

Arnold Berleant, ed., *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics*. Aldershot, Hampshire, UK, and Burlington, VT, 2002. Pages 127-141.

Chapter 10

From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics

Holmes Rolston, III

In both aesthetics and ethics something of value is at stake. What are the relations between these different normative modes? If beauty, then duty. If so, is the logic the same in art and in nature? If not beauty, then no duty? But not all duties are tied to beauties. Other premises might as well or better yield duties. Aesthetic imperatives are usually thought less urgent than moral imperatives. Nor is all aesthetic experience tied to beauty. Perhaps ethics is not always tied to duty either, but is logically and psychologically closer to caring. Already the analysis is proving challenging.

Right or Wrong Place to Start?

Aesthetic experience is among the most common starting points for an environmental ethic. Ask people, 'Why save the Grand Canyon or the Grand Tetons, and the ready answer will be, 'Because they are beautiful. So grand!' Eugene Hargrove claims that environmental ethics historically started this way, with scenic grandeur: 'The ultimate historical foundations of nature preservation are aesthetic.'¹ More recently, the U.S. Congress declared, in the Endangered Species Act, that such species have 'esthetic value ... to the Nation and its people' and urges 'adequate concern and conservation'.² In the presence of purple mountains' majesties or charismatic megafauna, there is an easy move from 'is' to 'ought'. One hardly needs commandments.

More precisely, the move seems to be from fact of the matter: 'There are the Tetons', to aesthetic value: 'Wow, they are beautiful!' to moral duty: 'One ought to save the Tetons.' *Prima facie*, one ought not to destroy anything of value, including aesthetic value. That is an unarguable beginning, even if carelessness sometimes needs repair by legislation.

Aesthetic values are often thought to be high level but low priority: jobs first, scenery second; one cannot tour the Tetons if one is broke. So this aesthetic ethic will need to be coupled with more persuasive power lest it be overridden when amenities are traded against basic needs. At this point, one can switch to resource and life support arguments. The forests turn carbon dioxide into oxygen, they supply water for drinking and irrigating; they

control erosion; they serve as a baseline for scientific studies. Biodiversity has agricultural, medical and industrial uses. Couple these lines of argument: healthy ecosystems, public welfare, resource benefits and aesthetic quality of life, and the combination of heavyweight and more 'spiritual' arguments will supply ample rationale for conservation.

That is practical in everyday life: everyone needs bread and loves beauty. Further, for those interested in philosophical issues, this is the quickest way out of the postmodernist confusions. We do not need epistemological realism, which is so problematic, as every academic knows. Ordinary relativist scenic enjoyments will do, joining them to routine resource use: amenities coupled with commodities. These motivations are ready to hand. Take a drive to the mountains. Enjoy the view, look at the fields en route, and think how air, soil and water are basic human needs. Press these points – environmental security and quality of life – and you will get no argument from the postmodernists, anti-foundationalists, deconstructionists, non-realists, pragmatists, pluralists or whatever is the latest fashionable critique.

Easy though this transition from beauty to duty is, we need a closer analysis. It may turn out that the initial motivations are not the most profound. Epistemologically, yes, aesthetics is a good place to start. Metaphysically, no: the worry soon comes that this beauty is only in the mind of the beholder. The metaphysicians will ask their probing questions. Any ethic based on aesthetics is going to be quickly undermined epistemologically, and in just the ways that the postmodernists, anti-foundationalists, deconstructionists and all those other troublemakers worry about. Any aesthetic value is some kind of a construct, set up on human interaction with nature. More radical environmentalists will insist that this falls far short. One is not yet respecting what is really there.

Now we have to backtrack and start again. Aesthetics is the wrong place to begin in environmental ethics, at least to begin in principle, though perhaps not always in practice. Aesthetics is also the wrong place to center environmental ethics, in principle and in practice. Nevertheless, one ought to celebrate – and conserve – beauty in nature. Aesthetic experience is indeed a capstone value when humans enjoy nature, but that does not make it the best model for all values carried by nature. The problem is that the aesthetic model keys value to the satisfaction of human interests; indeed, it leases value to just one particular kind of interest. But there are many non-aesthetic human interests, and these may urge compromising, even sacrificing, aesthetic values. Starting off with an aesthetically oriented approach may disorient us and leave us with too weak a locus of value to protect all the values in jeopardy.

Consider an analogy, I am asked, 'Why are you ethical toward your wife?' I reply, 'Because she is beautiful,' Certainly, beauty is a dimension of her life, but it is not the main focus of her value. I respect her integrity, rights, character, achievements, her intrinsic value, her own good. In some moods, I might say that all these features of her person are 'beautiful',

whereupon her 'beauty' would have become more or less synonymous with her 'goodness' (in the traditional philosophical vocabulary) or her 'value' (in more recent vocabulary). But I would wrong her to value her only in so far as she is 'beautiful', at least in the usual aesthetic sense. Certainly, her goodness is not concentrated in her capacity to produce in me pleasurable aesthetic experiences. That might fail with age or accident. I would also fail her if I failed to enjoy her beauty. That might give me an entrance to her further merits. *Mutatis mutandis*, our relations with sandhill cranes and sequoia trees might be similar.

Some are already objecting that my analogy is based on a category mistake. An art object is not a woman; a woman is not an art object. My analogy is misleading. The better analogy to appreciating the Grand Tetons and the Grand Canyon would be enjoying a Bierstadt painting. That I do enjoy for the pleasure it brings. Concerned about the conservation of the painting, its aesthetic value is its only reason for being. Likewise with national park scenery.

Have I a counter-reply? Yes. We are misled rather by the art object analogy. Surely, we easily see such a mistake with animals and birds. A sandhill crane is not an art object; an art object is not a sandhill crane. An art object is an artifact; a sandhill crane is not art in fact. The crane is a wild life, on its own, with autonomous, vital integrity, as no art object is. Expanding to the landscape, the crane lives in and migrates through ecosystems, such as Yellowstone and the Tetons. Nature is a living system: animals, plants, species, ecosystems, and any analogy to art radically misunderstands wild nature. An art object is inert, it has no metabolism, no vitality, no regeneration, no trophic pyramids, no succession, no evolutionary history. One is not in community in a museum. In a landscape, one is in biotic community. Treating nature as though it were found art will misuse such nature.

Yet aesthetics does figure large in conservation. Aldo Leopold, famously, connected duty and ethics in his land ethic: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, the stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'³ So aesthetics can give rise to duty. But it will not be by bringing into focus human pleasurable experiences à la art. Environmental value theory needs a more foundational, biologically based account. Leopold connects the 'beauty of the biotic community' with the continuing existence of its members 'as a matter of biotic right'.⁴ That does join beauty with duty, but it may also bring the complaint that rights no more exist in nature than does beauty.

Respecting What is Not (Yet) There

Of the multiple forms of value that environmental ethics is concerned to protect, aesthetic value is especially paradoxical. Beauty in nature, typically

the first justification given for conservation, has a seminal place in the sophisticated land ethic of Aldo Leopold. Yet aesthetic experience, at least of this kind, seems not to be present anywhere in non-human nature, considered objectively as it is in itself. Perhaps there are some precursors to aesthetic experience in animal pleasures or courting birds, but a critical appreciation of nature as worthwhile experience for its own sake arises only in human consciousness. A hiker may admire the vista as he crests the summit; the marmot, alarmed by the hiker's arrival, has not been enjoying the view.

The forest is not even green without us, much less beautiful. The fall leaf colors are lovely. They result when the chlorophyll (experienced as green) is withdrawn. What colors! Bright and deeper reds, purples, yellows, subtle shades of brown. They result from the chemicals that remain, earlier overwhelmed by the chlorophyll. The hiker's aesthetic experience increases on such days. But none of this has anything to do with what is actually going on in the forest. The chlorophyll is capturing solar energy. The residual chemicals defend the trees against insect grazing or serve other metabolic functions. Any color enjoyed by human visitors for a few hours is entirely epiphenomenal to what is really taking place.

And so with all aesthetic experiences. One enjoys the hawk flying above, poised in the wind; but the hawk is no artist, nor has it anywhere been naturally selected as an adaptive fit owing to aesthetic properties. In the cirque basin below lies a string of paternoster lakes surrounded by the headwall, a marvelous scene. But geologists never list scenic beauty as one of the geomorphological factors in landscape construction. In fact, of Leopold's three features of ecosystems that generate the land ethic, 'integrity, stability and beauty', a skeptic might well object that not one is objectively real in nature. Ecosystems are not stable but dynamically changing, often contingent and chaotic. They have little integration, more aggregated jumbles than integrated wholes. Any beauty is not actually there but in the eye of the beholder.

Well, if not exactly in the eye of the beholder, beauty in nature is always relational, arising in the interaction between humans and their world. Just as there is no creature with a philosophical world-view and an ethic before humans arrive, nothing has any developed sense of beauty. Humans ignite beauty, rather as they ignite ethics in the world. Here we may wish to give a dispositional twist to value. To say of any natural thing, *n*, that *n* is valuable means that *n* is able to be valued, if and when human valuers, *Hs*, come along. There is no actual beauty autonomous to the valued and valuable forests, cirque lakes, mountains, sequoia trees or sandhill cranes. There is aesthetic ignition when humans arrive, the aesthetics emerges relationally with the appearance of the subject-generator.

But why worry so much about what is not yet there until we come? Why not feature what is obviously there upon our arrival? When humans are valuing nature, at least in the aesthetic mode, we are joined with nature in

creative dialectic. What one wishes to appreciate and conserve is not nature but the nature-human relationship. The aesthetic genius is located in the pairing. Arnold Berleant puts it this way: 'One contribution that the aesthetic makes to the cognition of landscape lies in recognizing the human contribution to the experience as well as to the knowledge of it. Environment does not stand separate and apart to be studied and known impartially and objectively. A landscape is like a suit of clothes, empty and meaningless apart from its wearer. Without a human presence, it possesses only possibilities.'⁵

Well, that is true enough in the scenic-aesthetic sense; landscapes apart from humans are empty of such experience. Humans do need to wear their landscapes to appreciate them. But perhaps this ought not to set the governing model for all valuation, totalizing any and all concepts of value. Is the landscape meaningless, without value, possessing only possibilities – so long as it is without a human presence? If and only if humans, then beauty – actual beauty at least. Possibilities are always there, but these possibilities are always and only for us, not for the hawks and marmots, who are aesthetically incapable.

Now a worry looms. Is this something to be celebrated, this human relating to nature, and any conservation that may come of it, or is this something to suspect? Aesthetics might be emptying out other dimensions of value, blinding us to what is there when we are not. What if nature is not my suit of clothes?

Aesthetic value, it seems, must be anthropogenic (generated by humans), though perhaps not anthropocentric (centered on humans), in contrast to more biocentric or ecosystemic values. An ethic based on such relational value will have both strengths and weaknesses. On the strong side, this ethic will be closely tied to positive human experiences, supplying incentive. Where there is desirable aesthetic experience, the desire to save easily follows. There is no need to command any such ethic; it is not an ethic of duty laid onto otherwise unwilling agents.

The downside is that just this environmental ethics of positive desire is more a human option, more dependent on our current aesthetic preferences, more personally idiosyncratic, more culturally relative, even contingent on our changing tastes. If our grandchildren decide that they prefer ski lifts and runs up and down the Grand Tetons, disliking mere scenery; if they should enjoy more the participatory aesthetic experience of riding high over the forests on the way up, and graceful skiing, flow experiences, on the way down, so be it. Shifting aesthetic preferences shift incentives and shift duties. Fashions change; we come to like new suits of clothes.

Do we not need to base an ethic on something that is actually there? Respect for life, for endangered species, or for intrinsic values in fauna and flora, for the welfare of biotic communities, or for the systems of life support, or for speciation and evolutionary genesis – by contrast, all seem concerned with what is there independently of human encounter. Aesthetic

values, though they are important and though they readily support an ethic, can be in the end less forceful than moral duties to others.

The aesthetic ethic will be a sort of light-in-the-refrigerator ethic. The light comes on when we open the door; until then, everything is 'in the dark'. But maybe the way to think of it is that, when we open the door, we see what is already there. The cake in the refrigerator is not sweet until we eat it, nor is it beautiful until we admire it. These are always possibilities, but only possibilities without us. But then again the cake is actually there with all its properties, whether we open the door or not. The sugar in the cake was originally stored for plant metabolism. When we light up the beauty in nature, if we do it right, often we are seeing something already there. The trees are not green until we light them up; but the green, we recall, is chlorophyll, which is there without us, energizing the tree, and valuable to the tree before we came and after we leave, evidenced by those glucose sugars. Maybe the aesthetic ethic, seeing only possibilities, is overlooking deeper actualities.

Aesthetic Capacities and Aesthetic Properties

Perhaps the previous analysis makes the aesthetic response too optional. My experience that the forests of the Grand Tetons are green is not optional, even though the 'green experience' appears when I arrive. My experience of the mountains' majesty is more optional, but not entirely so. There is required of me an appropriate relation to these mountains. My experience is of beauty and grace in the running impala, and it is not an option for me to say that they are awkward and ugly. That would simply reveal my ignorance, my insensitivity, not my variant and legitimate preferences.

There are two sorts of aesthetic qualities: aesthetic capacities, capacities for experience that are only in beholders, and aesthetic properties, which lie objectively in natural things. The experience of beauty does arise in the beholder, but what is this experience of? It is of form, structure, integrity, order, competence, muscular strength, endurance, dynamic movement, symmetry, diversity, unity, spontaneity, interdependence, lives defended, coded in genomes, regenerative power, speciation, and so on. These events are there before humans arrive, the products of a creative evolutionary and ecosystemic nature; and when we humans value them aesthetically, our experience is being superposed on natural properties.

The attributes under consideration are objectively there before humans come, but the attribution of value is subjective. The natural object causally affects the human subject, who is excited by the incoming data and translates these as aesthetic value, after which the object, the tree, appears as having value, rather as it appears to have green color. Aesthetic experience of nature can be epiphenomenal and incidental to natural functions, as it is when humans arrive to enjoy fall leaf colors. But the experience can run

deeper. We ought to value the processes and products of a generative nature that we are discovering, sometimes more than we are projecting our values onto nature. Nature carries its more elemental aesthetic properties objectively, and these are ignited in the subjective experience of the arriving beholder.

We do enjoy seeing impala leap; there is grace in their motions. The aesthetic experience arises in my encounter with them, but the muscular power driving their locomotion is an evolutionary achievement objectively realized in the embodied animal. My aesthetic capacities track their aesthetic properties. There is aesthetic stimulation, for instance, in the sense of abyss overlooking a canyon, staring into space; similarly, with the fury of a hurricane at sea. That experience is in the beholder, but the abyss and fury (the aesthetic properties) are not in the mind; they are in nature. Perhaps 'fury' is an anthropomorphic metaphor, but the high wind driving the wind and rain is not. Human emotions track the motions of nature.

To put this provocatively, the world is beautiful in something like the way it is mathematical. Neither aesthetic experience (in the reflective sense) nor mathematical experience exist prior to the coming of humans. Mathematics and aesthetics are human constructs; they come out of the human head and are used to map the world. But these inventions succeed in helping humans to find their way around in the world because they map form, symmetry, harmony, structural patterns, dynamic processes, causal interrelationships, order, unity, diversity, and so on, discovered to be actually there.

It is true to say that the world is objectively mathematical and at the same time to say that mathematics is a subjective creation of the human mind. Mathematical properties are really there, though mathematical experience awaits the human coming – and analogously with aesthetic properties and capacities. It is thus no accident that mathematicians are so often among those who find the world aesthetically delightful in its symmetries, curves and patterns. A crystal is not a mathematician, but packing atoms into crystals, given also their electronic bonding capacities, results in ordered patterns that express mathematics, and delight mathematicians, as with the symmetries of the thirty-two crystal classes.

If the mathematics analogy is bothersome, we can make the same point with engineering. Animals and plants are not engineers, but natural selection and the demands for function and efficiency place engineering constraints on organisms, and the results have design that can please engineers. Studies of dragonflies in the Carboniferous show that their wings 'are proving to be spectacular examples of microengineering' giving them 'the agile, versatile flight necessary to catch prey in flight'. They are 'adapted for high-performance flight'.⁶ To execute these aerobatic maneuvers, the insects come equipped with highly engineered wings that automatically change their flight shape in response to airflow, putting the designers of the latest jet fighters to shame.⁷ Their flight, say these scientists, is 'elegant'.⁸ Anyone who has watched humming birds at bergamot can appreciate something of

such engineering excellence. What is philosophically significant is how this engineering for survival, the natural property, generates aesthetic experience in humans with their aesthetic capacity. Of course, such skills in flight are objectively there, whether or not witnessed by admiring engineers.

Animals and plants are not artists, but these same constraints for order result in form, symmetry, integration, sweep and curve, and these results can please aestheticians, as with dragonflies and humming birds in flight, or impala on the run. You may object that natural selection plausibly demands good engineering, but natural selection does not so plausibly demand beauty. That point is well made by those who insist on artistic standards of beauty. But *gestalts* begin to re-form if we let our criteria for beauty be reformed by the standards of biotic community. We are further claiming now that a biological appreciation of the world finds it beautiful, but this intensifies the importance of those properties that are really there. What we behold is as real as the eye of the beholder.

Beauty and the Beast

Suddenly those impala spook. Marvelous, see them leap! How nimble! How quick! What grace in form and motion! The herd almost flows over the veldt. Look again; they are in panic because wild dogs have appeared. Am I to see this as a kind of ballet or as a struggle for survival? Or is there a kind of beauty in the struggle for survival? Their fleet-footedness is marvelous; and, more marvelous still, it has been generated on Earth in an ambience of conflict and resolution.

In the charismatic megafauna, the observer enjoys organic form in spontaneous locomotion, on the loose, without designs on the human beholder. The animal does not care to come near, sit still, stay long, or please. It cares only about its own survival. It performs best at dawn, or twilight, or in the dark. Such wild autonomy is stimulating aesthetically. Wildflowers sway in the breeze, but they do not move; they are moved by the wind. The animal must eat and not be eaten. Unlike plants, the animal resources, though within its habitat, are at a distance and must be sought. There is a never-ceasing hunt through the environment for food, an ever-alert hiding from its predators. If, as a carnivore, one's food moves as well as oneself, so much the more excitement. Animals' motions are close-coupled to the survival game. In the higher animals, with developed nervous systems, human emotions are attracted by animal bodily motions and drawn through these into animal emotions, invited to empathize with somebody there behind the fur and feathers.

Aesthetically, there is grace in the overtones of such motion. Solving the engineering problems of animal motion (the mathematics!) routinely yields symmetrical dynamics of rhythmic beauty: the impala on the run, the eagle in flight, the streamlined fish, the nimble chipmunk. Even where this grace

seems to fail – in the lumbering moose calf, or the fledgling fallen from the nest – the observer is caught up in the timeless clamoring for life. Behind the motion and sentience there is struggle. The animal freedom brings the possibility of success and failure. The scenery cannot fail, because nothing is attempted, but living things can be more and less accomplished of their kind. An adult bald eagle excites more than an immature one, a more commanding token of its type.

Here we couple aesthetics with genetics and evolutionary ecology (now transcending engineering and mathematics). The aesthetician sees that ideal toward which a wild life is striving and which is rarely reached in nature. The observer zooms in with her scope on the full-curl ram, or the artist paints warblers ornamented in their breeding prime. In the language of the geneticists, the artist portrays and the admirer enjoys that phenotype producible by the normal genotype in a congenial environment. In a distinction going back to Aristotle, the ideal is true to the poetry of a thing, though not true to its history, and yet the poetry directs its history.⁹ Such an ideal is still nature's project.

Admirers of wildlife enjoy the conflict and resolution in the concrete particular expression of an individual life. How the impala do run, and run for their lives, and with such grace! The weather-beaten elk are not ugly, when one senses their competent endurance through winter. The spike ram is not displeasing, because its potential is inspiring. Warblers in spring are indeed in prime dress, but warblers in fall plumage are equally fitted to their environment, neither less ideal, less real, nor less beautiful, only requiring more subtlety to appreciate, now that the expenditure of energy and motion is not in color and reproduction but in camouflage and survival toward winter. The struggle between ideal and real adds to the aesthetic experience. There is aesthetic vitality, and respect for life is more closely coupled with the appreciation of beauty than we first thought. The Darwinian nature 'red in tooth and claw', the fittest struggling to survive, and resulting in adapted fit, also in an ecological harmony and interdependence, is a prolific world lavish in its biodiversity. Life persists with beauty in the midst of its perpetual perishing, and the struggle is integral to the beauty.

Aesthetics Gone Wild

Increasingly, we are committing ourselves to the claim that it is what is 'out there' that counts, even if it only lights up into aesthetic experience when we arrive. What counts as aesthetically positive is being instructed by objective nature as much as being projected onto nature. This is a quite different ambience from the leaf colors in the fall. Nature is phenomenal, and we are thrilled when let in on these phenomena. There is nothing epiphenomenal about that. Scenic beauty might require our framing it up and igniting it. But the wildness of a place, in which we also aesthetically delight, is not in the

mind. 'Wild' means 'apart from the hand (or mind) of humans'. The sense of beauty may be in the mind, but the wildness sensed that generates the experience of beauty is not.

But now, critics will complain, we are confusing the 'wild' with the 'beautiful'. What is 'out there' is not always pretty; often it is drab, monotonous, uninspiring. Romantic admirers of wildlife overlook as much as they see. The bison are shaggy, shedding and dirty. The hawk has lost several flight feathers. Every wild life is marred by the rips and tears of time. None of the losers and seldom even the blemished show up on the covers of *National Wildlife*. Wildlife artists select the best and discard the rest. The aesthetician repairs nature before admiring it. Landscape artists and architects are like flower arrangers; nature does provide raw materials, but raw nature is quite aesthetically mixed. One hunts, and picks and chooses, to make a bouquet or a garden. Save the Tetons; but there is no reason to save the Kansas plains – not aesthetically at least. Admire the bull elk in display; but a rotting elk carcass is ugly. This led Samuel Alexander to claim here that we, not nature, are the artists:

The nature we find beautiful is not bare nature as she exists apart from us but nature as seen by the artistic eye. ... We find nature beautiful not because she is beautiful herself but because we select from nature and combine, as the artist does more plainly when he works with pigments. ... Nature does live for herself without us to share her life. But she is not beautiful without us to unpiece her and repiece. ... Small wonder that we do not know that we are artists unawares. For the appreciation of nature's beauty is unreflective; and even when we reflect, it is not so easy to recognize that the beauty of a sunset or a pure colour is a construction on our part and an interpretation.¹⁰

Sunsets and fall colors, yes. But impala on the run and life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing? The more we reflect, the less easy it becomes to see these deeper dimensions of aesthetic value as nothing but a reflection. Alexander is looking for found art, or flowers to arrange. We are finding beauty by coming to share the life that nature lives for herself.

Do we wish to paint nature pretty, removing the warts? Or to paint nature as it is, warthogs and all? Is the poetry an ideal never real, until we repiece nature to our liking? Or is the poetry the history of struggle to make the ideal real, nature as she is in herself, those natural processes of conflict and resolution? Half the beauty of life comes out of it, as do the wildflowers that the artist arranges, or the exquisite nautilus shell secreted against its environment. The canines of the wild dogs have carved the impala's muscles; the impala's fleet-footedness shapes a more supple dog. I recall aesthetic stimulation watching a warthog escape from lions. We admire this element of fight even in the maimed and blasted, even in the inanimate, gnarled timberline fir. The coming of Darwin is often thought to have ruined nature's harmonious architectures, to have left nature ugly, but the struggles he posits, if sometimes overwhelming, are not always

unaesthetic. None of life's heroic quality is possible without this dialectical stress.

Leopold is looking over a marshland, watching sandhill cranes: 'Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut.'¹¹ Perhaps we do not so much leave aesthetics as do we transform it in successively more perceptive stages? Or perhaps we elevate aesthetics to discover values transforming into those uncaptured by the usual aesthetic language. 'Out on the bog a crane, gulping a luckless frog, springs his ungainly hulk into the air and flails the morning sun with mighty wings ... He is the symbol of our untameable past, of the incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.'¹²

If we are using the 'pretty' criteria, the crane is an ungainly hulk, gulping the mangled frog, but such hulks have haunted the marshes for forty million years. We reach 'a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise'.¹³ Is this aesthetic? Yes and no. A sense of biotic community with ancient cranes? There is certainly nothing like that in art, and this not beauty in any wow-look-at-the-Tetons sense. The beautiful has passed over into respect for life. It can as plausibly be said that we have left the territory of aesthetics and crossed into the realms of intrinsic and ecosystemic values. Nor is one content to rest the matter in some pleasurable relationship set up between wild cranes and humans today enjoying them. The motivation for conservation demands realism about cranes out there and the integrity of their lives, in which we humans today take pleasure.

We will need some epistemological representation of the cranes as objective living beings, without which this aesthetic experience cannot be genuine. This aesthetic account is highly constrained by facts of the matter. Nature is by now certainly mattering intrinsically, for what it is in itself, and not simply instrumentally, for the pleasure it brings us. These historical properties of the crane, re-enacted in its species line, become pivotal in the aesthetic.

The claim earlier was that a landscape is an empty suit of clothes, meaningless apart from a human wearer. That hardly seems Leopold's aesthetic. True, Leopold watching the crane is aesthetically stimulated; the crane gulping down the frog is not. Leopold is not making any usual 'instrumental' uses of the crane; he is not collecting its eggs to eat or using its feathers to decorate his wife's hat. He is valuing his crane experience intrinsically; but that is as and only as he first evaluates the crane for its intrinsic worth, occupying its niche in the marshland ecosystem. Maybe this is not biotic rights exactly, but he finds the crane an object of respect in its own right. He enjoys the crane right where it is on its landscape. This is a 'marshland elegy'.¹⁴

Ethics with an ecosystems approach will discover how beauty is a mysterious product of generative nature, an aura of objective aesthetic

properties that may require an experiencer with aesthetic capacities for its consummation, but that still more requires the forces of nature for its production. The wonderland one is appreciating is not in the eye of the beholder, even if the wonder is.

Perhaps it will now seem that we are erring in the opposite direction from that we feared at the start: we are overemphasizing the objective and underappreciating the subjective. Humans are becoming mostly observers of nature's wondrous show. So we must return to the participatory dimensions of aesthetics. Notice here, at least, for the promise of an ethic, that these are no lightweight reasons. The aesthetic cry is: 'De profundis!'

Participatory Aesthetics

Aesthetics is often thought to be characterized by disinterest, which is always to be separated from uninterest; but disinterest might still be thought an unlikely motivator for caring conservation. Care requires some kind of interest. Further, the emphasis on wild otherness, on nature as other than culture, might also contribute to the lack of care. A frequent injunction in environmental ethics is to 'let nature take its course'. Leave those cranes alone on the marsh! Leave the Tetons and the Grand Canyon wild! This 'hands off' ethic, respectful though it is, is one of non-involvement. The cranes and sequoia trees have been looking out for themselves for millions of years; the Tetons and the Canyon are places that can run themselves. Wild places and wild lives command our appreciation, but meddling is irresponsible. Wild welfare is not my duty.

So we need a course correction. Aesthetic experience of nature is in engagement as much as in detachment. Disinterest does preclude utilitarian concern, immediate self-interest or instrumental uses; but disinterest is not passive observation. There is immersion and struggle for us, as much as for the fauna and flora we observe. We initially may think of forests as scenery to be looked upon. But a forest is entered, not viewed. It is doubtful that one can experience a forest from a roadside pullover, any more than on television. The forest attacks all our senses: sight, hearing, smell, feeling, even taste. Visual experience is critical, but no forest is adequately experienced without the odor of the pines or of the wild roses.

There is the kinesthetic bodily presence, flesh and blood moving through time and space. One seeks shelter for lunch, to discover, cooling down after the brisk walk, that there is too much shade; and one moves to the sun, and enjoys the warmth. Later, the sunset is lovely, but are we prepared for the night? One is surrounded by the elements, and a total sensory participation is at once vital to aesthetic experience and vital to life. Bodily presence in the forest, the competence demanded and enjoyed there amidst its opportunities and threats, the struggle for location in and against the primordial world – this engagement enriches the aesthetic experience. Perhaps

only 'spirit' can enjoy aesthetic experience; but humans are and ought to be spirit in place.

Aesthetics goes wild, out of cultivated control, out of the human orbit, we have been insisting, even though we must be there to light things up. But now we have to notice that we ourselves are as much enlightened as we light up what is otherwise in the dark. We come to care not only about our being there but about these others. We realize our differences from them; we set aside a refuge for them where we only visit. In this wildness, we are not at home and must take some care. Yet at the same time our sense of identity enlarges into local, regional, global biotic communities.

One takes pride in the national parks as the cathedrals of America; we want wilderness for our children and grandchildren, as much as for them also the opportunity to visit the Louvre or the Hermitage. One does not draw one's living from the Grand Tetons or the Grand Canyon. But there is deep engagement, a sense of embodied presence as one climbs the Teton trails or descends into the Canyon, or watches the cranes over the marsh. One is making a life with such experiences, even though one is not making a living. So now the paradox deepens: just this being drawn out of ourselves into this autonomous nature, out there independently of ourselves, commands respect and responsibility, and we find ourselves reformed, with deeper identities than we had before.

We too live in this world. In wilderness we visit, but we must return to our native dwellings on rural and urban landscapes. When nature is nearer at hand and must be managed on our inhabited landscapes, we might first say that natural beauty is an amenity – only an amenity – and injunctions to its care would seem less urgent. But this gestalt changes with the perception that the ground is under our feet and the sky over our heads, that on Earth we are at home. Disinterest is not self-interest, but the self is not disembodied. Rather the self is incarnate and emplaced. This is ecological aesthetics, and ecology is vital relationships, a self at home in its world, I identify with the landscape on which I reside, my home territory. This 'interest' does lead me to care about its integrity, stability and beauty.

To biology we must add geography and to geography add biography. We cannot know who we are, we cannot know what is going on, until we know where life is taking place. Behind ethics is ethos, in the Greek, an accustomed mode of habitation. This takes humans past resource use to residence. When we ask about well-placed goodness in communities that we inhabit, both biotic and cultural, the dimension of the aesthetic is vital. Life without it is anaesthetized. There are the Grand Tetons and the Grand Canyon; even more this is a Grand Earth. The whole Earth, not just the marsh, is a kind of wonderland, and we humans – we modern humans more than ever before – put so much of this grandeur in jeopardy. No one, well placed in the world, can be either logically or psychologically uninterested in that.

From Beauty to Duty

How to couple aesthetics and ethics? Easily, we said at the start. Logically, one ought not to destroy beauty; psychologically, one does not wish to destroy beauty. Such behavior is neither grudging nor reluctant, never constrained by disliked duties to an other; rather, this is joyful caring, pleasant duty, reliable and effective because of the positive incentive. This ethic comes automatically. Now, in conclusion, the connections have become more subtle. Duty is what is 'owing' to others in one's communities. Most immediately, this is the social community of classical ethics; and now environmental ethics includes the biotic community, a land ethic. What is 'owing' to fauna, flora, species, ecosystems, mountains and rivers, to Earth, is appropriate respect. Whether this is better termed 'caring' or 'duty' will no longer be an issue when we feature these natural properties and processes, achievements, lives defended, these generative evolutionary ecosystems, and ask what is an appropriate admiration for them. This expanded aesthetics includes duties, if you wish to phrase it that way; or this enlarging aesthetics transforms into caring, if that is your linguistic preference.

Can aesthetics be an adequate foundation for an environmental ethic? This depends on how deep your aesthetics goes. No, where most aestheticians begin, rather shallowly (even though they may be aesthetically rather sophisticated). Yes, increasingly, where aesthetics itself comes to find and to be founded on natural history, with humans emplacing themselves appropriately on such landscapes. Does environmental ethics need such aesthetics to be adequately founded? Yes, indeed.

Notes

- 1 Eugene Hargrove (1989), *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 168.
- 2 U.S. Congress (1973), *Endangered Species Act of 1973* (Public Law 93-205), sec. 2a.
- 3 Aldo Leopold (1968), *A Sand County Almanac*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 224-5.
- 4 *Ibid*, pp. 211, 204.
- 5 Arnold Berleant (1997), *Living in the Landscape*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, p. 18.
- 6 R.J. Wootton, J. Kuikalová, D.J.S. Newman and J. Muzón (1998), 'Smart engineering in the mid-Carboniferous: how well could palaeozoic dragonflies fly?', *Science*, **282**, 749-51.
- 7 Gretchen Vogel (1998), 'Insect wings point to early sophistication', *Science*, **282**, 599-601.
- 8 Wootton *et al* (1998), 'Smart engineering in the mid-Carboniferous: how well could palaeozoic dragonflies fly?'
- 9 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451.
- 10 Samuel Alexander (1933, 1968), *Beauty and Other Forms of Value*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, pp. 30-31.

- 11 Leopold (1968), *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 96.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p. 109.
- 14 Ibid., p. 95.

Further References

- Brady, Emily (2000), 'The aesthetics of the natural environment', in Vernon Pratt (ed.), *Environment and Philosophy*, London: Routledge, pp. 142-63.
- Cooper, David E. (1998), 'Aestheticism and environmentalism', in David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer (eds), *Spirit of the Environment: Religion, Value and Environmental Concern*, London: Routledge, pp.100-112.
- Godlovitch, Stan (1998), 'Offending against nature', *Environmental Values*, 7,131-50.
- Hepburn, Ronald (1998), 'Nature humanised: nature respected', *Environmental Values*, 7,267-79.
- Lee, Keekok (1995), 'Beauty for ever?', *Environmental Values*, 4,213-25.
- Seel, Martin (1998), 'Aesthetics of nature and ethics', in Michael Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 3, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 341-3.