in accordance with a special principle”. CJ, 5:386, emphasizes mine.

⁷³ CJ, 5:390.

Thesis: All generation of material things and their forms must be judged as possible in accordance with merely mechanical laws.

Antithesis: Some products of material nature cannot be judged as possible according to merely mechanical laws (judging them requires an entirely different law of causality, namely that of final causes).⁷⁴

This “representation [*Vorstellung*]” of the antinomy, as Kant refers it, means to show that while the only way to a “proper cognition of nature” is made of mechanistic explanations, when it comes to human reason the use of teleology is inevitable.⁷⁵ Thus, while it is indeed our “obligation to give a mechanical explanation of all products and events in nature [...] as far as it is in our capacity to do so” Kant stresses that we must at the same time never “lose sight of the fact that those which [...] we can in spite of those mechanical causes, subject to investigation only under the concept of an end of reason, must in the end be subordinated to causality in accordance with ends”.⁷⁶

Notice that the two opposing theses Kant presents as the antinomy contain assertions not about nature itself but about the ways we form judgments on nature, which Kant refers as no more than a “guideline” [*Leitfaden*] enabling us to *sense* that nature forms a unity under empirical laws.⁷⁷ This guideline is not aimed at producing theoretical knowledge, as aforesaid, what it gives us, instead, is an *Ahnung*.

The term *Ahnung* is notoriously difficult to translate. The Cambridge translation to the third *Critique* chooses ‘presentiment’. Other scholars offer ‘inkling’,⁷⁸ ‘suspicion’,⁷⁹ ‘intimation’.⁸⁰ All translations capture the fact that *Ahnung* goes beyond traditional conceptions of rational explanation. In the present context of the ‘Teleology’, as we have seen, *Ahnung* is complemented by a *Wink* that it might be possible to go beyond a purely naturalistic study of nature in terms of mechanical causality.

The interesting point is that although an *Ahnung* is not constituting of knowledge in itself, it nevertheless remains within the domain of pure reason, see: “a certain *Ahnung* of our reason”,⁸¹ and is directed towards future discovery. This ambiguous characterization of the term *Ahnung* manages to combine the theoretical *impossibility* of having knowledge about the final end of nature *together* with the rational faith of being able to arrive at

⁷⁴ CJ, 5:387.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ CJ, 5:415.

⁷⁷ CJ, 5:386, 390.

⁷⁸ Chaouli 2017, p. 235.

⁷⁹ Nuzzo 2008, p. 229.

⁸⁰ Beyleveld & Ziche 2015, p. 937.

⁸¹ CJ, 5:390.

insight about it.⁸²

That is the beginning of an answer as to how, when we judge certain objects in nature to be purposeful, we feel encouraged by “a certain *Ahnung* of our reason” or a hint “given to us by nature, that we could by means of that concept of final causes step beyond nature and even connect it to the highest point in the series of causes”.⁸³ The part that still in need of clarification is: towards *what* these *Ahnung* and *Wink* indicate us, and more generally for what purpose do we need to regard nature as having its own *language*?⁸⁴

3. Conclusion: Towards Moral Theology

In the ‘General Remark on the Teleology’ Kant sums up the ‘Teleology’ section by arguing that the concept of natural purposes leads us “beyond the boundaries of nature” since through it we in fact extend our teleological reflections to nature as a whole and to the assumption of a final end of nature.⁸⁵ This concept of natural purposes, Kant stresses “can never be given *a priori*, but only through experience, but which nevertheless *promises* [*verheißt*] a concept of the original ground of nature which among everything that we can conceive fits only the supersensible”.⁸⁶

Kant further clarifies that this kind of teleology (natural teleology) “does not suffice for theology”.⁸⁷ Because when we apply the concept of a natural purpose to the final end of nature, or to its supersensible ground, for that matter, we take a concept that derives its meaning from the context of human agency and apply it to something we do not and cannot know independently. Thus, Kant argues that natural teleology can only give us a *hint* that “we could by means of that concept of final causes step beyond nature and even connect it to the highest point in the series of causes”.⁸⁸

However, even though it is indeed a mere hint, its significance lies in the openness of the dimension towards *what* it may be directed. My point is that the idea of natural purposiveness - although it cannot give us *objects* that go beyond what can be given in intuition⁸⁹ should nonetheless be viewed as pertaining to the very possibility of the

⁸² Cf. Beyleveld & Ziche 2015, p. 938.

⁸³ CJ, 5:390.

⁸⁴ As opposed, for instance, regarding the hints we find in nature as mere explanation of nature as correspondent to our needs.

⁸⁵ CJ, 5:476.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, emphasis mine. The ‘promise’ for a supersensible ground of nature that comes from nature itself can be easily included among the ‘cipher’ notions I have presented thus far due to the similar structure they share.

⁸⁷ CJ, 5:480.

⁸⁸ CJ, 5:390.

⁸⁹ e.g., the supersensible ground of nature, the highest good, or God.

practical dimension of our final moral end, i.e., “the highest point in the series of causes”.⁹⁰

This last point is even more pronounced in the ‘Aesthetics’ section. As we have seen, aesthetic judgment demonstrates that nature is purposive with respect to our faculties through the SFP exhibited by natural beautiful objects. This is, I wish to argue, nature’s crucial hint for us suggesting that in judging nature as beautiful we also judge that nature is here *for us*. The pivotal point here is that even though Kant is clear that this is only our *interpretation* of nature, it nevertheless provides more than the ideal notion of the postulates. This is because our interpretation is based on nature’s own appearance to us.⁹¹ Thus, we are warranted in judging natural beauty as a “cipher by means of which nature figuratively *speaks* to us”.⁹²

The ‘language of nature’ in this regard can at best be seen as a suggestive or inspiring language that enables us to reflect on certain objects in nature in a way that we can then connect with certain rational ideas. Stated differently, natural beauty suggests (in occasioning pleasure in us) that nature is not indifferent to us but can be seen as already pertaining to the domain of morality. The linguistic dimension of nature consists in the fact that this kind of subjective experience has to be communicable, i.e., that there must be a dimension of interpretation or configuration of the mere figurative aspect of nature to something that can be made explicit on the one hand yet remains conceptually indeterminable on the other.

The critical point is that we can make it explicit because it is already there, in nature. This is the sense in which I have suggested that the cipher of nature offers a kind of *evidence* that the work of nature is aimed at our moral vocation. For it shows that the dialectic that otherwise precludes the satisfaction of practical reason, is already in the process of coming undone. This explains why Kant says, that “reason must take an interest in every manifestation [*Äußerung*] in nature of a correspondence similar to this”.⁹³ Given that reason (in this case the reference is to practical reason) has to strive to realize its objects, Kant says that it is crucial for us to have *experiences* that indicate that these objects are indeed realizable.

Notice Kant’s choice of words in this context to the ‘traces and hints’ of nature as the *Äußerung der Natur* which can be translated as an ‘expression’ or even ‘utterance’ of nature thus reinforces the idea of the linguistic dimension of nature.⁹⁴

However, as far as these experiences in nature go, they cannot get us all the way through. That is, they do not get us to the unconditioned final end that practical reason

⁹⁰ CJ, 5:390.

⁹¹ Cf. Sweet 2013, p. 211.

⁹² CJ, 5:301.

⁹³ CJ, 5:300.

⁹⁴ See full quote on page 8.

seeks, as it cannot be exhibited, by its definition, in intuition. These experiences can thus only 'indicate' or 'hint' to us, as it were, that this end is coherent and *could* have objective reality. My point is that this hint we experience in nature, being part of nature's language, prepares the ground for Kant's treatment of beauty as a *symbol* of morality which stands as the culmination of 'The Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment'.

The idea is that beautiful nature presents us with SFP, which is the hint towards the realizability of the highest moral end – the highest good. Stated differently, the hint nature gives us allows us to *articulate* how beauty is a presentation [*Darstellung*] of the morally good. What we have here is a way of representing [*darstellen*] nature as meaningful to us.⁹⁵ Only then do we have a ground to make *analogical* presentation thus to regard beauty as a symbol of morality.⁹⁶

The symbolization articulated in the form of analogical relation *is* the true groundwork for Kant's moral theology as he puts it later in the *Religion*: "We always need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us".⁹⁷ My point is that in order for us to be able to make such analogical presentation we must configure our aesthetic experience of mere hints and ciphers *in* nature. This allows us to use certain objects in nature viz., natural beautiful objects, also *as* symbols.⁹⁸

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⁹⁵ See my opening quote from Kant's *Reflexionen*: "Beautiful things *show* [*anzeigen*] that human beings fit in the world". *Reflexionen zur Logik*, n. 1820A, 16:127.

⁹⁶ Cf. Chignell 2010. Chignell refers to the hints we find in nature as another sort of symbolization-relation, see: "Beauty entices in us by giving us symbols [...] of transcendental ideas" (Chignell 2010, p. 206). While I am in complete agreement that Kant's language of hints and symbols are inseparable, I *do* hold that there is a substantial difference between them. According to my reading natural beauty cannot "give us symbols" directly from itself, as it were. We must configure our experience in order to be able to make analogical presentation out of it. What natural beauty *does* give us are hints that we can make explicit by using them as a symbol.

⁹⁷ Rel., 6:65n.

⁹⁸ I thank two anonymous reviewers for carefully reading my paper and for their helpful suggestions and comments.

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