

Appreciating Natural Beauty as Natural

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I. Introduction

Scholars who write about natural beauty are fond of reminding us that nature must be appreciated as *natural*. By this they generally mean that the canons and categories of appreciation we normally use in taking the measure of beauty in human-made objects—especially artworks—are out of place in the world of natural things. After all, they argue, mountains, mammoths, and monsoons are not intentional objects; their meaning is not measured against the purposes of any (mortal) creator. The aesthetic concepts we apply to paintings, plays, and poems, whose nature and value are tightly tied to the purposes organizing their creation, do not apply to them. Mountains just are what they are, the evolved products of age-old geophysical forces predating and indifferent to human life. It is precisely because paintings of mountains, as opposed to mountains themselves, are products of human will that we can regard them as well- or ill-composed, belonging to this or that style, sentimental, idealized, ironic, morbid, and so on.

Clearly there is a great deal of merit in this view. It is no less foolish and distorting to look at a mountain landscape as though it really were a painting—faulting it or admiring it for its compositional balance, say—than it is to look at a painting as though it really were a mountain landscape—faulting it or admiring it for its repeatability of ecological detail. The difference in intentionality entails a host of differences in the parameters of response. We don't approach the objects of natural and artificial beauty in the same way. We set ourselves up to enjoy a symphony by drawing upon our familiarity with other performances of the work, other works of the same or similar genre, standard techniques of classical composition, the tonal characteristics of instruments employed, and so on. When we are delighted with the unexpected power of a given passage or disappointed in the tempi, our critical awareness is tempered and guided by our knowledge of the canons, categories, and standards that apply to composition and performance of works of this type; we hear the work as similar to, or different from, others that are in various ways like it. By contrast, we set ourselves up to enjoy a walk along a mountain stream by doing away with many, if not most, categories of learned appreciation and by opening ourselves to a freer form of enjoyment. When we are struck with the sudden aspect of a field of fireweed and toadflax, our pleasure seems more

nearly unmediated; we needn't know a lot about standard botanical characteristics of these species, differences from, and similarities to, other related wildflowers, their ecological niche, and so on, to gain an intense aesthetic satisfaction from the experience.

But it is easy to overstate the difference between these two modes of appreciation. The aesthetic enjoyment of artworks is not purely a matter of locating them in a field of categories and concepts; nor is the enjoyment of nature a purely unmediated concession to sense over thought. Nothing is more evident in the enterprise of appreciation than that each of these modes of awareness feeds off the other. We obviously, and habitually, deploy concepts, techniques, ways of speaking, background assumptions, analogies, allusions, and notions of aesthetic relevance that work for us in one domain *because* they work for us in the other. It is useful to see a sea fog as reminiscent of a Whistler *Nocturne* precisely because it calls our attention to features of an ambient sensory environment that come to the foreground only in light of our prior experience of the artwork. And it is useful to see a sunset as particularly splendid because our eyes have been trained to see splendor in sunsets by contemplating Turners. To generalize the point, our expertise in reflecting on the aesthetic qualities of artworks serves us well in regarding analogous properties throughout life, not only in thinking about the qualities and compositions of nature, but in thinking about those of interior design, automobiles, prose, politics, and the pattern of living we create daily. And, similarly, our familiarity with the particularities of natural objects is a useful preparation for our enjoyment of art, but not only art; it grounds our delectation of countless analogous features and configurations of elements in all of our enterprises.

This conclusion may seem platitudinous. Nature prepares us for art and art prepares us for nature. I argue in what follows that the point is deeper than it at first appears. Despite the fact that the point is both simple and obvious, it has generated a substantial amount of philosophical controversy. The core of the controversy lies in the fact that, although we are reasonably confident of the critical and analytical framework appropriate to intelligent appreciation of artworks, we are less confident of the corresponding framework of ideas appropriate to intelligent appreciation of natural objects. We are generally prepared to believe that our aesthetic response to natural objects is, despite any conceptual deficit, not naive, not unsuited to its objects, and fulsome. But, if the appreciation of natural objects is not supported by *some* kind of cognitive apparatus, something like—even remotely like—that which supports our judgments in the artwork, how can it be anything but shallow, subjective, and inaccessible to critical assessment? At present, philosophers are generally inclined to respond to this question in one of two ways. Conceptualists, like Allen Carlson and Marcia Eaton, insist that there are, after all, categories and concepts that can be deployed to help aesthetic judgments in respect to natural objects assume the legitimacy, such as it is, of aesthetic judgments in the artwork. Non-conceptualists, like Arnold Berleant, Emily Brady, and Noël Carroll insist that the fundamental twist in our view of nature is a liberation of reflection

from prior conceptual frameworks, so that imagination can gain ascendancy over thought.¹

In this essay I argue for a view of natural aesthetics that aims to mediate between these views. On the one hand, I want to reaffirm nature's natural connection with our experience of art and, on the other hand, I want to free aesthetic appreciation of nature from both of the two masters to whom it has recently fled: science and unfettered imagination. The view I want to advance takes natural objects as objects of aesthetic awareness and appreciation in a way that respects their difference from artifacts while remaining accessible to many of categories of analysis, criticism, and appreciation that apply to artworks. My claim is that we approach the qualities of things we think worthy of admiration in nature through lenses we have developed for thinking of aesthetic qualities at large—not art, not literature, not music, not politics, not urban planning, not landscape design, but all of these and more.

II. Glass Flowers

One of the great treasures of Harvard University is the Ware Collection of Glass Models of Plants, or, as it is more simply known to its more than one hundred thousand annual viewers, the glass flowers. The glass flowers are not art, or at least not designed to have been appreciated as art. Created in Germany with apparently irreproducible skill between the years 1887 and 1936 by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka as accurate models of various species of plant life, they were meant to be pedagogical tools for the instruction of students whose access to botanical specimens would otherwise be constrained by the vicissitudes of transport and the periodicity of seasons. The collection comprises more than eight hundred exquisitely fashioned models, ranging from truly exotic plants, scarcely ever seen, to common weeds. Invariably, viewers are powerfully impressed by the lifelike quality of the models. In fact, such was the skill of the Blaschkas that it would be nearly impossible to tell which was glass and which was a real flower if a model and its subject were placed side by side.

One of the specimens represented is *Chicorium intybus*, common chicory. This is a delicate roadside wildflower, common throughout North America. Its long, straight, striated stalks are festooned with star clusters of short, triangular leaves and compact, blue, daisy-like flowers. Providing they can resist discounting its charm by its commonness, many people regard it as a pretty, even beautiful, flower. Now suppose that, having been struck by the beauty of the glass chicory specimen, a museum visitor were to walk outside and discover at the parking lot's edge a living chicory plant, a plant whose physical differences from that of the glass plant were visually indiscernible. Having found the human-made chicory beautiful, should the viewer, to be consistent (i.e. *aesthetically* consistent), find the live chicory equally beautiful? If we are tempted to think otherwise, won't that be because we are implicitly counting the factors of illusion, hard work, and rarity

into our assessment of the glass flower's beauty? But are not these factors contributors to the model's worth in ways other than in the respect of beauty (and other exclusively aesthetic considerations)? It is tempting to think that we should be able to discount all the background factors—including everything relating to the two objects' disparate causal histories, insurable values, age, and so on—so as to isolate the immediate, foreground sensory experience in which they are alike. After all, aesthetic regard concerns itself fundamentally with the manifold of *sensory awareness*, and not with all that causes it or is caused by it. So it would seem reasonable to conclude that if the glass chicory and the living chicory *look* the same, then, so far as the sense of sight is concerned at least, the two should be deemed equally beautiful, perhaps even aesthetically identical.

To extend the hypothesis, we might suppose that a team of latter-day super-Blaschkas, empowered with all the tools of modern simulation technology, might set about to replicate each of the other sensible characteristics of chicory in a synthetic model. The olfactory qualities would prove no problem to any modern perfumier; chicory has a very faint and unsubtle fragrance. The gustatory qualities might be more of a challenge; chicory is famous for its distinctive flavor, which many people believe (wrongly, I think) improves the taste of coffee. Still, were native chicory not so widely available (if an epidemic plant disease were to deprive all living chicory plants of their characteristic tang), it is a virtual certainty that chemical laboratories could soon produce an artificial chicory flavoring satisfactory to the most discerning chicory-coffee aficionado. (And perhaps they already have.) It is easy to imagine that synthetic fiber scientists could replicate the tactile qualities of all parts of the chicory plant, not only its general feel, but its malleability, ductility, tensile strength, etc. And, whatever minimal sounds the plant makes in this or that atmospheric condition could be easily synthesized in any well-equipped sound studio. So, the success of such a venture in plant synthesis is certainly not beyond imagining. Let us assume, then, that we have two specimens at our disposal, a real chicory plant and an artificial chicory plant that cannot be distinguished from it on any sensory basis. Must we now accept the conclusion that the two are aesthetically identical, so that *anything* we are warranted in saying pertinent to the aesthetic status of the one we must be willing to say about the other, and any response we make to either must be made to both?

Some people will no doubt find this an easy question. They will say that the hypothesis has been forged in such a way as to exclude any basis of discrimination between the two, so that the question answers itself. Just as an animal breeder who is presented with a creature and its perfect clone cannot tell them apart (for that's what it means to be a *perfect* clone), the aesthetic judge who is presented with a real plant and its perfect synthetic replica cannot, *ex hypothesi*, draw an aesthetic distinction between them. But others will resist the pull of the hypothesis. They will wish to answer the question in the negative because they think that, the physical identity of the two plants notwithstanding, something is present in the natural plant and absent in the artificial plant that bears importantly on *how* the two are

seen. There is an important difference, they will want to insist, between perceiving a set of characteristics in an object and perceiving that same set of characteristics as *natural* to that object. To perceive something as a product of nature is not to perceive one more thing about it; it is to change the way we perceive everything about it.

This response is pretty much the one Immanuel Kant gave to the question more than two hundred years ago. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant commended the observer who takes an immediate interest in the natural rather than artificial beauty, and went so far as to say that the former perspective is favorable to a certain moral feeling (and is indeed "a mark of a good soul"). His way of delineating the natural and artificial frames of mind draws him directly into our conundrum:

He who by himself (and without any design of communicating his observations to others) regards the beautiful figure of a wild flower ... with admiration and love; who would not willingly miss it in nature although it may bring him some damage; who still less wants any advantage from it—he takes an immediate and also an intellectual interest in the beauty of nature. That is, it is not merely the form of the product of nature which pleases him, but its very presence pleases him....

But it is noteworthy that if we secretly deceived this lover of the beautiful by planting in the ground artificial flowers (which can be manufactured exactly like real ones) ... and he discovered the deceit, the immediate interest that he previously took in them would disappear at once, though perhaps a different interest, viz. the interest of vanity in adorning his chamber with them for the eyes of others, would take its place. This thought then must accompany our intuition and reflection on beauty, viz. that nature has produced it; and on this alone is based the immediate interest that we take in it.²

Here Kant appears to be saying that it is an essential and proper part of our aesthetic regard for natural objects to perceive them as other than collections of sensible features; it is to perceive these features as drawn together by natural forces (of growth, transformation, and evolution, let us say) rather than by artifice. The attention we give to natural objects can amount to an immediate interest, and even a form of love, only when their very presence is understood as predicated on processes removed from human design.³

But, what is it, exactly, about the thought that a thing emanated from natural process rather than human manufacture (which is, after all, just one more attenuated form of natural process, if you take the human participation in the great chain of being seriously) that should render our contemplation of it so immediately pleasing and valuable? And what is it that should lead to such disdain (or at least "disappearance of immediate interest") when what was thought to be a flower is ultimately discovered to be its artificial counterpart? The production of nature look-alikes can be, in its own way, both pleasing and moving, as the popular reac-

tion to the Blaschka flowers demonstrates. Why should the matter of origin count for so much? As Kant puts it, our experience of the one is rendered replete with immediate pleasure, love, and even an intimation of moral consciousness, while the other is purged of all of these. Is prejudice about origins here anything more than an eco-sensitive analog of the social prejudice endemic in human society that irrationally inflates or reduces our estimate of others according to their ethnic, national, or even regional origins?

The easy answer to this question is that we value the naturalness of the natural flower because it is full of a past and a future bound up with the rest of nature, and therefore implicated in it. We admire and respect nature, in turn, for a host of reasons—reasons that involve a tangle of normative concerns ranging from the ecological to the theological. Many of these may be hard to tease apart from aesthetic concerns. For example, our judgments about what is morally good in nature may seem nearly inextricable from our judgments about natural beauty. As we have seen, Kant endorses as a fundamental value in the contemplation of nature an activity he regarded as mingling aesthetic and moral virtues in the making of good-ness.⁴ And a good number of recent writers have echoed Kant's sentiment, if for various non-Kantian reasons.⁵ On Kant's analysis, even if the natural object and natural *as* natural would impure to its object some moral weight, or at least some weight other than, and different from, whatever weight it enjoys simply as an exemplar of its type.⁶

If, however, we are not as inclined as Kant and his philosophical successors to affiliate the contemplation of natural beauty with moral edification, on what basis will appreciating natural objects as natural make them special, and even superior to, their non-natural counterparts? And, if we put aside not only moral features, but *all* value-normative characteristics apart from the aesthetic, what is left that should incline us to take the chicory plant to be importantly different from, and perhaps even superior to, its glass twin just because the former and not the latter is *natural*?

III. Warhol and Blaschka

This puzzle about flowers and their artificial counterparts echoes a well-known example that lies at the heart of modern aesthetic theory. Andy Warhol created artifacts that mimicked their originals. It is fair to say that one of his *Brillo Boxes* was just as indistinguishable from a real Brillo Box as a Blaschka chicory is indistinguishable from its natural counterpart. In a justly famous article, Arthur Danto argues that these apparent indiscernibles *become* non-identical when we regard them through a certain conceptual lens—a lens involving an atmosphere of theory and a knowledge of the history of art, a lens involving a special, interpretive sense of "is" that Danto calls the "is of artistic identification."⁷ The Warhol Brillo box distinguishes itself from the grocery-store Brillo box by being swept up by this

theoretical mode of regard into an artworld. It is tempting to think that a parallel answer should be available in the case of the Blaschka chicory and its real-world look-alike. It is tempting, that is to say, to suppose that the difference between the artifact and the natural object should be, like the difference between the artwork and the quotidian artifact, resolvable by invoking the interpretive lens of theory. But is there an "is" of natural aesthetic identification? Is there, that is to say, a special mode of deeming that uniquely applies to natural objects in the appreciation of their aesthetic features?

Some philosophers seem to think there is. On their view, we implicitly invoke it when we view nature as natural. Like Danto's artworld, the natureworld, if we can call it that, becomes discernible (and properly appreciable) only in an atmosphere of history and theory—natural history and scientific theory, as it usually turns out. Underlying such a view is the conceptualist assumption that the way we come to understand things in general—the way we see them for what they are—is by invoking the right conceptual sorting devices (categories, taxonomic divisions, classes of similar types, and the like) and subsuming instances under them. Thus, the this-and-here item is made intelligible as an example of a given sort. It is by invoking the concept "sonata" that a certain form of musical composition can be heard for what it is, as making sense and being good, bad, or indifferent, as having features that are standard for works of its type and allow us to become aware of the *Gestalt* it shares with other relevantly similar works.⁸ Warhol's *Brillo Box* falls away from its real-world look-alikes when, and only when, it is seen through the concept of Pop Art construction. If it were not subsumed under the category of Pop Art artifact (or some similar *Gestalt*-indicating concept), it would fail to qualify at all as a work of art. By parity of reasoning, one might suppose that the Blaschka chicory falls apart from its real-world chicory counterpart just when the former is seen through the concept of a museum model of display and the latter is seen through the biological concept appropriate to its species and type.

Applying the general conceptualist assumption to natural objects, the twofold claim is first, that, if the concepts and categories we have chosen are the right ones, they give us a "fix" on the nature of these objects, and thus provide us with a necessary (although certainly not a sufficient) condition for appreciating, judging, or simply contemplating them; and second, that there are concepts and categories appropriate to the aesthetic contemplation of natural objects. The dominant view is that, in today's world,⁹ these concepts and categories are supplied by natural history and natural science; these are what give us the true and objective account of nature and its contents.

Non-conceptualists argue that the role of theory in natural aesthetics is quite the opposite. Whereas, they insist, it is appropriate to regard human-made things as fitting into, and evaluated under, human-made categories and concepts, it is distorting and misleading to impose the same sorts of cognitive constraints on nature. After all, nature is free, unbounded by classifications in its splendid diversity, and potentially open to perceptual delight in endlessly various ways. To burden it with

category subsumption, or even analogy to other modes of experience, is to belie its unique charm. Just as the conceptualists urge the explanatory categories of science on natural objects on the ground that science presents things as they are, so the non-conceptualists insist that leaving natural objects as they are means leaving the artificial cognitive framing devices at home.

Part of the impetus for this view comes from Kant. Kant urged us to regard judgments of beauty (in nature as in art) as fundamentally detached from understanding, and only indirectly stimulating it. If, as Kant supposes, our regard for the beauty of a natural chicory plant is freed from the thought "chicory" and all associated taxonomic frames born in the botany laboratory, we can look admiringly at it for what it is, not as a specimen of its type. And, in doing so, we can become aware of all those features that are unique to its individual appearance in the here and now. Another part of the impetus comes from the latter-day aesthetic attitude theorists, such as Jerome Stolnitz, who have insisted that proper aesthetic awareness of an object demands a disinterested and sympathetic attention to it for its own sake, setting aside all the intellectual baggage we usually carry to our projects.¹⁰ If contemplating natural objects for their own sake requires abandonment not only of our everyday worries, aspirations, doubts, and so on, but also of the very intellectual apparatus that we bring to our everyday world to make it manageable, then it will be imperative to experience nature a-conceptually, let alone non-scientifically. This position gives free rein to imagination. Each item of observation in the natural context invites its own response, and each response provides its own constellation of impulses to the subject. There is no reason to suppose that these impulses correspond to categories established by prior comprehension. So the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects transcends, or eclipses, the ways we are accustomed to thinking not only about art, but about everything.

No sensible person will deny that both science and imagination inform our appreciation of nature in important ways. Nevertheless, both the conceptualist position and the non-conceptualist position I have outlined are seriously flawed. In what follows, I want to defend a view that draws lessons from their failings while it capitalizes on their admitted strengths.

IV. Science and the Nature of Nature

The foremost exponent of the conceptualist position is Allen Carlson. In a series of stylish and forcefully argued articles over the last twenty years, Carlson has insistently grounded aesthetic regard of the natural world in the framework of understanding provided by natural science. The argument, which has never deviated in its essentials while contouring its borders in response to critics, is essentially this: Objects of our aesthetic attention in the natural world are not works of art; they are natural. Our appreciation of them must therefore be a way of thinking and responding that is fitted to the natural order. What we have come to know about nature objectively is cumulated in natural science. Therefore, natural science

provides the only reasonable basis for appreciation of natural objects, corresponding in its own way to our developed standards of appreciation in the arts (knowledge of types, traditions, historical deviations, and so on). Relying on natural science, we can appreciate the chicory plant as an environmentally integral component in the wider natural order. Relying on natural science, we can see how this specimen is relevantly like and unlike others. This way of viewing the chicory plant affirms that this object is situated in a natural environment, and that is essential to our seeing it (aesthetically and otherwise) for what it is.¹¹

The first problem with this argument is that it wrongly assumes that there is in the natural world a fact of the matter and that this fact is especially accessible to science. We should remember that it is the business of science to see what is similar as alike, and what happens as conforming to common rules of action. The artist may be struck with a feature of this particular chicory plant that leads her to take delight in it especially—say, the way that branch catches the light and brings it up against the shadow of the stalk. And so may we delight in it as admirers of the natural beauty of the plant apart from any artistic objective. But, science doesn't help us here. Science looks at the plant as chicory and sees it as an exemplar whose properties are tied to its type. To see the chicory plant as chicory is not to see it in the full range of its appearance. Categories are sometimes helpful in framing our experience of nature (or in inducing a conspectus of attention); but sometimes they aren't. A given object may fit in several categories, or uncertainly in any category, or (especially in the case of objects of first impression) in no category at all.

The limiting condition on scientific knowledge is not some dim barrier of mystery, but simply its inapplicability to the unique. The sciences are bound to understand individual objects only as members of classes of things and to understand events as subject to generally applicable laws. The eye of the aesthetic observer, whether trained on artworks or on nature, is concerned to see unique aspects of things—how this odd clump of chicory catches the afternoon light, how this shattering icepack sounds, how this waterfall spray feels. Not *qua* chicory, *qua* icepack, *qua* waterfall; but simply *qua* this-here-object-of-regard.

Second, in our experience of nature, the object of contemplation is often not a thing that has a scientifically recognized type, but rather an indefinable constellation of features. Nature does not consist of a sum of natural kinds. Much of what we admire in nature is nameless, not because a category is missing in our repertoire, but because it is a combination of looks, sounds, smells, glints, hues, swirls, and so on that simply have no names. These various features are drawn together into a conspectus of appreciation not by an organizing category, but by one or another informal framing device we call upon. We may for a while become aware of natural beauty in a promembrance of rock, moss, and varied plant life that looks composed into a unit of delectation just by its sunlit and shadowed contours and its relative isolation from its neighbors. We may take the graceful rhythm of wave action in a pond, its ever-changing patterns of lines and lights, as an aesthetic whole because just this much is marked out by the disturbance of wind. We may

find, on a walk through the woods, that the fragrance of the conifers, the susurrantion of the leafy undergrowth, the feel of the soil underfoot, and the sudden aspect of a dead ground squirrel come together in an experience whose poignancy is organized by a general awareness of the cycle of life, death, and renewal. In each case, the framing at work is temporary and malleable; but, even as we move about in it and reposition the frame ("Now look at the lake from this side!"), we draw upon it to give us a something-here-and-now as the object of our aesthetic awareness.

More than anyone else, it is Ronald Hepburn who has drawn attention to the importance of the aesthetic conspectus, as opposed to categories and subsumables, in imparting wholeness and focus to appreciation of nature. Hepburn insists that nature is frameless; but he denies that this means we cannot, by combining imagination with informed perspective, achieve a *rapprochement* with nature in which we "realize" what we observe. Realizing the natural object occurs when, for this reason or that, our perceptions find a place to dwell and linger.¹² As he points out, in our response to the flight of swifts, or the fall of an autumn leaf, or a wide expanse of sand and mud, the natural categories involved play at best a minor role in our appreciation.¹³ I may care very little whether the birds whose graceful pattern I observe are swifts or larks, whether the leaf falls from a maple or an ash, and whether I am on a salt marsh or river estuary. My aesthetic attention is drawn to aspects of the natural spectacle that stand importantly apart from any category or concept. I am delighted by the peculiar way—there is no word—that the birds, twisting in their flight, catch the light just so, and then just so again. Natural objects are often, in this way, an immediate substance of my sensory awareness; they are not just this or that, but the way this or that looks, feels, sounds, and so on. They are aspects, figurations, fragrances, and the like, which may have been cultivated by the contemplation of things of this or that type, but yet are importantly free of the type itself.

Thirdly, there is an obvious way in which cognition can interfere with delectation. In a famous passage from *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain admits that once he had mastered the language of the water and come to know all of its features, the grace, beauty, and poetry of the Mississippi River disappeared.¹⁴ Similarly, we may find that our experience of natural objects or natural settings is disturbed by what we have come to know about them. Our knowledge that a given object of our attention is *only* a chicory plant may detract from our awareness of its particular beauty in this light, under these circumstances, with this breeze, and so on. We have all been on walks through gardens when we didn't know the names of the flowers. It is hard to think that we would necessarily be in a better position to appreciate them aesthetically if we knew their names. Sometimes knowledge spoils experience. Knowing just what a thing is captures it in a category, and in that way makes it comfortable to us, whereas not knowing what a thing is and seeing it as just one more nameless splendor makes it uncomfortable, exciting, and therefore, in its own way, important.

So, although natural science gives us lots of information about nature, it does

not provide an account of the *nature* of nature needed to support the particular forms of appreciation we often bring to natural experience. By being indelibly committed to the cognitive, the categorial, and the regular, science provides no means of illuminating those aspects of our reflection on natural objects that is non-cognitive, particular, and anomalous.

V. Imagination and the Limits of the Natural

Those who find the conceptualist position unacceptable may be inclined to agree with the view advanced by a host of non-conceptualists that aesthetic regard for natural objects is mainly a matter of imagination, or something like it, rather than understanding. The idea here is that certain aspects of our awareness *not* comprehended in any of our scientific categories are central to our genuine appreciation of aesthetic objects. Emily Brady emphasizes the role of imagination. Noël Carroll emphasizes the role of emotional arousal. Arnold Berleant emphasizes the role of personal engagement with the environment. Other theorists emphasize other aspects of awareness. What binds them together is their common commitment to a view that the central features of natural aesthetic awareness are detached from concepts.

Kant, again, is the inspiration for those who want to take the appreciation of nature around the subjective turn. By urging us to see beauty judgments as cut off from information about their objects, he freed our sense of beauty from its intellectual entanglements. But Kant did not think that, under his theory, just anything you please could be beautiful. And, similarly, non-conceptualists have to draw a line between what they think is a reasonable attribution of aesthetic value and what is not.

The problem here seems to lie with the notion of imagination (and allied non-cognitive vectors of appreciation). As some theorists see it, imagination is a free agency, penetrating its objects in a variety of ways. Brady identifies four ways: exploratory, projective, ampliative, and revelatory.¹⁵ Carroll identifies a variety of ways by which we may be moved by nature, responding to objects and events with a range of appropriate emotions.¹⁶ Berleant identifies the capacity we have for focusing on the wholeness and integrity of a situation in creating conditions for our engagement with it.¹⁷ But the fundamental problem with these views and all other non-conceptualist approaches is the inherent limitlessness of the non-conceptual. If, as between understanding and imagination, nature is committed to the unrestricted province of the latter, there can be no bounds on what we make of it. A river can be a bookmark and a star can be a good luck charm.¹⁸

A second problem with the non-conceptual approach has been pointed out by Carlson. It is that the more nature is regarded as a realm free from the understanding-marshaling influence of science, the more it becomes a mystery—alien, aloof, distant, unknowable. It is a short step from declaring natural beauty ineffable to declaring it unintelligible. The more mysterious nature is made to appear,

the more inaccessible it is to our inquiring intelligence. As Carlson puts the point, "The mystery and aloofness of nature are a gulf, an emptiness, between us and nature; they are that by which we separate ourselves from nature. Thus, they can not constitute a means by which we can attain any appreciation of nature whatsoever."¹⁹

The trick is to find a way to respect the intuitions that drive these views apart. I think this can easily be done: First, there is no denying that nature is something about which scientists know a lot. Second, knowledge clearly does not exhaust our reflection on natural objects. Third, imagination is an essential ingredient in our appreciative involvement with anything. It ought to be possible to build a perspective on the aesthetic value of natural objects that incorporates both natural science and imagination without giving pride of place to either. This is precisely what I aim to do.

VI. Syncretic Aesthetics

What I want to argue for here is both a way of addressing the cleft between the rival views I have described and of re-integrating our thinking about art and nature. First I will draw upon the prior discussion to make five theoretical points; then I will pull them together to reach a conclusion that makes room for both science and imagination.

My first point is this: If two things look alike (and are in all other sensible respects indistinguishable), then they are aesthetic twins. So, if the natural chichoreo and its synthetic counterpart are indistinguishable in the relevant respects, they are aesthetic twins. Now, if twins are to be separated in such a case, they will be separated as twins are in other instances. That is, features other than their origin will be taken into account. In the case of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and their look-alike counterparts, the "is" of artistic identity does the trick. But that artwork device works because a human-made institution provides a scheme of deeming (that, in Danto's example, makes it apt to say of a given patch of paint on a Breughel painting "that is Icarus") in relation to human-made works. Here the roles of convention and social consent are large. If there is an "is" of natural aesthetic identification, the roles of conventions and consent are minimal. As Danto has repeatedly pointed out, it is, in a sense, theory that makes art possible. But it isn't theory that makes the live chichory plant possible. The "natureworld," if that is what we want to call the full range of natural aesthetic experience (actual and possible), is in some ways quite independent of our judgments.

The second point is that taking a natural object as natural is not simply a matter of regarding it as non-human-made. First, we should admit that, in our modern world, most of what we want to call "natural" is already, to some degree, human-made. We have carved out the areas we want to leave "unspoiled," and we have reserved other areas for limited access with the idea that those who see them will get a sense of what nature is really like. Sunsets often look the way they do

because of pollution we create. When a great glacier calves, and tons of ice plummet into the sea, part of the job was done by gravity and part by the heat we have been injecting into the atmosphere. But, second, nature is not confined to what nature-seeking tourists come to see. The volvox colony in the microscope is nature; Orion's belt in the evening sky is nature; the bulge of my tulip in the spring earth is nature; my sneeze is nature. When we speak about nature in general we are inclined to talk about the kind of experience folks have when they get out of their urban environments to see the unspoiled world beyond. But, there is no truly unspoiled world. And there is a natural world right there in the place they left. Clouds come everywhere, as do bugs and weeds.

The third point is that the perspective of science is not the perspective most people bring to the experience of nature; and it is rarely the source of the delight we experience when we enjoy natural beauty. There are, to be sure, moments when we take pleasure in seeing this or that object as one of its type, a rocky promontory as an example of geologic upthrust, for example. But there are, equally, moments when our aesthetic pleasure consists in deliberate attention to nameless congeries of natural occurrences. One summer, on the Oregon coast, I knelt down to observe the ever-shifting patterns resulting from the intersection of multi-colored beach sand and streams running to the sea. There was a wonderful confluence of shapes and colors, fascinating in their sinuous interaction and dissipation. It was simply beautiful, so beautiful that dragging myself away from it was almost painful. But there was no thought that it was beautiful as a *this* or *that*. In all of its aesthetic qualities, this call-it-what-you-will owed no debt to concepts.

The fourth point is that imagination is never unbridled. As Kant argued, when the imagination is stimulated, the understanding is too, in its way. And if we think we are, as non-conceptualists sometimes suggest, disposed to regard aesthetic objects as stimuli for any fantastic association we may call up (so that a raven might be a writing desk, say), then all aesthetic bets are off. Anything can be anything. But, if non-conceptualism restricts itself to the claim that things need not be regarded as what they are *usually* taken to be, or what their standard classification makes them, then the point can bear the weight it needs to bear in the current controversy. Imagination works to see thuses as thats. A cloud can be a bear, a disk of metal can be a dollar, and a sunset can be a display of colors and forms that stimulate delight, remind us of death, call up the pallet of Turner, and so on.

The fifth point is that there is nothing about either science or imagination that precludes both from cooperating in the intelligent appreciation of natural objects. As it happens, there is a pair of bald eagles nesting near my home. When I see one of them soaring over the neighborhood, I am delighted. I am aesthetically pleased. But my pleasure in the flight of this great bird does not depend very much on my recognition that, in the ornithological taxonomy, this is a bald eagle. Nor, for that matter, that it serves as a patriotic icon in our country. I see it swoop over the water, hover overhead, swinging its great white head this way and that, then sail up on a draft, and disappear into the distance. I am certainly aware that it's a bird, that it's

an eagle, and even that it is a rare bird, a bald eagle. I am also aware that, in an urban environment, it is a rare and precious presence. I know that it needs certain things to eat, certain places to rest, certain climatic conditions to survive, and so on. So, I am at least minimally aware of ornithological lore that pertains to this creature as a being of its type. I just do not believe that that knowledge contributes very much to my sense of the eagle's beauty, or the beauty of its flight. If on some occasion I were to mistake a hawk for the eagle, but see its flight as beautiful—just as beautiful as the eagle flight—I would be making a mistake in science, but not in aesthetics.

What lesson can we draw from these observations? Perhaps the most important single point is that, in thinking about the aesthetic qualities of a natural object, we cannot confine our attention to class membership or to any one category of appearance. Rather, we have to regard the object as situated in a constellation of properties, some aesthetic, some scientific, some political, and so on. And, some of these properties attach to concepts and others don't. So the best we can do in responding to them is to use those parts of our intelligent awareness that suits each. My awareness of background information about the eagle is not like the information about genre and type needed to locate a work of art in its niche and assess it, but more like information about the paint and canvases, or marble, or metal in the tuba, that are instrumental to the artistic production, yet not cognitive requisites for its appreciation. I do not want to deny that the more we know about something the better positioned we may be to appreciate it, in aesthetic or any other sense. But, at the same time, I suggest that some of what we know about a thing might help us to see it as a thing of its type without helping us to see whether, as a member of that type, it has aesthetic merit at all.

The key point science provides to the appreciation of natural beauty is the insistent vision that what is natural is more than non-human-made; it is a part of an order of being that has its own modes of growth and development, its own history, its own inter-relatedness. To see natural beauty as natural is necessarily to contextualize it in that way. But to say this is not to concede that all of the contents of nature are to be understood through particular categories or concepts, including those of science. Rather, appreciating a chicory plant, an eagle's flight, a pattern of water in sand, are reactions that always, to some degree, leave all concepts and categories behind. Paying respectful attention to the nameless ingredients that largely constitute these phenomena, we instinctively draw on a repertory of responses that we have cultivated in the full range of our experiences.

This is where art comes back into the picture. The curved line that marks the edge of a leaf may call to mind the characteristic curvilinear treatment of human limbs in mannerist painters of the Northern Renaissance (Cranach, say). But, to see the leaf and the painted limb as alike need not be to see one as the reflection, or emblem, of the other. In drawing upon our familiarity with aesthetic characteristics in the arts we are simply drawing on a resource in which the sensitivities we apply to all manner of objects have been finely honed. If I have become aware of

certain tonal modulations by listening to Handel flute sonatas, I am not turning the similar sounds I hear in the forest into ersatz flute sonatas. I am simply using the aesthetic skills I have to make the attention I pay to natural beauty pay off.

Now, suppose, having steeped myself in the study of landscape paintings in all the great museums, I step out into a setting that a landscape painter would very likely have found a fit subject for portrayal. When I look at the natural scene, do I then necessarily see it as a scene—as scenic? Because my head is full of art, do I aestheticize nature in such a way as to make it artificial? I might, but I don't see why I must. No more than a summer on a farm would make me look at bucolic paintings as especially natural. The truth of the matter is that, as Eaton has pointed out,

Human valuing is holistic; we rarely experience something purely aesthetically or purely ethically or purely religiously or purely scientifically.... The task for all of us is to develop ways of using the delight that human beings take in flights of imagination, connect it to solid cognitive understanding of what makes for sustainable environments, and thus produce the kind of attitudes and preferences that will generate the kind of care we hope for.²⁰

The curve of the leaf and the curve of the leg in the painting are both aesthetically affecting because there is something about curves of a certain kind that moves us. That something is not peculiar to nature, nor to art. It pervades experience broadly, emerging first here, then there, with a cumulative impact on the attentive observer.²¹ When we pay attention to artistic beauty, that attention prepares us to appreciate natural beauty—not as artistic, but as one more area in which we find value. And likewise for the lessons of nature for art.

VII. Conclusion

I have tried to show that appreciating nature aesthetically as natural is more than a matter of recognizing its non-artificiality; but neither is it only the comprehension of natural objects under some particular concepts and categories, nor again is it the reduction of nature to a plaything of unfettered imagination and free association. Between the view of the conceptualists, which overstates the influence of concepts and categories on appreciation, and that of non-conceptualists, which understates their influence, there is a third position, which I have called syncretism. There is a real difference between a real flower and its glass look-alike. That difference begins with the recognition that one is a product of nature. That entails seeing it as implicated in an order whose historical course and direction is complex, interconnected, and largely detached from human purposes. But this environmental recognition does not require the invocation of science in framing aesthetic awareness of the contents of nature. In reflecting on the richly various and largely nameless features we find in natural settings, we rightly draw on asso-

ciations, familiarities, analogies, etc. that we have learned in other settings, most especially in art. In drawing on these resources, we need not impose the terms of one world on the other; rather, we make the most of our developed sensibilities to make the most of nature and of the other worlds we occupy as well. And if it should turn out that there are various harmonies, similarities, and affinities between them, then all the better.

Notes

- 1 In "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 149-156 [reprinted in this volume, Chapter 9], Marcia Eaton draws this distinction somewhat differently. She divides the competing positions into the "cognitive model" and the "imaginative model." My way of framing the difference is meant to suggest that, though there is cognitive content at work on both sides of the division, classifications of the kind standardly used to identify types of natural objects by the sciences are at work on one side and not on the other.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [1790], trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1951), pp. 141-142.
- 3 The key remark is this: "In saying it is *beautiful* and in showing that I have taste, I am concerned, not with that in which I depend on the existence of the object, but with that which I make out of this representation in myself." *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 4 As Kant puts it, "... to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature (not merely to have taste in judging it) is always a mark of a good soul; and that, when this interest is habitual, it at least indicates a frame of mind favorable to the moral feeling if it is voluntarily bound up with the contemplation of nature." *Ibid.*, 141.
- 5 See, for example, Marcia Mueelder Eaton, "The Beauty that Requires Health," in *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology*, ed. Joan Nassauer (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), pp. 85-106.
- 6 This conclusion may seem to clash with what Kant says in his famous declaration of the independence of beauty judgments from the existence of their objects (*Critique of Judgment*, p. 39), but it reflects a profound sense in which Kant subscribes to the moral instructiveness of the natural order in general.
- 7 Arthur Danto, "The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects, the Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 571-584.
- 8 Many theorists inclined in this direction find support for their views in Kendall Walton's essay "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334-367. In this essay, Walton argues that to perceive a work of art is, typically, to perceive it in a category, and to perceive it in a category is to perceive the *Gestalt* of that category in the work. The *Gestalt* of a category is a function of what the artform has evolved to be, a basis for our expectations of perceptive awareness. So, on Walton's account, what we can comprehend in a work is always a function of what its categorial predecessors have prepared us to comprehend.

- 9 Aesthetic categories as well as explanatory principles are clearly time-relative. In an earlier age, theology and mythology occupied the position natural science does today as suppliers of conceptual tools for making natural objects intelligible.
- 10 Stolnitz develops this view in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 32-42.
- 11 See Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1979): 267-276 [reprinted in this volume, Chapter 2]; "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment and Objectivity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 15-27; "Interactions between Art and Nature: Environmental Art," in *The Reasons of Art: Artworks and the Transformations of Philosophy*, ed. Peter McCormick (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1985), pp. 222-231; "Saito on the Correct Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 20 (1986): 86-92; "Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation, and Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 393-400; "Nature: Contemporary Thought," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Volume 3, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 346-349; and especially *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000). This last text draws together many of Carlson's earlier writings into a general theory of aesthetic appreciation of the environment.
- 12 Ronald Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *British Analytical Philosophy*, eds. Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 285-310 [reprinted in this volume, Chapter 1].
- 13 The tide flat is considered in Hepburn, "Neglect of Natural Beauty"; the swift and leaf examples are taken up in "Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 65-80.
- 14 Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* [1883] (New York: Penguin, 1984), pp. 94-96.
- 15 Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 139-147 [reprinted in this volume, Chapter 8].
- 16 Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, pp. 244-266 [reprinted in this volume, Chapter 4].
- 17 Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 37. [Editors' Note: Chapter 11 of *Aesthetics of the Environment*, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature," is reprinted in this volume, Chapter 3.] Berleant develops the same ideas at greater length in *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997).
- 18 Marcia Muellder Eaton presents powerful criticisms of Brady's version of non-cognitivism in "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature." She points out that the associations called up by imagination in response to natural objects are so various, so unrestricted that there is no way of knowing whether they are shallow or naïve, instructive or not, apt or delusional.
- 19 Carlson, "Nature: Contemporary Thought," p. 347.

- 20 Eaton, "Fact and Fiction," p. 155 [this volume, p. 179-180].
- 21 In a way, what I say here is reflective of Stan Godlovitch's defense of a perspective that refuses to impose one world's framework on another, but nevertheless profits from the ability of the mind trained in both to respond richly, and differently, to both. See, for example, his "Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics," *The Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11 (1994): 15-30 [reprinted in this volume, Chapter 5].