

Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics

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I. Victimless Vandalism?

Alberta's a pretty cold place and it helps if you get to appreciate ice. Each winter, our local river, the Bow, a fast stream born in the Rockies, freezes nearly all the way across. Spreading out from both banks, the ice is often several feet thick. Come early spring, these broad ice shelves break up and large slabs are shoved in piles onto the shore. After about a month, they wither under the sun and eventually disappear.

No one enchanted by the world can fail to be attracted by this seasonal show. For those convinced that nature must match up to us, this gallery of blocks counts at least as a contribution to some imaginable proto-sculpture. For those who take the world much as it is without anxiety about Culture and Meaning and Agency and High Art, these glassy masses, in a good year, would steal any prize.

I often walk along the Bow, especially during the breakup. In spring it's particularly easy to convince my boy Daniel to keep me company because of another seasonal treat. With the sun beating on these blocks followed by the dark cold of night, the predictable expansion and contraction causes countless stress fractures within. What appears outwardly as a stony integrity masks a tense inner decay ready to show itself when properly triggered. Past a certain threshold of strain, parts of these blocks will rupture into a shower of splinters that spread round their base like a diamond scree. The release sounds like the random chimes of breaking glass.

If you leave the world be, these rupture thresholds ripen gently, and the blocks deteriorate dignifiedly quite like the sandstone castles of southern Utah. But, as every child quickly learns, you can hurry the process with stunning effect by applying gratuitous force just so to certain vulnerable points. Rocks do the trick, and so does the well-placed kick. Such curt blows liberate a thousand elastic stresses that, when relaxed simultaneously, launch a noisy shower of icicles. When you're eight or so, you just can't get your fill of this adventure. The odd grown-up joins in too. Having reduced a stretch of the Bow Gallery to rubble, the vandals head home, ready to lay waste the arctic the next sunny day.

II. A Natural Aesthetic for Environmentalism

What's the moral? What principles are at stake? Pompously put, the Bow massacre raises questions about beauty, time, and nature. Should it make any difference to us that some things of aesthetic value might be transient? Should an aesthetic appreciation of nature require us to respect scales of space and time that may have little significance from a human-centered perspective? If so, isn't it curious that the aesthetic dimension, rooted firmly and, some may argue, necessarily in the realities of human perception, should have to disavow that very limit when directed to the natural sphere. Must we adopt another perspective here? Is there another one to adopt?

Any merit these questions have flows from an uncustomary power the aesthetic outlook acquires in reflections about environmentalism, the view that nature needs protecting. It is difficult if not foolish to defend environmental principles on instrumental or purely utilitarian grounds.¹ Environmentalists who avoid appeals to utility may extend concerns to other species by attributing rights to them. But even this may frustrate the aims of environmentalism. Sometimes we can't plausibly refer to a violation of rights. Do whole species have rights? Forests? We may even resort to inventing a fictional rights-holder just to have a target for possible misconduct. But, we can't speak coherently of the rights of rivers or sand dunes.

One environmental view stresses non-interventionism, pressing us to accept the natural world on its own terms. To justify protecting nature as it is and not merely as it is for us, we must demonstrate that nature has intrinsic worth. Supposing we reject stock moral appeals to rights and benefits, what can replace them? Well, the aesthetic sphere recognizes non-moral intrinsic value. For an aesthetic appeal to work, an argument must be mounted that identifies in nature that which overridingly commands our regard. To do so, such a natural aesthetic must forswear the anthropocentric limits that fittingly define and dominate our aesthetic response to, and regard for, cultural objects. This makes of natural aesthetics a distinctive pursuit. How such a non-anthropocentric aesthetic is possible, how it can appear to shed such limits, if it can, is my concern here.

I begin by distinguishing between what I call *Centric* and *Acentric* forms of environmentalism. I propose that only acentric environmentalism takes into account nature as a whole; if we wish to adopt an acentric environmentalism, we require a corresponding acentric natural aesthetic to ground it.

Centric positions locate the value or benefit flowing from a principle in beings to which a point of view may be ascribed; roughly, beings to which we may naturally attribute a center of consciousness or apperception, however dark the notion. Such beings have perspectives such that we can understand why it might matter to them what might happen, even if we may not be able to articulate or even understand what might be the matter-to-them. Rocks and rivers don't qualify; nematodes do. If it makes sense to enact a policy for some such being, that policy instantiates a centric view. Any environmentalism that aims to preserve the earth for its inhab-

itants is centric. Centric Environmentalism is biocentric with both Restricted and General forms, anthropocentrism being typical of the first and full biocentrism of the second. Anthropocentrism may range more widely than may be obvious. For, suppose we were colonized by a relatively benign fully rational extra-terrestrial species. We might well include this species under the "ratiocentric" umbrella that favors us. Biocentrism itself may come specialized as zoocentrism and botanocentrism. Strictly speaking, only zoocentrism can be centric because although plants clearly can benefit and be adversely affected, they do not enjoy an outlook of any description.

In Acentric positions, the value expressed in a principle cannot reflect the point of view of the recipient because no such point of view exists. Thus Acentrism reaches toward the notion of a moral perspective toward "mere things." Any moral relevance in the distinction between living and non-living is lost in acentrism. Strip-mining the moon becomes morally as problematic as strip-whaling the seas. Nothing distinguishes leaving be Venusian craters or the Amazon rainforest, between active lava flows and the ecology of the Serengeti. Acentrism lacks and hence remains indifferent to any special focus, any moral dualism. It neither draws nor presupposes any relevant categorical or moral distinction between the animate and the inanimate. This gives it a distinctive, and distinctively weird, non-perceptual universality.

Acentrism addresses a limitation in centrism: namely, its fragmented view of nature. Each form of centric environmentalism rests on special interests, centers of concern. Centrism treats nature as articulate and its parts as partisan. Further, centrism is predicated upon the continued interests of particular parties and thus prejudicially concentrates, coagulates, respect for them. Oddly, centric environmentalism dignifies while not actually articulating belief in natural fixity, stasis, by assigning special virtue to conservation, to saving natural things as they are, and restoring them as they once were. This runs counter to one truism about nature: everything that comes to be passes away. Nature's inherent flux is contradicted in conservatism. The conservationist impulse is primarily an expression of cultural, not natural, value. To save, to bank, to preserve, to keep unchanged, embalmed—these are the engines of tradition, the hallmark of culture. Nature has neither parts nor tradition nor history.² Centric environmentalism fails to reflect nature as a whole because nature is apportioned and segmented by it.

Because acentric environmentalism cannot rest on the rights and benefits sustaining biocentrism, it could appeal to an aesthetic that rejects the limits that fittingly define and dominate our response to, and regard for, cultural objects, artworks. To appreciate nature on its own terms aesthetically requires minimally the acknowledgement that nature is neither artificial nor quasi-artificial. To regard nature as itself we cannot "culturalize" it; we cannot pretend that it looks or behaves like our artwork, not without creating out of it a "de-natured" artifact.

This tension between aesthetic appreciation appropriate to art and to nature Allen Carlson recognizes in his critique of the "object" and "landscape" paradigms

of appreciation. Basically, Carlson rules the artificiality (and often triviality) of perspective in both attempts to fit nature within a frame, so to speak. Later, I consider Carlson's positive view, the "environmental model," a more holistic stance, which, I argue, imposes a different kind of frame. I pursue a frame-free perspective, a move behind the manifold of perception.³

To regard nature aesthetically as itself, as primordially non-artificial, thus calls for an acentric aesthetic, one typified not so much by its object as by its attitude. Of course, the object appropriate to this acentric attitude is nature as conceived through acentric environmentalism. The only way one can attain a moral regard for the nature of acentric environmentalism is by appreciating nature through an acentric aesthetic.

III. The Arbitrariness of Aesthetic Appreciation

Before considering an acentric natural aesthetic, I have to consider the odd implication that any culture-inspired (i.e., centric) natural aesthetic is somehow arbitrary. I think it no more odd to regard our conventional centric natural aesthetic arbitrary than it is so to regard our conventional anthropocentric morality. This needs elaboration.

There is something aesthetically offensive about wanton environmental destruction even when no habitat is jeopardized. Imagine bulldozing down the great Navaho sandstone castles of Monument Valley. But how far do our irritations extend? Just how selectively sensitive are we? How about smashing ice blocks heaved up in spring breakup? Is this any less obnoxious? Well, yes it is, we might say, because the ice will melt anyway, and, besides, it is renewed each spring. But the great stone monuments too will crumble to dust and will rise again the next time a massive tectonic subduction heaves the interior plateau high up leaving it easy prey to the wiles of erosion. Ah, we say resignedly, Life, Human Life, is not long enough to enjoy geological renewal.

Can it come to this, that our standard natural aesthetic is governed by our temporal puniness? Probably so, and, furthermore, no one should be surprised. The aesthetic dimension grows upon the culture of human scale, is accountable to and acceptable only within the bounds of human perception and human apprehension. Such an aesthetic, operating within our sensory limits and attentive to their typical objects, I identify as a centric aesthetic. Once things transcend that scale, up or down, our appreciative powers flicker, our securable outrage flags. But isn't this high arbitrariness?

Is any centric natural aesthetic unavoidably arbitrary simply because it is hitched to our biological limits? It seems so. If we were giants, crushing a rock monument, even a stony moon, would be no more aesthetically offensive than flattening the odd sandcastle is to us now. If our lives were measured in seconds, shattering ice blocks would count as momentarily coarse as using Bryce Canyon as a landfill pit.

If our aesthetic concerns about nature are sensorily parochial, shouldn't we overcome it? If so, this leaves us aesthetically on the point of a plane stretching out indefinitely in all directions. To move to an acentric natural aesthetic is at least to value aesthetically that which cannot derive its value through ordinary sensory experience.

The retort is swift. Surely, our natural aesthetic is, naturally, as anthropocentric as we are human. The charge of arbitrariness is trivial because it infects any unavoidably anthropocentric perspective, even morality. Though it's true that if we had no pain receptors, pulling out someone's fingernails may be no more vicious than giving someone a lousy haircut, this doesn't imply that it can't matter generally if we yank out someone's fingernails. All it does is warn us that we'd best reserve judgment on foreign worlds until we know the facts. Anyway, such anthropocentrism has the appropriateness of necessity. Which sensory perspective can we trade it in for?

This blanket dissolution misses the mark because an obvious arbitrariness emerges within our present limitations. Some find the discrepancy between the human treatment of humans and other animals incomprehensibly capricious. "Because it's just a chicken" doesn't seem, in itself, a morally sanctioned reason for rearing an otherwise autonomous creature in conditions of captivity and then killing her when she becomes large enough to roast. Surely, it is not much more difficult to see that there might be something analogously dissonant within our present natural aesthetic about the co-existence of indifference to the destruction of ice blocks and passionate opposition to the Oldman River Dam project.

Anyway, even if we have to live with what we've got, no one said the perspective must be sensory in the ordinary sense. It is this departure that starts to make of an acentric aesthetic something apart. To be examined are two non-sensory experiential frameworks through which to appreciate Nature: (1) the intellectual-cognitive and (2) the affective-reverential. Both offer rich alternatives, but neither alone is adequate. To these I add the objective-mystical, the view from which no viewer matters at all.

IV. How to Build an Acentric Aesthetic—a Beginner's Guide

If we reckon even an insensate nature has value in itself and not just as habitat or as a source of pleasure, that value must flow from a non-moral source. Rock and ice have no point of view. Any environmentalism focused upon all of nature indiscriminately must be acentric. The nature addressed by this acentric environmentalism is the principal object of an acentric natural aesthetic.⁴ Such an aesthetic cannot itself be humanly parochial because our object is something much bigger and less understandable than we are; hence the place for an acentric natural aesthetic, one that indifferently gives the ice on the Bow a voice with Crater Lake. If this result spells for some a *reductio ad absurdum* for such an environmentalism, it signals for others just how profoundly radical and culturally subversive environmentalism really is.

What might an acentric aesthetic look like? However peculiar such an aesthetic appears, models exist for its foundation. In the remainder, I review two fruitful prospects for an acentric aesthetic, one developed by Allen Carlson, the other by Mark Sagoff. Neither was fashioned for the job I'm advertising, so neither qualifies completely. Still, each suggests how we might break free of our standard scalar limits. I conclude with a third sketch, less intelligible and articulate than those before, but one that is obligingly sensitive to the cardinal credo of any radical and misanthropic environmentalism; namely, that nature is, for us, fundamentally inaccessible and ultimately alien. The two models examined lack this mystery of aloofness, the first full of optimism about our cognitive-epistemological prospects, the second about the power of love and reverence.

Biomorphic Stretch: Rights, Quasi-Persons & the Kingdom of Ends: Before proceeding, another view, albeit odd, merits a glance. One way to ensure protective regard for the vulnerable against our devices is to declare them the locus of rights. One would suppose, though, that things don't come much more brute than rock and ice, so one would have a tough time finding the fitting criterial nail on which to hang any entitlements. Odd to say, that rock and ice are insensate need not block the extension of rights to them. One philosopher has ensured such a privilege for artworks by classifying them as "quasi-persons," thus securing them membership in the Kingdom of Ends. How else can one characterize how some acts can be affronts against works directly rather than merely indirect indignities against their creators or audiences?⁵ Why not spread round the joy of quasi-personhood to nature generally? Wouldn't this afford all of Creation whatever acentric environmentalism requests?

It's not so easy. The category "quasi-person" seems question-begging and, tactically, must have been introduced just to give the notion of an artwork's "rights" some honorific weight since artworks are decidedly not persons. You cannot just say that because something can be as-if-violated that it is the subject of rights, that it should be so treated. At best, quasi-persons can't have any but quasi-rights. Any quasi-right is a quasi-entitlement. The redrock mesa's quasi-entitlement is to quasi-protection. Would you sleep well at night knowing the quasi-police had your quasi-safety in mind? Quasi-person talk gets quickly out of hand. Are cars quasi-persons insofar as they can be maltreated; for example, by crunching their gears or failing to change the oil regularly? Is a vintage wine a quasi-person just because it can suffer by being excessively chilled or bounced about?

One reprieve is the hint in nature's quasi-personhood of the popular Gaia idea.⁶ Simply put, we are to respect nature in itself because it is, as a whole, a person of sorts, a self-sustaining integrated system with the analogue of needs, growth, personality, health, and the capacity to suffer and to flourish. The Gaia notion is broader than biocentrism because life is just one function contributing to the "welfare" of the whole.

I am reluctant to invest in such stock. Gaia seems either just another unhelpful biomorphic or, even, anthropomorphic metaphor, or an unwitting celebra-

tion of our own inimitably human obsession with order, economy, organization, system, functionality, hierarchy, cooperation, obedience, and interaction. To paint either picture is to conceive nature as much chummier a place than it is, a place too much like what we know, like, and can control. In a sense, Gaian environmentalism is the moral parallel of centric natural aesthetics; that is, it subsumes the whole within the part, makes of nature a mere patient our medicine can heal. Gaian views seem not so much to reflect nature as to extend wishful fantasies of harmony and interconnectedness. But these hail primordially from our worship of functional human structures—organizations, institutions, corporations—that typify human society and human life. Whoever said nature is a productive factory or a purposive well-balanced corporation in which each hoplite and centurion knows its place? Whoever said nature must have an economy, a sense of thrift and investment? To see it such is to make the world after our own image, an image we understand and appreciate incontestably better than anything else. Something archetypally Romantic haunts such “organic” or “organismic” models.⁷

Though no opportunity for exposition exists here, it is worthwhile to add to the general suspicion that certain basic physical, biological, and geological models are modeled on, and reflective of, more closely understood cultural phenomena and norms. We graft law onto nature as natural law; economy and trade as ecology; progressive change as evolution. This is not the socio-historical hypothesis suggesting that specific historical and cultural episodes spur interest in and give birth to specific types of theory; for example, indeterminacy for uncertain times, unitarianism for stable times, etc. Instead, consider the quasi-biological hypothesis that humans in their science, morality, and art make all of nature an expression of generally human normative goals. Nature is either that-to-be-conquered (the Useful, the Knowable) or that-to-be-praised (the Wise, the Perfect). What we win, earn, or learn from nature, what we wonder at is typically what we want (and sometimes get) from ourselves. (For computer fans, appreciate fully the logic of conceiving SimEarth as the sequel to SimCity.)

Suppose we say everything just happens, albeit intelligibly, as repeated pattern and predictability. Do we gain by weaving “balance” and “integrity” into the story? Do these do more explanatory work than merely indicating that whatever is can suffer change if certain other things alter? If we insist that regulation is integral to our account then we really must take nature to be an engine or an organism—anyway, a being inside a plan, a story ordered in time. But isn’t that our story all over again?

Sympathy with metaphor when the going gets dark won’t help either. A Gaian perspective leaves our outlook blinkered for it is unclear whether the Gaian notion is an apt model for everything or, indeed, anything else out there. However system-like the Earth is, however imbued with organismic regulative features, however delicate its balance, these features cannot be extended to nature as a whole for that would amount to extrapolating Gaia to the whole universe. But what is the

“balance” of the universe, what is its economy, its order, its proper state, its health? Nature as a whole is everything out there, and that isn’t any more machine- or organism- or person-like than a molecule. Regarding special cases, what’s the economy of the moon, say, or an asteroid? What are their putative balance and harmony? That we want nature to be intelligible via familiar metaphorical extensions merely tells our story. We have here, at best, a wild inductive fantasy; at worst, hyper-animism gone amuck.

Scientism for Natural Aesthetics—Carlson’s Cognitivism: We are saved from the provinciality of human scale by a familiar enterprise, science, which triumphs over against surface subjectivism. To appreciate nature’s fullest inventory and the natural irrelevance of relative scale, to achieve high objectivity—“the view from nowhere” in Nagel’s wonderful phrase—any natural aesthetic aiming to transcend the more parochial exhibitions of anthropocentrism must embrace not only all creatures great and small but also all processes long and short. How else to confront nature as it is, as a whole? And what better start than with a scientific natural aesthetic?

Allen Carlson developed such a view not only to “objectify” natural aesthetics but also to furnish it with descriptive categories sui generis, which parallel those in cultural aesthetics. At the same time, Carlson transcends immediate experiential limits by urging that our appreciation of nature should be underwritten and even inspired by scientific discoveries. This preferred “environmental model” of natural aesthetics is built upon our understanding nature scientifically:

...to aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different environments of nature and of the systems and elements within those environments. In the way in which the art critic and the art historian are well equipped to aesthetically appreciate art, the naturalist and the ecologist are well equipped to aesthetically appreciate nature ... This knowledge [we have of nature], essentially common sense/scientific knowledge, seems to me the only viable candidate for playing the role in regard to the appreciation of nature that our knowledge of types of art, artistic traditions, and the like plays in regard to the appreciation of art.⁸

The late, very great, Richard Feynman agrees:

Although I might not be quite as refined aesthetically as [an artist], I can appreciate the beauty of a flower. But, at the same time, I see much more in the flower than he sees. I can imagine the cells inside, which also have a beauty. There’s beauty not just at the dimension of one centimetre; there’s also beauty at a smaller dimension ... There are all kinds of intriguing questions that come from a knowledge of science, which only adds to the excitement and mystery and awe of a flower. It only adds. I don’t understand how it subtracts.⁹

Feynman clearly doesn't mean "seeing" literally. Here we have at work the acentrism of sub-surface revelation, science as the impersonal aperceptual avenue to the beauty of Reality, that which underlies and thus eludes the mere artist's sensorium. A.N. Whitehead shares the bluntly Platonic view that sense perception "is very superficial in its disclosure of the nature of things." This makes the artist a mere runner-up at best in providing a basis for a proper appreciation of nature.¹⁰

Since science attaches no privilege to medium-sized hardware nor to the perceptual apparatus of medium-sized perceivers, and is equally (if not more) respectful of the very large, the very small, the very brief, and the very long, it does not offer any basis for aesthetic preference or appreciation on the basis of scale. The scientist's aesthetic perspective thus extends (beyond), if not transcends, the sensorial surface of our common perceptual world. The misgiving that our very physical limitation tacitly establishes and sanctifies such preferences ignores the remarkable power of science to enter into and even manipulate such micro- and macro-worlds.¹¹

A cognitivist aesthetic need not, of course, be grounded in straightforwardly empirical enterprises. The aesthetic of the mathematician or even of the chess player shows how acentrism qua rejection of the sensuous basis of aesthetic judgment can arise. Nor is it fair to say that the mathematician's purely formal aesthetic is somehow parasitic upon, reminiscent of, or derived from, a more fundamental sensuous (centric) aesthetic. Such dependence would have to be shown, and without begging the question.

Such a scientific cognitivism grounding natural aesthetics gives it greater weight than could any reliance upon the sensuous surface; a weight that is measured in relative objectivity, impersonality, distance, and the dismissal of our scalar limits. To distance our appreciation from our immediate natural parochial resources gives this cognitivist aesthetic an acentric aspect. Further, if knowing nature scientifically underwrites the deepest, most genuine, and apposite aesthetic appreciation of what nature really is, what better grounding for a fully comprehensive acentric environmentalism?

Unfortunately, I've some misgivings. However snug we feel in the security of science, I'd hesitate to give over to it too much say over how to approach nature aesthetically. First, if cognitivist aesthetics banks on the presumption of hard truth in science, it must face the challenge of Antirealists, Internal Realists, and Relativists.¹² However controversial such challenges, they raise enough doubt about science as the high road to Reality to weaken any dependence upon science as necessarily revealing anything more deeply for the purposes of aesthetic apprehension than whatever the painter intuits. Second, the history of science is partially one of rejection, false hopes, vainglorious fantasies. Firm scientific categories have been mistaken; presumed natural kinds never have existed; stock theoretical terms failed to refer; grand theories have withered. Suppose your appreciation of some natural phenomenon rested upon what turned out to be a false scientific theory. What do you suppose would happen? Would your appreci-

ation be dimmed? Would you marvel the less? I certainly hope not. (Shades of the Naturalistic Fallacy.) Third, science discovers natural kinds. Why restrict oneself to an aesthetic slavish to the kinds that science announces? Fallibility aside, it seems unduly dull to follow dutifully after and along with the known. Why not let things "fall together" as they will, as Dickie suggests?¹³ Surely, there is no mission to ape the constricted formality of cultural aesthetics with its types and structures, genres, and styles?

More seriously, we can become dulled by scientific success. How so? The purpose of science—to discover the way the world really is—and its project of uncovering cannot proceed without certain constraints. These include consistency with extant and complementary theories, testability, experimental controllability, coherence with all else that is accepted, and other displays of institutional conformity. The categories of interest to science are those that arise through theorizing and experimentation, description and measurement. Whereas these extend our notion of scale, they do so on our terms, so to speak, and instrumentally. Whatever is acceptable scientifically, must be scientifically apprehendable. And apprehendability requires highly circumscribed constraints. Science is directed to forge a certain kind of intelligibility.

That intelligibility costs. Science de-mystifies nature by categorizing, quantifying, and patterning it. Under those frameworks, science makes intelligible the nature it divides, conquers, and creates in theory. So, the object is still ours in a way; a complex artifact hewn out of the cryptic morass.

This theme of "intelligibility or bust" has a long heritage, finding a powerful classical expression in Kant's notion of the "finality of nature," the a priori subjective principle that drives us "to discover in nature an intelligible order ... to make a consistent context of experience ... because only so far as that principle applies can we make any headway in the employment of our understanding in experience or gain knowledge."¹⁴ A.N. Whitehead echoes the theme:

You cannot talk vaguely about nature in general. We must fix upon details within nature and discuss their essences and their types of interconnection. The world around is complex, composed of details. We have to settle upon the primary types of detail in terms of which we endeavor to express our understanding of nature. We have to analyze and to abstract, and to understand the natural status of our abstractions ... Every age manages to find modes of classification which seem fundamental starting points for the researches of the special sciences. Each succeeding age discovers that the primary classifications of its predecessors will not work.¹⁵

Science ultimately disappoints the acentrism because it offers us only a gallery of our own articulated images. Such misgivings bother not only those seeking alternative conceptions of nature but also philosophers of science who question what the sciences, particularly mathematical ones, actually tell us about:

The fundamental laws do not govern reality. What they govern has only the appearance of reality and the appearance is far tidier and more readily registered than reality itself ... We construct both the theories and the objects to which they apply, then match them piecemeal onto real situations deriving ... a bit of what happens.¹⁶

What is always left behind is the mystery, the ineffability, and the miraculous in nature. For Feynman, science enriches and even deepens one's sense of mystery. However, it may dissatisfy aesthetically in exposing us only to mysteries that science deems to be intrinsically solvable.

Science-centered foundations for natural aesthetics still smack of the acceptance and imposition of implicit functional limits. Scientific activity is not necessarily any less anthropocentric than any other human enterprise. If we look to science to give us those needed categories on which to hang our appreciation, we exchange but one form of human-centered cognition for another.

Surely it is just as much what we don't know and can never know about nature that occasions aesthetic appreciation as anything we've already learned. Science's goal to discover, to reveal and thus to de-mystify runs counter to the perspective of an acentric aesthetic, which maintains a sense of intrinsic mystery, of marvels that no explanatory models can contain. Any natural aesthetic has to respect the inarticulable, which is, after all, the spontaneous voice of wonder.

Science, pursuing nature's foundation, rejects the notion of a systematically incomplete account of nature. The very search for "fundamental" particles, for a final answer to the question "What is the World Made of?" belies a faith in the meaningfulness of structural or ontic ultimacy. Contrast this with the image of worlds within worlds without end captured in fractal ontology where each level reveals as much detail and complexity as the level above; where there are no ultimate simples, no basic constituents, no ontic basement. Such unending depth isn't fully consonant with the world-picture of Feynman. Though in harmony with the appreciation of inner complexity and the anticipation of discovering greater complexity, it isn't clear whether a committed scientist can accept that science reveals no more about the total picture no matter how deep it digs.

Louis MacNeice in "Snow" has a nice feel for the confusion of plenitude:

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion

A tangerine and spit the pips and feel

The drunkenness of things being various.

Sagoff's Affective-Reverential View—Mother Earth: What's lacking in the scientific regard for nature is heart. Instead of cognitive states, Mark Sagoff draws upon respect, regard, reverence, affection, and love. The unconditional regard flows from an inner attachment to the earth, which Sagoff assimilates to the blood

ties of sympathy and protectiveness we adopt without prompting toward certain of our fellow humans and to our intrinsic cultural and social nature:

Raising children, preserving nature, cherishing art, and practicing the virtues of civil life are all costs—the costs of being the people we are. Why do we pay these costs? We can answer only that these costs are benefits; these actions justify themselves; these virtues are their own reward.¹⁷

The framework, unabashedly affective, appeals to a primordial attachment drawn from our natural relations. This affection, a native and unforced way of reaching out to objects of the world, can extend beyond the locally tribal, a notion reminiscent of Hume's optimism about widening sympathy. Sagoff wants to make a Kantian move in his reference to preserving nature for its own sake—categorically—and his approval of Kant's market price/dignity dichotomy.¹⁸ But, the motive force is not reason alone; it's love. And that's Hume's territory—harnessing the irrational for good.

Blood ties broaden into cultural ties (expressed partially in art preservation) and cultural ties should broaden out further to global environmental ties. If we consider what is lost through the effects of time, artworks are preserved because they are cherished and loved and thus they need have no intrinsically interesting extant characteristics. The value is residual and is sustained even if the work is damaged, as with broken statuary.¹⁹

This affective motif Sagoff extends to provide a ground for protecting the environment as an object of love, reverence, and respect. We respect it veritably as a "fount of all being," "great mother earth." Nature is the Relative of Relatives, or Kin of Kin. This expansion of regard seems to move us effortlessly from the purely aesthetic dimension to the more purposive ethical dimension. The smooth transition is no accident. It is bound by a common force. The carrier wave is our human capacity for affection and respect.

Intriguingly, the affective outlook simulates acentrism through its selfless magnanimity. "Regarding an object with appreciation or with love, we say it has intrinsic value." Not only does this commit us to the non-substitutability (non-transferability) of such individuals; we are further to promote their well being. Regarding nature as having "a health of its own, an integrity," we are to promote these. Because, ironically, love is blind, love is archetypally selfless and universal. Our love for nature transcends human interest. Acentrism is further suggested because the basis for regard need not attach to objects of common perception. Not only does respect transcend changes in the object; it can transcend the human scale even if this involves a move toward the ineffable where love and affection verge upon awe or worship and their concomitant notions of the sacred.

Unlike Carlson's cognitivist aesthetic, Sagoff designed his affective-reverential analysis to justify an environmental ethic. Although he richly complements the epistemic with an elemental non-cognitive affective force underlying our surface responses, the account faces problems.

First and most obviously, such naturalistic foundations must be secure if the view is to have justificatory rather than contingent explanatory force. So long as people really are affectively drawn as suggested, the broadening of respect is but a manifestation of growing appreciation aided by some logical glue appealing to whatever standard of consistency happens to move us. But, if we became otherwise or if we found sufficient excuses to ignore or override impulses we come anyway to suspect, new non-naturalistic arguments to shore up regard would need to be mounted. But what these could rest on primordially, I do not know, unless we revert to some contrived consequentialism, which itself will have to be propped up with a priori warnings about impending catastrophe unless the noble thing is done.

Second, the sense of scale is again limited, and the risk of the parochial ever present. Love, affection, respect, regard—these can be strong but they can be arbitrary and fickle. They are least strong the greater the distance from us, where some intellectual paste—derived ironically from the cognitive side—is needed to cover up our indifference or, worse, revulsion.²⁰ There are some forms of life that, to us, are hideous and frightening, some aspects of terrain that are merely foreboding and dangerous. Why love these when they threaten, or disgust? An appeal to love that survives changes in state of the loved one may get us some way; but, if the love were never there from the start, it needs a proxy to provide whatever defense the selectively primordial but absent regard cannot offer. Sagoff never explains how we get to love something we may fear, unless he counts on our learning to love it. If this doesn't make his account parasitic upon a cognitive approach, it can quickly degenerate into another nasty form of "respecting thine enemy" with its concomitant call to kill with kindness.

Third, Sagoff's imperialism of respect suffers from parochialism. The cognitive view requires that we must know whatever it is we appreciate; the affective view that we respect it. Just as the former leaves no space for the necessity of the unknowable, so the latter cannot accommodate that toward which we have and can have no human or quasi-human relationship. Cognitivism fences in nature as an object (or collection of objects) of human knowledge; affectivism reduces nature to that which falls within the bounds of our reverence. True, nature need not reciprocate (how could it?) but it must be at least affectively palpable, it must meet us in ways that allow us to experience respect. Sagoff leaves no room for a nature for which we have, in principle, no significance. It is that nature—the aloof, the distant, the unknowable, the Other—that eludes the filters of cognitivist and affectivist attempts at contact. The impossibility of contact may be just what it takes to make an acentric natural aesthetic possible. Here we have to compensate for the fullness of epistemic and affective alienation.

Mystery and Insignificance: What compensates? I have rejected attitudes matched with taking nature as a super-person (Gaia), as a harmonious knowable (cognitivism), and as a lovable super-parent (affectivism). As if by remainder, I offer another scrap, sadly obscure, spun off from the sense of mystery upon which

an acentric aesthetic may be built. Related to mystery are the notions of aesthetic aloofness and a sense of insignificance, which comprise the adoption of an acentric perspective. From that perspective one experiences the world from any of an infinite number of points of view from which the viewer and (generalizing by parity) we, do not matter at all. This gives us nature as categorically other than us, a nature of which we never were part, one our appreciation of which acquaints us with the ultimacy of its independence, its autonomy.

If nature as a whole eludes our science and our affection, the only fitting aesthetic regard for it is a sense of mystery. The relevant special sense of mystery is one that cannot have a solution. There is no "cracking" this puzzle, or following that clue. To do either is to lose the absence of focus without which nature cannot be apprehended acentrically. We watch the mystery in a state of appreciative incomprehension, at best an acknowledgement of limits. To grasp the state of mystery one must apprehend the need for a freedom from perspective, sensorial and categorical. This involves appreciating the fundamentally parochial nature of experience, and the invidiously parochial, even incidental, nature of human experience.

Mystery cannot thus be apprehended from within the cognitive-scientific point of view because that demands solution in principle. Science sets out to know with the firm conviction that the goal can somehow be met. Science can't be a puzzle-solving enterprise without a puzzle, but the puzzle is defined by and within the science. Science generates only questions with potential answers.

Neither can mystery rely upon reverence or respect, love or attachment. These presuppose the power and the opportunity to get close, even to reciprocate—at least to hope such may be possible, as do those who fantasize about living in harmony with nature. We can revere and respect other living things. That's easy and morally necessary. But nature, the great Insensate, is beyond us, as are those of its ways whereby the only clear picture we have is filtered nomologically as patterned processes, repetition, and obedience to necessity. Art arises partially as an expression of our need and failure to get close.

The mystery invoked is not that which some experience about Life, which, after all, is merely terrestrial so far as we know, and seemingly only a surificial (if not superficial) phenomenon. Ignoring these limits, life is scarcely a thing apart. Indeed, we are acquainted with nothing more intimately. Though it is unfortunate we can't enter the experiential world of other species, still, we are not at an utter remove. We can relate a little. We can understand their hunger and pain and fear and, at least, opt not to intrude. We share the prejudices of sentience and so can at least understand the natural bias that separates us. This, though, draws us no closer to the silent void of waves and rock and fire. We're peculiarly ill-equipped to comprehend things without needs, things that cannot be hurt or degraded in the ways we immediately experience. True, habitat can suffer these insults, but necessarily by proxy, habitat being defined by the beings that use it. Habitat is unavoidably hitched to a centric outlook. Terrain is outside all this desperate fuss.

No one can prove that other species are closer to nature than we are. Still, I sus-

pect it because I can't imagine being more distant than we are. Our distance we won for our magnificent success in removing the onus of living with the raw immediacy and vulnerability that seems to typify life on the outside—life we can't live and probably never did except in the nightmares of Hobbes. Properly, the closest contact we can make is in death, but that robs the actor of the play, the audience of the actor.

Perhaps the mystery considered already thrives in religious outlooks. If so, it doesn't match certain conceptions of mystical insight. At least, I reserve judgment about religious and quasi-religious mysticism wherever these summon higher-order hyperbolic epistemic or affective attitudes. Russell, for instance, attributes to mystical insight an epistemological achievement principally yielding "definite beliefs," one that "begins with the sense of mystery unveiled, of a hidden wisdom now suddenly become certain beyond the possibility of a doubt."²¹ The theologian Rudolf Otto emphasizes a powerful quasi-affective bonding as "common to all types of mysticism," which he calls "Identification of the personal self with the transcendent Reality."²² Both strike me as thematic extensions of the scientific search for the secret of the universe and the strong sense of caring relatedness to nature.

Perhaps the sense of mystery is just a religious surrogate. If so, we might re-evaluate the faded star of sublimity, described by Thomas Weiskel as "a massive transposition of [religious] transcendence into a naturalistic key."²³ But the sublime falls short in its very definiteness. Traditional notions of the sublime incorporated feelings of fear or a sense of being overwhelmed or a discovery of the nobility and complexity of the human mind. Mystery, however, requires nothing of terror or terrible pleasure, of power, or of oceanic vastness. Nor does it promise promotion to high moral consciousness or guide a tour through the infinity of inner mental space. Although some sentiments may overlap—consider those linked to Otto's *mysterium tremendum*—none meets appropriately the qualities of aloofness and impersonality. In any event, the sublime remains too weighed down with a tradition too ready with recipes for the essence of sublimity.²⁴

Nor does the mystery necessarily involve simple awe and wonder. These are bred from the same stock as love and respect, and come with a kindred fickleness and arbitrariness of scale. If an acentric environmentalism is possible, it requires a regard much more uniform than these sorts of affects ensure, one typified precisely by the dissolution of human perspective, which levels to an anonymous indifference (uniformity) the vantage points of those adopting the stance. Thus it effectively renders all viewers and viewpoints indistinguishable and fosters in turn a sense of consistent universal insignificance, one that is not brightened by a positive, enriching sense of the endlessness of nature. Awe, in any case, is unavoidably self-centered. To appreciate nature acentrically, one must avoid being impressed or overwhelmed by it. Such states of awe presuppose that we bring a human self-image into the experience comparatively, thereby appointing ourselves benchmarks of the amazing.

What regard, then, can we have for nature? What constitutes an acentric aesthetic? The notion of mystery required must serve on the side of the Subject and the Object: the aesthetic attitude that properly fits the aesthetic object. The only way we achieve, if at all, the requisite attitude is through a sense of being outside, of not belonging. This flows in part from our sensory nature, which forces us to have a perspective, a view from somewhere that gives us position in space and time, and so draws us into the notion that spatio-temporality must be the ultimate glue of things. But this false necessity of locus is the limitation that sensing creatures endure, distracting them from apprehending proper impersonality, true indifference and autonomy that are nature's principal marks. Locus defines our humanity and the way it copes with life by transmuting rigorously whatever is external to it into manipulable experience.

There are infinitely many points of view from which we do not matter at all. To apprehend nature acentrically is to adopt any such point of view and thus attain aesthetic aloofness. That any such vantage point counts should dispel the suspicion that one must attain a God's-eye view of nature. If only one could "see" with a bee-²⁵ the eye one would have done nearly enough, for then, at least, the world viewed couldn't be for us. This outlook is not associated with scientific impartiality because it has no ordained agenda nor any dictate to meet successfully conventions of intelligibility. Nor is aloofness the same as aesthetic disinterestedness, although the former requires the latter. Aloofness is more detached, distant, than disinterestedness. It calls not only for the removal from experience of all functional and personal considerations of the object, but all limiting scalar (e.g., sensuous) ones as well. To achieve aesthetic aloofness is to disavow any preference for customary surface perception in the aesthetic because it is precisely that avenue of apprehension that is manifestly a victim of scale, an emphatic expression of culture. Of course, our very human nature works against any such scale-neutral acentrism. We can see only so much, feel only thus-and-so, live only so long.

This may make acentric natural aesthetics impossible, paradoxical. If it is possible, it leaves room open only for mysteries without solution. If we acknowledge such mysteries, we approach natural appreciation, but not through forms of cognitive anchorage nor through the warmth and security of respect and affection. Nature is aloof, and in this aloofness we come, not so much to understand or reverse, as to attempt to mirror or match, and thus to grasp without capture.

That aloofness is linked to disinterestedness and that it functions as the fitting attitude toward nature as a whole lends support to the claim that acentrism is genuinely an aesthetic rather than a moral or a religious outlook, though the boundaries between these may seem obscure and even trivial. In any event, as an aesthetic, acentrism distances itself from the cultural domain, which has as its focus those archetypal playthings of culture—works of art—which are the most arch of artifacts, made-things, human-things.²⁶

Notes

- 1 Nicholas Rescher proposes such a view in *Unpopular Essays on Technological Progress* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980). More recently, Mark Segoff urges a similar view in "Zuckerman's Dilemma: A Plea for Environmental Ethics," *Hastings Center Report* 21 (1991): 32-40.
- 2 These themes are further developed in Stan Godlovitch, "Disposing of the Past," read at the Alberta Philosophers' Conference, Kananaskis Country, April 1989.
- 3 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]; also "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 15-27.
- 4 In "Aesthetic Protectionism," *The Journal of Applied Philosophy* 6 (1989): 171-180, I argue that an aesthetic regard for nature cannot support a protectionist ethic because the principal focus of the aesthetic outlook has to be that which appeals to us. My target there is the anthropocentric focus in natural aesthetics, which necessarily undervalues the natural (intrinsic autonomy, otherness) in nature whenever natural appeal is under threat. So, it may be thought aesthetically better that a world with more especially colorful ducks exist than one with more drab ones. Such leads to making room for the color by thinning out the drab. This I likened to curatorship.
- 5 Alan Tormey, "Aesthetic Rights," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32 (1973): 163-170.
- 6 The classic sources are James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) and *The Ages of Gaia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).
- 7 For example, see Evelleen Richards, "'Metaphorical Mystifications': The Romantic Gestation of Nature in British Biology," in *Romanticism and the Sciences*, eds. A. Cunningham and N. Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 130-143.
- 8 Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," p. 273 [this volume, p. 71-72]. See also Allen Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984), especially, pp. 30-32: "The nature and extent of positive aesthetics [i.e., that virgin nature is essentially beautiful] which is justified seemingly depends upon interpretations of science."
- 9 Richard P. Feynman, *What Do You Care What Other People Think?* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988) p. 11. Thanks to Glenys Godlovitch for bringing this passage to my attention.
- 10 A.N. Whitehead, *Nature and Life* [1934] (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), Lecture I.
- 11 Cf. Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 12 Cf. Bas Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and standard works by Kuhn and Feyerabend.
- 13 George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 169.
- 14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 25-26. See also, F.X. Coleman, *The Harmony of Reason* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), pp. 8-9.
- 15 Whitehead, *Nature and Life*, p. 1.
- 16 Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 162. Cartwright thinks theory construction can be fraught with a kind of epistemic tunnel-vision. See also Anthony O'Hear, *Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 129 ff.
- 17 Sagoff, "Zuckerman's Dilemma," p. 37.
- 18 See Sagoff, "Zuckerman's Dilemma," p. 39.
- 19 Sagoff developed these themes in a talk delivered at the American Society for Aesthetics meeting in Kansas City, October 1987. Among other things, he pointed out that artworks though terribly commonplace are treated as if they were precious rarities. Storage sites bulge with undisplayed works, works that there is no opportunity to display. Why keep them at all? he asks. Because they are part of us, like old relatives, he replies.
- 20 Nor should we ever forget Adam Smith's harshly sobering reflections upon what exactly gets us worked up most. Cf. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], eds. D. Raphael and A. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 136-137.
- 21 Bertrand Russell, "Mysticism and Logic," in *Mysticism and Logic* [1917] (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 14.
- 22 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* [1917], trans. J.W. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 36.
- 23 Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 4. Again, "the Sublime revives as God withdraws from an immediate participation in the experience of men" (p. 3).
- 24 The sublime, once a prominent topic, may simply have drowned in a soup of obscurity. Mary Mothersill remarks that "at one time the sublime picked out a constellation of feelings, expressions, style, and sensibility that everyone recognized as having some internal affinity. Then ... it all came apart.... The ingredient elements persist. Nature unimproved, the wilderness inspires enthusiasm and awe but does not evoke thoughts of the Categorical Imperative. Its moral burden is limited to 'environmental ethics' ('Woodsmen, spare that tree')." "Review of Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*," *Mind* 101 (1992): 156-60, p. 160. Classical 18th century sources include Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1759] and Kant's neo-Romantic *Critique of Judgement* [1790]. Wordsworth brought to full flower the Romantic sublime. See Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, and M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971). The full confusion is elegantly and sympathetically reviewed in E.F. Carrith, *The Theory of Beauty* [1949] (London: Methuen, 1962), Chapter IX. Serious recent discussions include Guy Sircello, *A New Theory of Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Section 28 and Guy Sircello, "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?"

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 51 (1993); also Paul Crowther, "The Aesthetic Domain: Locating the Sublime," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989): 21-32, and Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

25 Kafka's Gregor Samsa, condemned to an alienating metamorphosis, is doomed never to make it. The incredible shrinking hero of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Director Jack Arnold, Screenplay: Richard Matheson (1957), gets closer as he heads at the stretch for the infinitesimally small which, lo, turns out to offer the viewpoint of viewpoints, rather, a view from everywhere (The apotheosis of the Absolute Boom Shot). Much more modestly and quite within the club, an adult may learn a little about a different world simply by stooping down to the height of a child and watching.

26 Versions of this paper were presented at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, and at the American Society for Aesthetics, Pacific Division Meeting, Asilomar. I have benefited from comments by Allen Carlson, Hilda Hein, Thom Heyd, Tom Leddy, Stephanie Ross, Roger Shiner, Guy Sircello, and Bob Stecker.

Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination

Ronald Hepburn



I.

What is it to appreciate a landscape aesthetically? As several recent writers have claimed, it may be an experience within which many layers can be distinguished. The purely sensory component—colors, shapes, sounds, tactile sensations, smells—seldom if ever exists on its own; for we know that area of blue to be the blue of the sky, that broken disc to be a reflection, in nearly still water, of the moon, that object by the dried up lake to be the skull of a sheep or goat. We conceptualize, we recognize, we add context, background, seek out formal relationships—reflectively.¹ Furthermore, we may see not simply a large and very dark cloud, just above the horizon, but see it as an ominous harbinger of a severe storm, threatening the still bright but fragile scene in the middle distance. There we have expressive properties, and the thought of changes over time—even a kind of drama. One layer more: we may experience a polar scene of ice and snow as revealing something fundamental (and no doubt grim) about how things really, or ultimately, are: something concealed from us in more familiar, temperate, farmed countryside. Or, in sharpest contrast, we may experience a nature whose poignant beauty on some occasion seems to speak of a transcendent Source for which we lack words and clear concepts.

In these last two instances, we have what I want to call "metaphysical imagination." We see the landscape as ominous, cosmically ominous, or as revealing-concealing a still greater beauty than its own. In a word, then, the many-leveled structure of aesthetic experience of nature can include great diversity of constituents: from the most particular—rocks, stones, leaves, clouds, shadows—to the most abstract and general ways we apprehend the world, the world as a whole.

In what follows, I shall try, first of all, to clarify and develop the central concept of metaphysical imagination and its place in aesthetic experience of nature; secondly, to draw attention to a tendency among a number of philosophers today to underestimate the interest, importance, and diversity of the contributions of metaphysical imagination to the aesthetic experience of landscape. Next, we need to acknowledge that the opposite mistake can also be made: that of attributing excess-