



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Brady, Emily, "Don't Eat the Daisies: Disinterestedness and the Situated Aesthetic." *Environmental Values* 7, no. 1, (1998): 97-114.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5742>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1998. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

Don't Eat the Daisies: Disinterestedness and the Situated Aesthetic

EMILY BRADY

*Philosophy Department
Furness College, Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YG, UK*

ABSTRACT: In debates about nature conservation, aesthetic appreciation is typically understood in terms of valuing nature as an amenity, something that we value for the pleasure it provides. In this paper I argue that this position, what I call the hedonistic model, rests on a misunderstanding of aesthetic appreciation. To support this claim I put forward an alternative model based on disinterestedness, and I defend disinterestedness against mistaken interpretations of it. Properly understood, disinterestedness defines a standpoint which precludes self-interest and utility, and it does not entail a passive subject abstracted from who they are. This standpoint is compatible with a 'situated aesthetic' in which appreciation of aesthetic qualities is grounded in an embedded subject who is sensitive to the context and narrative of the object. The alternative model provides a conception of aesthetic value which distinguishes it from amenity value, and it also defines a non-instrumental approach that offers the opportunity for enhanced appreciation and attention to nature's value.

KEYWORDS: disinterestedness, aesthetic value, environmental aesthetics, natural beauty

I. INTRODUCTION

In debates about how to manage and conserve particular parts of the natural environment, aesthetic appreciation is often understood in terms of what I call the 'hedonistic model'. The hedonistic model classifies aesthetic value as a type of amenity value, where nature is valued for the aesthetic pleasure that it provides to inhabitants or visitors. As an amenity, nature is treated as a means to our ends; nature as a playground for sensory and recreational enjoyment.¹ But this strategy is problematic, for it both confuses aesthetic appreciation with the desire for pleasure, and reduces it to a sort of consumption. If we want to forward the cause of nature conservation, then we need to move beyond valuing nature as a means to pleasure. In this paper I shall argue that disinterestedness characterises a desirable alternative model of aesthetic appreciation, one which marks off the

distinctive role of aesthetic value. I begin with a particular conservation problem to provide a practical framework for considering the role of aesthetic value in nature conservation. I then contrast the hedonistic model with the disinterested model and discuss the role of disinterestedness as the foundation of aesthetic appreciation, defending it against recent attacks on the grounds that such attacks rest on a misunderstanding of the concept. Through this discussion I show that disinterestedness is compatible with a 'situated aesthetic' where aesthetic appreciation involves an embedded subject who is sensitive to the situatedness of the aesthetic object.

II. WINDSURFING ON WASTWATER?

There is an ongoing debate about whether or not to allow windsurfing on Wastwater, a lake in the western part of the Lake District National Park in England. The National Trust manages the lake and area around it which includes the lake shore and some of the surrounding hills. Windsurfing is allowed on some other lakes managed by the National Trust in the park, but so far the Trust has resisted allowing it in Wastwater on the grounds that windsurfing would spoil the distinctive character of the lake. The sombre, sublime character of Wastwater makes it unlike any other lake in the park. Its magnificence is striking – deep, dark water with a dominant scree slope rising steeply from the southeastern edge of the lake. Viewed from the southwest, the peak of Great Gable provides a dramatic backdrop to the water. Those who argue against the windsurfers cite several specific reasons for their position: the bright colours of the windsurfers' sails would be visually intrusive and incongruous with the aesthetic unity of the landscape; secondly, the recreational activity would introduce more cars and spoil the wild stillness that defines the mood of the place; thirdly, the area is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and there is some concern that increased recreational use of the area would be ecologically damaging, especially to the mires at one end of the lake. Those who argue in favour of the windsurfers believe that the windsurfing would be relatively quiet and unobtrusive, and some people think that the colourful sails would brighten up the landscape. On both sides of the debate, the reasons given are based in aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, with the exception of the ecological point in the National Trust's argument. In the next two sections I contrast two different models of aesthetic appreciation to determine which offers a better approach to the Wastwater problem.

III. THE HEDONISTIC MODEL OF AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

The hedonistic model rests on two main points; firstly, the desire for pleasure is what motivates aesthetic appreciation, we seek out particular landscapes or

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

natural objects not because they have aesthetic value in themselves, but because they provide a means to our pleasure; and secondly, aesthetic appreciation is a matter of individual taste. Together these points support a view of measuring the aesthetic value of an object by adding up the various pleasures and displeasures of individual aesthetic responses.

In the context of the Wastwater problem, the hedonistic model would be likely to be used in the following way. Views on the problem range from the belief that windsurfers would cheer up the sombre mood of the lake, brightening it up by adding colour and activity, to the view that windsurfers would destroy the lake's distinctive character, with the sails and activity creating a disruption to the mood and the look of the place. These conflicting views would be treated as pleasures and displeasures, and they would be measured by weighing up which choice – windsurfers or no windsurfers – would maximise the pleasure of inhabitants and visitors. Included in this general calculation would be both aesthetic pleasure (understood in terms of what gratifies the senses) and the recreational pleasure from windsurfing, with both pleasures lumped together under the heading of 'recreational use and enjoyment'.

There are several disadvantages to this approach. Aesthetic value is treated as a matter of individual taste, a private matter that is too subjective to be given a prominent role because it is impossible to measure. When attempts *are* made to measure it, aesthetic value is lumped together with other pleasures. Aesthetic appreciation then becomes a purely instrumental concern, being significant only insofar as it increases or decreases the pleasure of inhabitants and visitors, so that any distinctive role for aesthetic appreciation is lost because it becomes indistinguishable from pleasures connected to use. The end result is that aesthetic value is subordinated to other concerns which, it is believed, can be objectively determined, such as the rarity of a species or the economic benefits of a new road.

On one hand the hedonistic model's approach is not at all surprising, for it reflects a pair of common notions of the aesthetic: the 'aesthetic' means pleasure of the senses, and beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.² On the other hand, I find this understanding of aesthetic appreciation surprising because it is so far removed from the common philosophical view of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested attention to the aesthetic qualities of an object for their own sake. Although this view has been challenged, it remains a dominant player in philosophical aesthetics. I think the solution to my puzzlement and surprise lies in the gap between theory and practice, in particular the distance that lies between academic work in aesthetics and the role of aesthetics in conservation decision-making. This gap is not easily bridgeable, but it is possible to draw on philosophical aesthetics beneficially to develop an alternative model of aesthetic appreciation. This new model carves out a distinct place for aesthetic value by defining it as valuing the aesthetic qualities of nature not as a means to the human end of pleasure, but rather as having value apart from any ends.

IV. THE DISINTERESTEDNESS MODEL OF AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

A good source for understanding how disinterestedness characterises aesthetic appreciation can be found in Kant's aesthetic theory. Kant distinguishes the judgements of aesthetic appreciation, 'judgements of taste',³ from other types of judgement in two ways. First, judgments of taste are grounded in a feeling of pleasure or 'liking' in the subject in response to the form or appearance of some object, rather than being grounded in a determinate concept of the object. This marks off aesthetic judgments from cognitive judgements. Secondly, and more importantly for my argument, the feeling of pleasure or liking which grounds aesthetic judgements is *disinterested*. Disinterestedness does not mean indifference, but rather it identifies a way of appreciating an object apart from any 'interest'. It operates as the condition which distinguishes judgements of taste from both judgements of the agreeable and the good, both of which involve appreciating objects in relation to an 'interest'.⁴

For Kant, to have an 'interest' in an object is to have a concept of it in terms of its capacity to satisfy some desire.⁵ In particular, he identifies two kinds of interest that are not involved in the aesthetic appreciation of the judgement of taste: (1) interest in or desire for an object for sensory gratification (which he classifies as a liking for the agreeable); and (2) interest in or desire for an object as a means to some practical or utilitarian end (which he classifies as a liking for the good.) Both types of interest involve valuing objects for some purpose that they serve, which may also be understood in terms of satisfying some desire we have. In the first case, we like or value an object, say a cold drink, because it serves the purpose of quenching our thirst. The second case involves liking or valuing an object because it serves another type of purpose – either utilitarian or moral. To use Kant's example, we like health, and say that it is good because it enables us to perform the tasks of life. Valuing something as morally (or intrinsically) good, is connected to purpose and desire because we find something morally good when it satisfies an end according to duty (Kant's 'moral law'). Aesthetic appreciation involves no interest in this sense because the judgement of taste is a judgement which is free from any (determinate) concept of the object, and thus any desire connected to this.⁶

The aesthetic appreciation of the judgment of taste is therefore distinguished from valuing an object in virtue of its capacity to fulfil some desire. The judgement of taste is a 'free liking' which arises through the mere contemplation of an object for its aesthetic qualities, rather than a liking which arises through the ways in which that object might satisfy our needs, whether as a means to our own (self-interested) ends, or other ends. Kant articulates this when he says that:

...only the liking involved in taste for the beautiful is disinterested and free, since we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason.⁷

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

The differences between the hedonistic model and the disinterestedness model turn on this point. The pleasure of the hedonistic model is an appetitive pleasure in which the desire for sensory pleasure *motivates* aesthetic appreciation. This is the pleasure that Kant connects with judgements of the agreeable, or judgements based on the desire to gratify the senses. But because the feeling of pleasure which characterises the judgement of taste is disinterested, this pleasure does not motivate the aesthetic response, for that would indicate an interest, namely desiring the object as a source of pleasure instead of appreciating its individuality.⁸ So in contrast to the hedonistic model, the disinterestedness model effectively removes pleasure as a motivating factor in aesthetic appreciation. Pleasure is still involved, but it is produced in the aesthetic response rather than a motivating factor. However, Kant's characterisation of the aesthetic response is perhaps too narrowly construed in terms of pleasure. Pleasure need not be a necessary condition of the aesthetic response. For example, the aesthetic response can be characterised by shock, curiosity or sadness. Pleasure may be connected to such responses, but it is not a necessary nor a sufficient condition of the model of aesthetic appreciation I wish to develop. In this respect, as well as in a few other respects (which I discuss later in this paper), my model diverges from Kant's. The central claim which I draw from Kant is that the pleasure (or other feeling or emotion) connected to the aesthetic response is disinterested.

Disinterestedness as the foundation of aesthetic appreciation points to how aesthetic value might figure positively in debates about how to manage and conserve the natural environment. It achieves this by providing a means by which to distinguish aesthetic value from amenity value, and it also secures a place for aesthetic value which backgrounds personal preferences and utilitarian concerns in our approach to nature and foregrounds an appreciation of its aesthetic qualities alone. In the Wastwater case this means valuing the lake and surrounding mountains for their beauty and sublimity – the way in which the great peak dominates the scene, with the dark lake reflecting its stature – rather than valuing the lake as a source of pleasure for a windsurfer.

V. DEFENDING DISINTERESTEDNESS

Disinterestedness is a concept which has attracted several criticisms, so in order to support my model as a desirable alternative I now turn to a consideration of them. These criticisms come from a variety of perspectives,⁹ but I note three voices in particular: the philosophical aesthetician (a criticism from within aesthetics), and from outside aesthetics, post-modern and feminist philosophers. Since there is some overlap between these perspectives, I shall proceed by taking them together, whilst recognising that the objections are bound up with the different projects for each of them. The common criticisms are

- (1) disinterestedness wrongly characterises aesthetic appreciation as a 'blank cow-like stare' (the blank cow-like stare objection)
- (2) disinterestedness necessarily underpins a formalist aesthetics which is indefensible because it claims that the aesthetic is identified exclusively with the perception of form (the formalism objection)

The first objection rests on the association of disinterestedness with distancing, detachment, and passive contemplation. This association stems from the idea that through disinterestedness we detach or distance ourselves from concerns about ourselves to be in a better position to appreciate an object for its individual qualities. Unfortunately, this distancing and detachment has given rise to the belief that aesthetic experience involves passive contemplation of an object, and what follows from this are a number of problems for the concept.¹⁰ For the aesthetician, detachment, distancing and passive contemplation are often taken to mean that aesthetic experience is typified by 'the blank cow-like stare', that is, inactive perceptual contemplation. The blank cow-like stare is challenged with the claim that many experiences which we would want to call aesthetic are active and exciting instead of still and restful. The feminist and post-modernist concur, arguing that the detachment of disinterestedness yields a passive and abstracted standpoint rather than an active and embedded one. Their objection rests on the belief that disinterestedness requires that almost everything about the individual subject is set aside (values, beliefs, desires, life experience), so that one is disconnected from both situation and context. Disinterestedness is thus accused of insensitivity to the individual circumstances and details of a situation (in this case the natural object or landscape of our aesthetic attention). John Dewey sums up this first criticism when he says that the aesthetic response involves 'no severance of self, no holding of it aloof, but fullness of participation'.¹¹

The associations which lie at the foundation of the first criticism give rise to the second, that disinterestedness is responsible for the worst kind of aesthetic formalism. In aesthetic formalism, detachment from personal concerns associated with the disinterested standpoint becomes detachment from concern for everything but form. Exclusive attention to form has two consequences for the aesthetic response. Firstly, formalism sets up a dichotomy between form and content and claims that only the perception of form is relevant to aesthetic appreciation. Form is usually associated with combinations of lines, colours, and shapes, while content pertains to what the painting, poem, or music is about. Secondly, it is argued that in aesthetic appreciation 'we need bring with us nothing from life'.¹² The aesthetic response is cut off from knowledge of the artists's intention, the genetic history of the artwork, and more generally, life experiences, save the response of aesthetic emotion, an emotion exclusive to the perception of 'significant form'.¹³

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

Many aestheticians object to both tenets of formalism. The first is rejected on the grounds that the form/content dichotomy is difficult to uphold.¹⁴ In response to the second point, critics argue that the exclusion of both life experience and knowledge of the aesthetic object devalue our input into the aesthetic experience by making irrelevant knowledge, beliefs, imaginative associations, memories, etc. The feminist and post-modernist agree, but put a slightly different slant on their objections. Formalism represents a 'closure' of the aesthetic response because it sharply defines it in terms of disinterested perception of form. This 'closure' seals off the aesthetic from the rest of our experience, which has the additional consequence of making aesthetic appreciation available only to a select elite, namely those who possess the aesthetic sensitivity to perceive significant form.¹⁵

Given these criticisms, it is not surprising that disinterestedness has become such a problematic concept; it has evolved into something quite unfashionable because it identifies a distanced, and even elitist approach, which is connected to a dispassionate, abstracted perspective. But I would like to argue that these criticisms about the idea and value of disinterestedness can be traced back to misconceptions of the concept as it was originally understood. By returning to the historically accurate roots of the concept, I aim to clarify it and thus expose the misguided nature of these objections.

The original meaning of disinterestedness lies in 18th century moral philosophy when Shaftesbury identifies the disinterested standpoint with morality. Moral action is motivated by affection for something for its own sake, and it is therefore contrasted with desiring an object as a means to an end for one's own pleasure, or for any other use. Shaftesbury opposes 'interestedness' or self-love to disinterestedness or actions which are not motivated by self-concern or any other consequence.¹⁶ Disinterestedness thus begins in this ethical context and is then brought smoothly into aesthetic theory to characterise the standpoint which we see in Kant.

The significance of Shaftesbury's remarks, together with Kant's, is to show that disinterestedness does not entail the passivity, abstraction and formalism assumed by its critics; aesthetic appreciation does not require that we set aside who we are, it requires only that we set aside *what we want*. Disinterested aesthetic appreciation does not have to be impersonal or detached from the self – we approach the object from a concrete standpoint and, if we choose, relate the object to ourselves but apart from wants and desires. Having clarified the logic of the concept, I shall now consider more carefully how this type of standpoint can meet the two objections discussed above.

The first criticism began with the claim from within aesthetics that disinterestedness makes aesthetic appreciation a blank cow-like stare, an approach marked by passive contemplation. Here, the objection also rests on a mistaken assumption; the assumption that there is some conflict between disinterestedness

and engagement with the aesthetic object. But if disinterestedness is merely freedom from certain kinds of interest, then it certainly does not follow from this that aesthetic attention can be likened to the blank cow-like stare. Aesthetic attention involves the active use of the capacities of perception, thought and imagination.

To support this point I return to Kant, since his aesthetic theory sets disinterestedness side by side with the aesthetic contemplation of the object. Although he says that the judgement of taste is characterised by *passive* delight or contemplative pleasure, a closer look provides an important clarification. He attributes a special meaning to 'passive' by connecting it to an 'interest', which was shown above to mean having a desire connected to an object, whether for sensory gratification or to use as a means to some end.¹⁷ Only judgements of taste are characterised in this way because the activity of the perception is complete in itself. Thus the passivity of the aesthetic response means only an inactivity in respect of interest, and it does not preclude active contemplation. But just what does this active contemplation consist in? I would like to focus on the role of imagination as one aspect of this engagement to show that aesthetic attention is rarely passive and that there is no conflict between disinterestedness and participation with the aesthetic object.

For Kant, the contemplation of the aesthetic response is characterised by what he calls the 'harmonious free play of imagination and understanding'. The freedom of the mental powers here refers to freedom from cognising the object, that is, seeking determinate knowledge about it, but it also refers to the very nature of imagination's activity as free. Its activity is not constrained nor directed by determinate concepts of the object. Thus Kant sets up an active role for the mind in aesthetic experience, one which involves playing with the perceptual features of both artworks and natural objects. Although he uses the term 'contemplation' to describe this mode of attention, this is no still, passive state of mind, as illustrated in these remarks

This pleasure is also not practical in any way...yet it does have a causality in it, namely to *keep* [us in] the state of [having] the presentation itself, and [to keep] the cognitive powers engaged [in their occupation] without any further aim. *We linger* in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself.¹⁸ (translators brackets)

It is in fact this activity that gives rise to the feeling of pleasure that underlies the judgement of taste for Kant, so the activity is characteristic of every act of aesthetic appreciation. He also gives an active role to the imagination in a particular kind of aesthetic experience – the sublime. Here imagination is active in trying to grasp the magnificent size or power of certain awesome natural objects, although in the end it fails to apprehend the object because it is stretched its capacity, pushed beyond its limits. It is important to note, however, that in both cases imagination's freedom is tied to the object; there is no room for self-

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

indulgent fantasy in Kant's account, since the understanding keeps imagination in check through their mutual free play.

Kant's view of aesthetic contemplation is characterised by engaged attention rather than a blank cow-like stare, but where does this leave the subject as participant? Recall that further problems related to the first criticism were raised by feminists and post-modernists, namely the claim that the disinterested subject is abstracted from situation and context. This problem stems from mistaken associations which are in part due to the unfortunate connotation of the terms, 'disinterestedness', 'distancing', and 'detachment'. 'Disinterestedness' is too often taken to mean indifference rather than interest or attention to aesthetic qualities alone. 'Distancing' is mistakenly coupled with the idea of creating distance (physical or otherwise) between subject and object rather than distancing oneself from desires and needs which might get in the way of appreciating the object itself. This is not surprising given the conventions that hold in viewing artworks, and the physical barriers that we put between ourselves and the natural environment.¹⁹ 'Detachment' is understood not as setting aside utilitarian interests in relation to an object, but rather as cutting oneself off from one's own experience.

By referring back to the logic of disinterestedness outlined above, these associations look misplaced. There is nothing in the concept of disinterestedness which excludes an approach which is sensitive to context, narrative, and the situation of both subject and object. To show how disinterestedness can support a 'situated aesthetic', I begin by focusing on the role of the *subject*, and will defer consideration of the situatedness of the object to my response to the formalism objection. What is required here is a better understanding of exactly what aspects of the subject are precluded by disinterestedness, and I begin by considering this problem within ethics.

In the domain of human conduct, some philosophers have argued that the impartiality of disinterestedness does not entail that moral judgements are made from an abstracted standpoint.²⁰ To see how this might be possible, consider two different cases: the impartial juror deliberating on the innocence or guilt of the accused; and the counsellor who provides guidance as both listener and advisor. First, a juror in an armed robbery trial acts as an impartial observer of the proceedings because they are expected not to act on personal biases toward the defendant. If the defendant is a particularly arrogant person, a juror who has a particular dislike for arrogance, and in fact mistrusts it, has a duty to background this preference, to make it irrelevant to her judgement. Nonetheless, the juror deliberates from a situated perspective rather than a view from nowhere. For example, let's say that she is a young woman with a keen eye for detail, which she will use to carefully examine the facts of the case and to make a reasonable judgement as to innocence or guilt. She herself has been robbed once and is thus able to relate to the situation of the victims, but she adds to this the fact that it must have been even more frightening for them because her assailants were not armed.

She uses her own past experience to relate to the victims, yet she tells herself not to assume the guilt of the defendant out of her own fear. My example illustrates a disinterested approach to judging the situation, in which the juror judges from a position embedded in her particular experience, knowledge and ability. The concrete features of the juror are not left out of deliberation, but rather they play an essential role in her assessment of the case.

My second example shows how a disinterested perspective can be essential in the more intimate context of a counsellor-client relationship. In order to help clients with their problems, counsellors require a detailed understanding of each case which they achieve by discovering the background and needs of the client. This essential sensitivity and familiarity with the client's situation is coupled with the counsellor's own situated perspective. The counsellor is also an individual with particular experience, beliefs and needs, some of which may be absolutely essential to his expertise in this context. His experience as a supportive member to the rest of his own family may be what has enabled him to develop the particular stance he takes with all his clients, and it may also enable him to address the problems of a particular client. But alongside this we expect the counsellor to be disinterested, so that his own needs and desires do not impede his ability to help his client. His needs and desires remain a part of him, but they are not acted upon in this context. For example, a session may evoke thoughts and feelings about his relationship with his partner, yet he must set these concerns aside and work them out on his own time, unless they can be redirected away from his own concerns and used to work through the client's problem. An advantage of backgrounding needs and desires is that the counsellor is open and receptive, more able to focus on the client's needs.

The two examples show how some very individual or personal features of the subject are compatible with a disinterested standpoint, while others are deemed to interfere, and hence are set aside. Although the aesthetic standpoint does not involve the practical reasoning and deliberation of a moral agent,²¹ we can begin to see how a disinterested, situated standpoint works in the appreciation of aesthetic qualities. When appreciating a butterfly, I am not detached from who I am in my response. I take delight in the graceful weightlessness of its flight, which may be because I delight merely in the gaiety I see expressed in the creature, or it may turn on personal associations I relate to the experience – perhaps I identify with the freedom of its flight. My own experience shapes and deepens my appreciation of the aesthetic object; it is shaped by who I am and deepened by the meanings I attach to the object. My response is still disinterested because although my own associations shape my response I am not preoccupied by them; I value the butterfly for its grace and beauty rather than for any end it might serve.

The potential richness of the situated aesthetic has so far been described in terms of how the subject's experience contributes to the aesthetic response, but I have yet to show how the *object* is situated within disinterested appreciation. I would like to complete that part of my model by responding to the formalism

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

objection, which claimed that disinterestedness underpins aesthetic formalism. One source of the formalist position is Kant's claim that aesthetic judgement is unlike cognitive judgement because in aesthetic judgement we do not apply a determinate concept to an object, but rather the aesthetic response is characterised by a feeling of pleasure in the perception of the form or appearance of an object. But although formalists trace their roots back to Kant, whether or not he is a formalist remains a matter of debate.²² One shrewd interpretation holds that it does not follow from Kant's claim that *only* form is relevant to aesthetic appreciation. Paul Crowther argues that

The key *logical* significance of the pure aesthetic judgement lies in what it does *not* presuppose in order to be enjoyed. To take pleasure in the way things appear to the senses is just that. We may find that our being in a position to experience such pleasure has required a certain path through life; it may also be that a lot of factual knowledge and practical considerations impinge upon our pleasure. However, such factors are not *logical* preconditions of our enjoying beauty: they are contingent elements. We do not *have* to take account of them in appreciating formal qualities for their own sake.²³

This points to the negative logic within Kant's aesthetic theory. Knowledge of the background of the aesthetic object, for example knowledge of the function of a whale's blowhole, is not *necessary* for appreciating the shimmering grey skin stretched across its back.²⁴ Crowther's point is useful for clarifying the logic of Kant's judgement of taste, and it suggests that contingencies such as knowledge of whale physiology or concerns about the survival of whales as a species *could* be fed into aesthetic appreciation.

However, Kant never provides an account of how these contingent elements might figure alongside the perception of form or appearance. This makes me wary that sticking too closely to Kant in this context would present problems for my argument. His account might limit the richness of the situated aesthetic for which I argue, and a defence of his aesthetic theory against the charge of formalism would involve a discussion of arguments beyond my aims here. To clarify then, I embrace Kant's concept of disinterestedness as the foundation of aesthetic appreciation, which means that objects are appreciated for their aesthetic qualities rather than as a means to some end, but I reject his potentially problematic conception of what counts as an 'aesthetic quality' since this could be understood too narrowly in terms of formal qualities. On my view, aesthetic qualities are perceptual qualities widely understood – what we perceive using all of our senses plus meanings that we attach to sense perceptions through thought and imagination.

What then is the role of knowledge in disinterested aesthetic appreciation, and how might this reach beyond appreciation of merely formal qualities of the object? Just as artworks are products of an artist and a history of art, natural objects are embedded in a narrative of natural and cultural history, even though they lack a human maker.²⁵ And just as with artworks, we must decide how much

or how little knowledge of this narrative is relevant to aesthetic appreciation. Disinterestedness becomes a useful guideline here: we choose knowledge which focuses and expands our attention to perceptual qualities of the object and the meanings that emerge through our experience of them. My appreciation of the butterfly is shaped not only by associations I make, but also by the particular knowledge I have of butterflies. Knowing that a butterfly emerged from a caterpillar in a cocoon increases my appreciation of the vibrant colours because it enables me to recognise the contrast of colours before and after the metamorphosis. This knowledge is part of the story of the butterfly, yet it becomes a legitimate part of aesthetic appreciation because it adds meaning to the perceptual qualities I enjoy.

But not all knowledge is consistent with the disinterested aesthetic standpoint. Some knowledge clearly conflicts with the condition of disinterestedness. When I identify with the butterfly's free flight, thoughts which follow from that may distract me from disinterested attention to the butterfly *qua* aesthetic object. For example, if I bring to the experience the knowledge that one of my siblings is not so free, but rather trapped in a painful relationship, I have used the butterfly to articulate my thoughts and feelings around something too personal. In this way I have become preoccupied not with the beauty of the butterfly, but with concern for my sibling.

Other uses of knowledge are inconsistent with disinterested aesthetic appreciation simply because they shift focus away from *aesthetic* appreciation. Scientific knowledge can supplement the aesthetic response, as my point about metamorphosis shows, but it can also dominate appreciation in ways that divert attention from aesthetic qualities. If I value the butterfly because it has particular qualities which make it a good specimen of its species, then I value it in virtue of biological rather than aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, even if the scientific approach is disinterested, as some have argued, it lacks what makes the disinterestedness of aesthetic appreciation valuable to nature conservation. Scientific value is grounded in wonder and curiosity and aims at acquiring knowledge, while aesthetic appreciation is grounded in the experience of aesthetic qualities, but it has no explicit aim; it is not *for* knowledge, nor *for* sensory gratification.

These examples show that disinterestedness does not make all knowledge of non-formal qualities irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation, and they also indicate how disinterestedness supports a perspective which treats natural objects – whales, butterflies, landscapes – as embedded in their own particular narratives. This latter point, coupled with the situatedness of the subject, provides a picture of what disinterestedness *includes*, rather than what it excludes. It is not merely a concept which sets logical restrictions on aesthetic appreciation, but it also encourages open receptivity to the aesthetic qualities of the object because it frees up the mind from personal preoccupations. Iris Murdoch eloquently expresses this almost selfless attention.

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly, I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing left but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.²⁶

We can be drawn in by the object, engaged so thoroughly in perception that its aesthetic qualities pull us out of ourselves. Disinterestedness thus characterises a particular way of being occupied in which our attention to natural objects is directed outwards rather than inwards.

Disinterestedness as the basis of aesthetic appreciation defines a standpoint that backgrounds the concerns of self-interest and utility in relation to nature and foregrounds its aesthetic qualities as valuable in their own right. Against the claims of the blank cow-like stare and formalism objections, I have shown that this standpoint does not entail abstraction from every aspect of individual experience, nor from the context and narrative in which the aesthetic object is situated. Instead, disinterestedness supports a situated aesthetic which is sensitive to the particularities of the aesthetic experience and works positively to shift focus away from the self and toward fullness of engagement with the aesthetic object.

VI. THE DISINTERESTEDNESS MODEL AND NATURE CONSERVATION

With a clear idea of the alternative model in place, it is now possible to consider more closely how it might be used to tackle the Wastewater problem. One benefit of my model is that it provides a distinct place for aesthetic value alongside other values that might be included when discussing possible solutions to the problem. Rather than treating aesthetic value as a type of amenity value by weighing up pleasures and displeasures in order to determine the choice that maximises pleasure, the disinterestedness model locates aesthetic appreciation in a different category altogether. It achieves this by treating the lake and its surrounding landscapes as valuable simply in virtue of qualities such as the grandeur of the mountains shooting up from the shore and the muted greens and oranges of the grass and bracken on the hills.

In actual discussions about whether or not to allow windsurfing on the lake, amenity value will be taken into account along with the value based on aesthetic qualities of the landscape and the ecological value of the SSSI. It is not part of my strategy here to argue that aesthetic value should take precedence over these other values in this case or any other, nor to suggest ways to settle disputes that arise between conflicting values or even disagreements between aesthetic judgements that issue from my model. These matters must be left to the good judgement and experience of individuals who know the case well and have reflected on its details. However, I do not want to suggest that aesthetic value is

less important than other environmental values. The aesthetic experience that gives rise to our aesthetic judgments significantly contributes to the value of life. It is not a luxury, nor is it the icing on the cake. If this seems difficult to accept, consider the impoverishment of a life devoid of natural beauty or the arts. Moreover, it could be argued that aesthetic value is presupposed by other environmental values. For example, ecosystem integrity presupposes the aesthetic concepts of integrity, harmony and unity. In any case, the importance given to aesthetic value in comparison to other values must vary according to the conservation problem, simply because it may be less relevant in a particular case, or because of the particular conditions of a case. With respect to Wastwater, aesthetic appreciation is prominent amongst the relevant factors for discussion. In another case, where changes to the environment have an insignificant impact in terms of its aesthetic character, aesthetic value will feature less prominently.

These arguments cannot be developed in sufficient depth here, but given the aims of this paper, I can at least point to the potential benefit of my model for designating aesthetic value as not merely subjective and therefore as worthy of serious consideration in conservation debates. Disinterestedness constrains acting on personal desires and biases, which ensures some degree of impartiality in aesthetic judgements. I have argued above that this impartial standpoint is not impersonal in every way. Those involved in the dispute come to the table with their various individual aesthetic experiences of Wastwater – some will be visitors, others will be inhabitants, some like the look and feeling of Wastwater as it is, others think it would be better or won't change for the worse with windsurfers – and like the juror and the counsellor, what they bring to the discussion is shaped by who they are, including their own knowledge and experience of the lake. But disinterestedness requires backgrounding individual preferences which interfere with appreciating aesthetic qualities alone (such as how the lake might best serve their own purposes). Aesthetic judgements are in this way freed from merely personal or arbitrary aspects. For example, the windsurfing enthusiast who lives near the lake must consider how the appearance and character of Wastwater might be changed for better or for worse, apart from her wish to use the lake.

But agreement in aesthetic judgements does not necessarily follow from disinterestedness. Having backgrounded her desire to use the lake, the windsurfing enthusiast might still find the lake more aesthetically pleasing with windsurfers. She might argue that the colourful sails would improve the dreary look of the place, presenting a bright contrast to its muted colours. Beside this judgement lies the equally disinterested judgement of the hillwalker who sidelines his own preference for solitude and peace, but nonetheless judges that the colourful sails would detract from the wild beauty of Wastwater through their very contrast with its muted colours. Despite this possible disagreement, the benefit of disinterestedness is nonetheless clear. It makes aesthetic judgements possible which are not merely subjective because it removes personal prejudices. The upshot of this is a more viable concept of aesthetic value.

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

I conclude by emphasising the advantages of my model of aesthetic appreciation. Disinterestedness carves out a distinctive role for aesthetic appreciation in nature conservation by removing it from the category of amenity value, thus designating a clear place for it alongside other ways we value nature. It also distinguishes an approach to aesthetic value that does not rest on the narrow subjectivity of merely personal tastes. And finally, these two advantages combine to provide a type of non-instrumental value which, if given importance, offers the opportunity for enhanced appreciation of nature's value.

NOTE

I would like to thank colleagues in the Philosophy Department of Lancaster University, Cheryl Foster and anonymous referees of this journal for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ This is sometimes true even of conservation organisations themselves. For example, the planning statement for the Adirondack State Park in the United States identifies aesthetic value in terms of 'scenic value' which I find rather ambiguous. On the one hand it suggests the value of what you see, which can be understood in terms of valuing what you see in virtue of its aesthetic qualities, but the use of 'scenic' (rather than the more neutral 'landscape') is also suggestive of valuing nature as a means to our pleasure. Judging from the context of its use in the planning statement, scenic value is closely linked to recreational value, so that they are referred to together as meaning 'for human use and enjoyment'. Scenic value is set alongside other values – historical, scientific, and educational – that feature in the park plan and it is therefore given an important role beside other values, but it is the association with recreational value that I object to, because this interprets aesthetic appreciation in terms of an amenity value. (Adirondack Park Agency 1985, pp. 17, 34). The Countryside Commission in England designates scenic qualities as distinct from 'natural, historic, and cultural qualities', but it seems to make a clearer distinction between amenity value and aesthetic value in the way that its objectives distinguish between conserving designated 'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' and conserving parts of the countryside in the interests of access and recreation (Countryside Commission, 1994).

² For a helpful discussion of the predominance of this view and the implications of it for a serious treatment of natural beauty, see Diffey 1993.

³ Kant's use of 'taste' here can be misleading. He argues that although judgements of taste are grounded in a feeling in the subject, we nonetheless expect agreement in these judgements. One of the aims of his *Critique of Judgment* is to show that beauty is not merely a subjective matter, yet also that beauty is not an objective quality.

⁴ Kant 1987, §2.

⁵ I agree with Paul Guyer's interpretation here when he defines Kant's notion of 'interest' as 'a conception of an object which furnishes an incentive for the will, or as a conception of an object and its relation to the subject whereby the faculty of desire is determined to seek its realization' (Guyer 1979, p. 187).

⁶ Kant also connects 'interest' to being concerned about the 'real existence' of the object. This is an odd way of putting it, but some interpretations of this suggest that it means

having an interest in the object that is determined by concepts of its utility or its goodness (or more generally, its 'empirical existence'). (Guyer, 1979, p. 183ff.; Crowther 1996, p.111; Kemal 1992, p. 50.) This interpretation is supported further when Kant says that the judgement of taste is a free liking, in which what matters is 'not the [respect] in which I depend upon the object's existence.' (Kant 1987, §2, p. 46)

⁷ Kant 1987, §5, p. 52.

⁸ It is worth pointing out that Kant's position is no isolated case. He has had a lasting influence, which is indicated by a very recent view of aesthetic pleasure put forward by Jerrold Levinson, '*Pleasure in an object is aesthetic when it derives from apprehension of and reflection on the object's individual character and content, both for itself and in relation to the structural base on which it rests.* That is to say, to appreciate something aesthetically is to attend to its forms, qualities and meanings for their own sakes, but also to attend to the way in which all such things emerge from the particular set of low-level perceptual features which define the object on a non-aesthetic plane.' (Levinson's italics) (Levinson 1992, pp. 331-332).

⁹ Examples include Nietzsche 1969, pp. 10-104; Dewey 1980, pp. 252ff; Shusterman 1992, pp. 8-10; Berleant 1994; Novitz, 1992, pp. 64ff.; Battersby 1991, pp. 35ff. There are also several critiques of the abstraction associated with disinterestedness in the ethical context. These are too numerous to list here, but one worth noting because it combines both a feminist and environmentalist point of view is Plumwood 1993, pp. 169ff. An important recent defence of disinterestedness with some points in common with mine can be found in Carlson 1993.

¹⁰ Edward Bullough's theory of 'psychical distancing' is responsible for some damage to the concept of disinterestedness within aesthetics if only because it establishes a connection between disinterestedness and the notion of 'distancing'. (Bullough 1912.) The concept of disinterestedness is further damaged by George Dickie's sharp criticism of the aesthetic attitude theories of both Bullough and Stolnitz. Although Dickie does not refer to Kant, he certainly sees the problems of the aesthetic attitude as stemming from disinterestedness (Dickie, 1964).

¹¹ Dewey 1980, p. 258.

¹² Bell 1931, p. 72.

¹³ 'Significant form' is exclusive to Bell's formalism. Also, I should note that Bell's formalism applies only to art, he never intends for it to apply to nature.

¹⁴ Carroll 1989, p. 87.

¹⁵ Crowther 1993, p. x.

¹⁶ Stolnitz 1961, pp. 132-133.

¹⁷ Kant 1983, p. 10.

¹⁸ Kant 1987, §12, p. 68.

¹⁹ Despite avant-garde art, many conventions still hold: we do not touch paintings and sculptures in museums; we sit back or dance away from the stage when listening to music; and in the natural environment, there are bars, fences, or signs telling us to keep out. I recognise the importance of such barriers for preservation, but it is nonetheless a convention that supports the idea that aesthetic experience is standing back in still contemplation.

²⁰ For examples of this view, see Herman 1993, pp. 184-207; and O'Neill 1989, pp. 145-162.

²¹ In addition to the differences between the moral and aesthetic standpoint noted here, there are others worth underlining. I do not seek a sharp distinction between the moral and

DON'T EAT THE DAISIES

the aesthetic in terms of defining necessary and sufficient condition for each, but I believe that moral and aesthetic interest are distinguishable. (Disinterestedness alone does *not* make either sort of interest distinct from the other, since it can be a feature of the moral as well as the aesthetic, as is the case in Kant's philosophy.) Moral interest involves attention to human action and character, and moral judgements rest on these considerations. Aesthetic interest focuses attention on perceptual qualities of the object, and the meanings we attach to them (where the meanings emerge through perceptual exploration, which includes the experience of perceiving non-visual qualities). Aesthetic judgments are grounded in the aesthetic qualities we discriminate through perceptual qualities and related meanings. Some of the examples I offer in this paper indicate what I mean by *aesthetic* appreciation.

²² I do think a case can be made that Kant's aesthetic theory is not formalist. I cannot pursue that argument here, but for a defence of Kant against the claim that he is a formalist, see Schaper 1979, pp. 78ff.; Crowther 1993, pp. 56ff; Savile 1993, chapter 5; Kemal 1992, chapter 3.

²³ Crowther 1996, p. 112.

²⁴ Crowther's point argues that knowledge is not necessary to appreciate the formal qualities of the aesthetic object, and insofar as I understand what Kant means by formal qualities I agree. However, the appreciation of other aesthetic qualities, such as the metaphors in poems, may in fact depend upon knowledge of some kind. Because natural objects are not *about* anything, knowledge – scientific, historical, cultural – is not necessary to aesthetic appreciation of nature, although such knowledge often shapes, enriches and deepens appreciation.

²⁵ 'Natural objects' include parts of the environment that have been cultivated or otherwise affected by humans. I maintain no sharp distinction between natural objects and artefacts, although I recognise the differences which pertain. This point is important in relation to the role of knowledge in aesthetic appreciation, since the more significant the role of cultural history in shaping some natural object, the more we may want to feed cultural knowledge into aesthetic appreciation.

²⁶ Murdoch 1991, p. 84.

REFERENCES

- Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan*, Adirondack Park Agency 1985.
- Battersby, Christine 1991. 'Situating the Aesthetic: A Feminist Defence', in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne (eds.) *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*. London: ICA.
- Bell, Clive 1931. *Art*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Berleant, Arnold 1994. 'Beyond Disinterestedness', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **34**(3): 242-254.
- Bullough, Edward 1912. "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle", *British Journal of Psychology*, **5**: 87-117.
- Carlson, Allen 1993. 'Aesthetics and Engagement' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **33**(3): 222-227
- Carroll, Noel 1989. 'Clive Bell's Aesthetic Hypothesis' in G. Dickie, R. Sclafani and R. Roblin (eds.) *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Crowther, Paul 1993. *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Crowther, Paul 1996. 'The Significance of Kant's Pure Aesthetic Judgement', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **36**(2): 107-121.
- Countryside Commission, 1994. *Working for the Countryside 1994/1995*, pamphlet.
- Dewey, John 1980. *Art as Experience*. (First published 1934.) New York: Perigee Books.
- Dickie, George 1964. 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **1**(3): 56-66.
- Diffey, T.J. 1993. 'Natural Beauty without Metaphysics' in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds.) *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guyer, Paul 1979. *Kant and the Claims of Taste*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Guyer, Paul 1993. *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herman, Barbara 1993. *The Practice of Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel 1987. *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. W. Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Kant, Immanuel 1983. *Metaphysics of Morals* in *Ethical Philosophy*, trans. James Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Kemal, Salim 1992. *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Levinson, Jerrold 1992. 'Pleasure, Aesthetic' in D. Cooper (ed.) *A Companion to Aesthetics*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 331-332.
- Murdoch, Iris 1991. *The Sovereignty of the Good*. (First published in 1970.) London: Routledge.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 1969. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books.
- Novitz, David 1992. *The Boundaries of Art*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- O'Neill, Onora 1989. *Constructions of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plumwood, Val 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Savile, Anthony 1993. *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Schaper, Eva 1979. *Studies in Kant's Aesthetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Shusterman, Richard 1992. *Pragmatic Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Stolnitz, Jerome 1961. 'On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **20**: 132-133.