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Aesthetics in Practice: Valuing the Natural World

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetic value, often viewed as subjective and even trivial compared to other environmental values, is commonly given low priority in policy debates. In this paper I argue that the seriousness and importance of aesthetic value cannot be denied when we recognise the ways that aesthetic experience is already embedded in a range of human practices. The first area of human practice considered involves the complex relationship between aesthetic experience and the development of an ethical attitude towards the environment. I then discuss how aesthetics has played a role in scientific study and the use of evaluative aesthetic concepts in science, such as variety and diversity. The final section shows the connection between the beneficial effects of aesthetic engagement with nature and the restorative value of nature for human well-being.

KEY WORDS

Aesthetic value, aesthetic experience, ethics, nature, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

I have titled this paper 'Aesthetics in Practice' to convey how deeply aesthetic value permeates human practice, from engagement with everyday environments, to enjoying wild places, to making moral choices, to scientific study of nature. The aesthetic is not reserved for the art museum, concert hall or scenic viewpoint. While a distinctive kind of valuing, it is not separate or cut off but rather integrated into the relationships we develop with the natural world through a variety of human activities. Although I will not spend time discussing it here, a theoretical basis for this approach to aesthetics may be found in John Dewey's philosophy. True to his philosophical pragmatism, he argues that the aesthetic

response is continuous with practical and intellectual experience. Dewey was critical of the elitism of aesthetic theories which raised the aesthetic out of the vital stream of human experience (Dewey 1980: 252–62). Put simply, he replaced an aesthetics of the rarified with an aesthetics of the everyday.

The aim of this paper is to show why aesthetic value of nature is important to environmental policy debates. Aesthetic value is a serious rather than trivial environmental value and ought not to be overlooked. It is not my strategy here to argue for aesthetic value as an intrinsic value of nature and how this might support valuing nature for its own sake (an approach that ought to hold sway in decision-making and policy). Rather than get tangled up in metaphysical arguments, I want to consider how aesthetic value finds its way into human practice in a pragmatic sense. My strategy will be to explain how aesthetic valuing is involved or embedded already in our relationships with nature, and following that, how it underpins many of our attitudes toward the environment. If this can be established, it will go a long way in showing how central, and serious, a value it is.

In line with this, section 3 of the paper tackles the complex area where aesthetics and ethics meet, as I point to some of the ways it has been claimed that aesthetic value supports moral value. The fourth section considers where aesthetics and science meet; in particular, how some ecological values are underpinned by aesthetic qualities such as variety, diversity and harmony. In the fifth section, I turn to aesthetic value as an instrumental environmental value, in so far as aesthetic experience of nature has restorative benefits for humans. But at the risk of glossing over the importance of aesthetic value in its own right, in section 2 I begin by sketching out some of the reasons – misplaced I think – why aesthetics has not been given the attention it deserves in policy debates.

2. THE SERIOUSNESS OF AESTHETIC VALUE

Just as we find that funding for the arts in the public domain, in schools and so on, takes the back seat to other kinds of activities, this is also the case in environmental planning and policy. Although aesthetic value (sometimes seen as overlapping with ‘landscape value’) is mentioned, it is given low priority, and more often scientific considerations on the one hand or economic ones on the other hold more sway. Why is this so? There are at least two interconnected reasons. Aesthetic concerns are viewed as lying in the realm of the decorative. They belong to the area of human concerns that are attended to only after we have secured the fundamental necessities of life, e.g., food and shelter (Porteous 1996: 7). Aesthetic value is considered less important, even trivial, compared to other more ‘serious’ environmental values such as scientific value.

A second reason is tied to the common sense view that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, a highly contentious position in philosophical aesthetics.

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Much critical work on aesthetic judgment attempts to show the objectivity or intersubjectivity of our aesthetic judgments. This kind of argument has been seen as especially important in environmental aesthetics, for if it can be shown that aesthetic value is objective, this type of value is more likely to be given a voice in environmental policy debates. It is the perception of aesthetic value as subjective preference that has led to its weak voice in such debates (Brady 2003: 224–5). Values which are underpinned by scientific or quantitative support, values which are assumed to be objective, are more commonly taken seriously. An unfortunate result of identifying aesthetic judgments with subjective preferences is that, for example, a community's aesthetic experience of an urban green space is left out of the equation as merely a matter of opinion. Instead, evidence which is deemed to be more objective, such as the economic or housing benefits of that space, is given more consideration.

In keeping with the broader aims of this paper, I cannot enter into the complex arguments against the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment. I have argued elsewhere that aesthetic judgments have an intersubjective grounding (Brady 2003: 191–223). Rather than being private expressions of individual taste, aesthetic judgements are based upon a set of critical activities that are practised and developed in a public context. Through aesthetic communication, we share our aesthetic responses, the reasons underlying them, and pin down reasons for disagreement. It is certainly possible to arrive at agreement in aesthetic matters, even if some disputes inevitably remain. Allen Carlson has argued more strongly for aesthetic objectivity in the environmental context by grounding aesthetic judgments through scientific cognitivism, where appropriate or correct aesthetic judgments are grounded in knowledge of the natural sciences. (Carlson 2000: 54–71). Outside environmental aesthetics, philosophers considering aesthetic properties and judgement have argued for aesthetic objectivism. For example, Jerrold Levinson argues that although aesthetic properties are relational, they supervene on non-aesthetic objective properties (Levinson 1990: 134–58). David Hume's concept of ideal judges provides an alternative strategy for establishing objectivity. Aesthetic judgments are justified by an appeal to competent judges, people with adequate experience and developed aesthetic sensibilities (see Hume 1985; Goldman 1995). So, although there is considerable ongoing debate, there are various established arguments against the common sense view that beauty is simply in the eye of the beholder.

I do not underestimate the difficult battles fought to protect the environment from harm and development, and it is not my view that aesthetic value should have priority over other environmental values. Rather, I want to suggest that through a critical understanding of aesthetic value we may better grasp why it deserves serious treatment in policy debates.

3. AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

Locating a link between aesthetic and moral value is not a new idea. There is range of arguments from various thinkers, past and present, which claim that aesthetics is fundamental to ethics (Eaton 2001: 81–94). The complex and multi-faceted nature of the relationship between these two realms of value makes the topic difficult to address in detail here, but I would like to highlight one especially persuasive strand in the arguments. This view, developed by philosophers such as Kant, Schiller and, more recently, Marcia Eaton, argues that human capacities which contribute to the development of moral character and to making skilled moral decisions are capacities practised in a focused and deep way through aesthetic engagement. These may include capacities such as perceptual sensitivity, imaginative freedom, creativity and emotional expression (Eaton 2001: 83–8; Brady 2003: 256–8). The careful perceptual attention required and exercised in the experience of art may enable one to more carefully observe important features and detail in a complex moral problem. A well developed imagination may facilitate greater empathy with another being, and in this way help to motivate appropriate moral action. This approach is promising for supporting the aesthetic-moral connection, even if it has to be kept in mind that aesthetically sensitive beings are not always morally sensitive. As Eaton points out, there are a ‘plethora of counterexamples to the claim that aesthetic experiences make people morally good in general’ (Eaton 2001: 83).

Some environmental philosophers have suggested that developing a relationship with nature through aesthetic experiences, that is, first-hand, multi-sensory, emotional and imaginative engagement, can encourage or contribute to a moral attitude toward nature (Rolston 2002: 127–41; Elliot 1997: 61–73). In his ‘Land Ethic’, Aldo Leopold encourages us to develop our aesthetic sensibility for nature in order to judge what is ‘esthetically right’, thus suggesting a link between aesthetics and ethics (Leopold 2000: 189). These views grasp how fundamental the aesthetic response is to valuing nature, and they seek to build upon a foundation that is also fairly democratic in terms of the range of people and communities who may have aesthetic access to natural environments, whether that is wild nature or the modified environments of urban parks and gardens. This approach recognises that aesthetic experience is sometimes the most visceral, felt experience we can have of nature. In that sense it can be very penetrating, have a strong impact and just *stay with us*.

Care is needed though in how far one takes this suggestion. There is no necessary connection between positive aesthetic valuing of nature and ethical treatment of environments. However, there is at least intuitive strength in the idea. At least in cases of environments one knows and loves, or natural places one visits over and over again, one is more likely to treat them with respect, for aesthetic and other reasons (for example if a mountain is enjoyed not just for its sublimity but also for its recreational opportunities). The saying, ‘not in my

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backyard' speaks volumes here in so far as it pins down our tendency to protect the environments we cherish because they are in fact our backyards – or places close to our backyards. But this also points to some of the problems in aesthetics underpinning an environmental ethic. If the most reliable connection between 'beauty and duty', as Holmes Rolston has put it (2002: 127), is generated by relationships between humans and cherished environments, what happens to those places that are strange, unfamiliar, and ugly? How will valuing based in aesthetic experience motivate care and respect towards environments with which we have not developed relationships?

It is not clear that it can, if what is important in engendering significant relationships is either the first-hand immediacy and impact of aesthetic qualities on us – rolling countryside, meadows of wildflowers, blue-green mountains, fragrant pine forests or the invigorating, crashing surf of the ocean – or the frequency of such encounters. Can we develop a caring attitude toward so-called 'unscenic nature', toward things we find just ugly, even if we know we ought to know better? Marshes and bogs are not obviously attractive places, yet a more intimate encounter with them reveals aesthetic as well as ecological interest. Like other recent philosophers writing on aesthetics of nature, Yuriko Saito argues persuasively that aesthetic appreciation must move beyond the legacy of the picturesque, beyond the enjoyment of scenery and towards a wider appreciation which includes 'unscenic nature' (Saito 1998). Positive aesthetic valuing of the unscenic – even of the creepy-crawly – may be possible through immediate, sensuous appreciation anchored in scientific understanding which provides a background ecological story to what might otherwise appear, superficially, as ugly (Saito 1998: 103–5).

In terms of the as yet unexperienced, it may be possible to aesthetically value things with which we have not developed a close relationship. I have never visited the Sistine Chapel or the Grand Canyon, but I have seen photographs and other representations of them, and I know there is wide agreement on their beauty and sublimity. But this doesn't take care of the problem altogether. These places are familiar and well known to many people, whereas the distant and unfamiliar may still be out of aesthetic-moral reach. It could be argued that if I care about a particular environment because I have often found it beautiful, I may be able to extend my attitude of care to other environments, based on the assumption that other beautiful places are also worth protecting, even if I have not judged their beauty through first-hand experience. Two more vexing questions present themselves: what about environments that for one reason or another are unavailable to the senses, or, worse, environments which have given people very bad experiences? The answer here is probably that we need to go beyond aesthetic experience to extend our understanding and grasp of environments we wish to protect. This may involve ecological understanding, as Leopold, Saito and others have urged, or simply going beyond caring relationships and toward some other kind of environmental ethic (Leopold 2000; Saito 1998: 103–5).

Indeed, it may simply not be possible to positively value some natural objects, processes or events (Saito, 1998: 105–109).

One final worry about grounding ethics in aesthetics is the fact that moral and aesthetic values often conflict. What we find beautiful in nature may actually damage the environment in some way. For example, there are cases of beautiful non-native species crowding out, damaging or even causing the extinction of other species. The bright, attractive flowering plant, *rhododendron ponticum*, a non-native species in the UK, is known for creating a toxic environment around it which kills plant and insect life (Lawson, Rawles and Gritten, 1998: 38–40). However, many other environmental values that are generally seen as harmonious conflict from time to time, and in these situations one has to examine each case carefully to determine a solution. That the conflict exists in one situation does not mean that aesthetic value cannot support moral valuing of nature in other cases. Also, there are many cases of environmental degradation that coincide with aesthetic disvalue. The monotonous expanses of industrial agriculture are produced with harmful fertilisers and pesticides and cause severe erosion among other problems. The decrease of animal populations from destruction of habitat, especially birdlife, means that a key element in the aesthetic appeal of such landscapes is lost: the presence of birds and the rich soundscape of birdsong.

Aesthetic value and ethical value frequently overlap, intertwine, harmonise and conflict in human experience. I have shown that aesthetic value and experience have some recognisable role in shaping our moral attitudes toward the environment, if not always a positive one. Although not all intimate relationships are caring ones, it is worth encouraging direct experiences of nature, aesthetic and otherwise, in an effort to develop feelings of care toward environments, even if this just means making the effort to get past prejudices and ignorance. This is presumably an underlying assumption of environmental education. My suggestion is inspired also by recent philosophical arguments which claim that actively engaging in (benevolent) environmental restoration practices can enable an experiential involvement that may help to restore a positive relationship with nature. Andrew Light argues that

Restorationists get firsthand (rather than anecdotal and textbook) exposure to the actual consequences of human domination of nature. A better understanding of the problems of bioactivating the soil, for example, gives us a better idea of the complexity of the harm we have caused to natural processes ... Restoration is an obligation exercised in the interests of forming a positive community with nature ... (Light 2000: 108).

I want to suggest that this relationship is not one-sided, merely from human to nature. It may work the other way too: from nature to humans. Intimate engagement with nature may enable a caring attitude, but likewise, it may be that practices such as ecological restoration, gardening, art in the environment and recreational activities like swimming and walking, enable active participation

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with a range of environments and contribute to human flourishing. I discuss this idea in more detail in section 5, below.

4. AESTHETIC VALUE AND SCIENCE

Another way aesthetic values permeate human practice is found in the use of various aesthetic concepts in the sciences and mathematics. Sometimes these are obviously aesthetic, when a proof or theory is described as beautiful. More often they are concepts that have a dominant aesthetic meaning and use but have been used in various non-aesthetic contexts so that their connection to the aesthetic has become more distant, although even in these cases the association with the aesthetic is understood within scientific discourse. The most commonly discussed examples of these concepts are harmony, symmetry and integrity. Harmony and integrity are key qualities of beauty in classical and medieval philosophy (especially Aquinas), and are closely connected to qualities such as order, balance and symmetry (Eco 1986).

Arkady Plotnitsky points to the role of harmony in mathematics in Kepler's work, which was influenced by Pythagoras:

As a – or even *the* – paradigmatic example of this ideology of mathematical aesthetics, one might consider Kepler's famous 'longing for harmonies' and 'noble proportions', and his grand vision of the 'harmony of the world' ... Kepler's aesthetics and aesthetic ideology have been decisive for developing modern mathematics, physics, and astronomy, no less – and sometimes more – than the scientific or explanatory aspects of his discoveries (1998: 251).

James McAllister discusses how scientists, more recently, use aesthetic criteria to evaluate their theories. Scientists 'perform two sorts of evaluations of theories: one is directed at ascertaining the theories' likely empirical performance, whereas the other employs terms of aesthetic appreciation' (McAllister 1996: 3). Aesthetic appreciation has a role in the development of scientific theory through 'aesthetic induction', as he puts it:

a scientific community's aesthetic preferences are reached by an induction over the empirical track record of theories: a community attaches to each property of theories a degree of aesthetic value proportional to the degree of empirical success of the theories that have exhibited that property (McAllister 1996: 4).

Scientists' aesthetic preferences are specified according to various aesthetic concepts, especially to different forms of symmetry (McAllister 1996: 39–40). Using examples from Einstein's theory of relativity and others, McAllister shows how forms of symmetry attach to different aesthetic properties of theories. Certain forms of symmetry will be deemed to make a successful theory, depending on the theory in question and other factors (1996: 42–3).

By attempting to show how aesthetic concepts such as symmetry and harmony are important to scientific theory, I do not intend to underplay the critical problems that surround theories of beauty. The concepts discussed here have a long history in theories of beauty (see for example, Burke 1958), but there are divisive arguments between realist and subjectivist accounts. One key argument against the view that beauty is identified with properties such as order and coherence shows that an art work, for example, may exhibit coherence without eliciting the response of pleasure normally associated with beauty. In other words, the claim is that there are no principles of beauty (McMahon 2001: 229–31). It might also be disputed that the concepts I have identified as aesthetic are in fact mathematical, so that it is not the case that specifically aesthetic concepts have migrated into science, but that it is the other way round. But given some of the examples discussed above (and below) there is little question that however we label harmony, symmetry, integrity, etc., their relationship to aesthetic value has historically always been close, and they have moved easily between the space of aesthetics and science. So, despite problems associated with the difficult notion of beauty, concepts typically associated with it and with aesthetic concerns, appear to be key to some forms of scientific thinking.

In the biological sciences, ‘harmony’, ‘integrity’, ‘coherence’, ‘variety’ and ‘diversity’ appear to have a role in identifying desirable natural states. For example, ‘biological integrity’ has been defined in this way:

Integrity implies an unimpaired condition or the quality or state of being complete or undivided; it implies correspondence with some original condition. The term most appropriately refers to the condition at sites with little or no influence from human actions; the organisms living there are products of the evolutionary and biogeographic processes influencing that site. Biological integrity ... refers to the capacity to support and maintain a balanced, integrated, adaptive biological system having the full range of elements (genes, species, assemblages) and processes (mutation, demography, biotic interactions, nutrient and energy dynamics, and metapopulation processes) expected in the natural habitat of a region (Karr and Chu 1995: 40–41).

When Leopold said that, ‘A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, wrong when it tends otherwise’, he may well have intended for ‘integrity’, ‘stability’ and ‘beauty’ to have entailed each other rather than to be sharply distinguished (2000: 189). Variety and diversity are central concepts to understanding biodiversity, which in broad terms refers to the number, variety and variability of living things. Biodiversity is considered desirable for healthy ecosystems and more diverse species often contribute to the aesthetic appeal of an environment. But I want to get deeper here; to understand how biodiversity as a scientific concept entails the aesthetic concepts of diversity and variety. ‘Biodiversity’ comes from ‘biological diversity’, where ‘biological’ specifies the kind of diversity in question.

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Although one might claim that diversity is being used here differently than in aesthetics, I would argue that diversity (and variety) in itself has an aesthetic meaning, and that this meaning is carried into the biological use of the term. In common usage, 'diversity' and 'variety' suggest richness and are contrasted with monotony, dullness, lack of interest – a kind of impoverished sameness. Variety and intricacy are named as central qualities of the eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and landscape taste of the 'picturesque', where garden design and scenery were valued for a diversity of elements and variety of forms and colours (Ross 1998: 133).

There is also psychological evidence for preferences for variety and richness alongside coherence in landscape elements (Porteous 1996: 132–3). Studies in evolutionary psychology show a marked preference for savannahs with trees, and landscapes 'with water; a variety of open and wooded space...trees that fork near the ground...vistas that recede in the distance, including path or river that bends out of view but invites exploration...and variegated cloud patterns' (Dutton 2003: 697). A biological basis for the human aesthetic preference for savannahs (and landscapes like them recreated in gardens and parks) is put forward by the Jay Appleton's prospect-refuge theory (Appleton 1975). Although Appleton's theory has been disputed, various studies confirm some of its claims (Ulrich 1993). Komar and Melamid found a surprising cross-cultural agreement in preferences for scenic paintings with varied open spaces combined with landscape elements of water, trees, domestic and wild animals and human beings (Dutton 2003: 698).

Other aesthetic concepts and values come into play in the biological context, especially in the conservation of plants and animals. For example, we find that aesthetic concepts and values have a role in the selection of particular species for conservation. Matthew Chew has argued that 'ecological nativists employ aesthetically repugnant and troubling archetypes to reinforce intra-disciplinary cohesion as well as to recruit public support for the anti-alien species project' (2005: 1). In relation to positive aesthetic values, terms such as 'cute', 'beautiful' and 'charismatic' have found their way into species conservation (and form part of anthropomorphic responses), where the attractiveness of a particular species will influence decisions and policy concerning its protection (Chapman 2005: 4; Serpell 2003: 83–90; see also Rolston 1986; Kellert 1993). It is also common to highlight the aesthetic appeal of various plants and animals through photographs and other means in conservation campaigns and literature. In these respects, scientists interested in protecting various species appear to recognise the important role aesthetics plays in motivating interest and persuading the public to care. I am not suggesting that conservation biologists and others seek to protect only aesthetically appealing species, but just that they recognise the centrality of aesthetics – for better or for worse – in the appeal of animals and plants to fellow conservationists and the public. Furthermore, this is not to say that ugliness in nature is ignored; although some philosophers have argued that

there is no such thing as ugliness in wild nature (see Allen Carlson's 'positive aesthetics', 2000: 72–101, and Saito's refutation of the thesis, 1998: 105–9).

Finally, let me conclude this section with a brief look at 'wonder', which is often cited as fundamental to motivating the pursuit of scientific knowledge, as well as our interest in protecting the natural world. Wonder may be understood as a quasi-aesthetic concept, and it at least overlaps with aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual experience. It shares with aesthetics both appreciative and contemplative aspects, and both wonder and the aesthetic response describe experiences which are 'concentrated', 'rapt' and which tend to be 'heightened' and 'expanded' (Hepburn 1984: 147). Ronald Hepburn observes that 'wonder aroused by the discerning of intelligible patterns of nature' acts as a motivation in scientific enquiry (1984: 134), and for support he refers to Arthur Koestler's discussion of the role of wonder in the work of notable scientists in *The Act of Creation* (1964).

Aesthetic concepts and values underpin or play a role in the development of some scientific theories, as well as shaping some key scientific concepts and values, such as biodiversity and conservation. In these ways, one might argue, the aesthetic is already brought into important environmental values, albeit through the kitchen door.

5. AESTHETICS AND WELL-BEING

Earlier I pointed out that aesthetic value is given low priority in environmental debates at least because it is perceived as a luxury, something we attend to only after vital needs—physiological and social—have been met. Aesthetic experience has been associated with self-fulfilment rather than self-preservation (Porteous 1996: 6–8). But what if it can be shown that aesthetic and other experiences of the natural environment promote well-being, that without them we are essentially deprived? Many accounts of aesthetic value locate it as a non-instrumental value, Kant's aesthetic theory being one of the most important and influential in this respect. One reason for this strategy is to distinguish aesthetic value from hedonism, and to specify the distinctive kind of pleasure or 'liking', associated with the aesthetic response, namely, disinterested pleasure (Kant 2001: 90–91). But whether one holds a Kantian view or a more pragmatic one such as Dewey's, which tries to more obviously incorporate the aesthetic into the fabric of everyday life, both views recognise the beneficial effects of aesthetic experience. Dewey, for instance, argues that aesthetic experience is a life-enhancing, invigorating and vital human activity, although his theory is focused more on the aesthetic response to art (Dewey 1980: 1–19). Kant, who focused more on natural beauty and the sublime in nature than art, intimates how aesthetic engagement enlivens and expands the imagination in various ways and furthers our feeling of life (Kant 2001: 90; Hepburn 2001: 66–7; Schiller 1994: 60–84). Hepburn draws on

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Kant's views in particular to point up the element of reflexivity in the aesthetic response, where engagement with art and nature may lead to self-discovery or enhanced self-understanding (2001: 66–7; 2005).

In connection with these ideas, there is an established tradition in literature and poetry which celebrates the restorative value of nature through experiences which may be described as aesthetic. Romanticism is replete with humanistic reverence for natural beauty and sublimity, and the uplifting effects of nature on human emotions and imagination. Wordsworth's poetry is infused with ideas about the healing power of nature (see, for example, 'Tintern Abbey'; 'The Excursion'). These lines are from his autobiographical poem, 'The Prelude' (1850):

O there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
 A visitant that while it fans my cheek
 Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
 From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
 Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
 To none more grateful than to me; escaped
 From the vast city, where I long had pined
 A discontented sojourner: now free,
 Free as a bird to settle where I will.
 What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale
 Shall be my harbour? underneath what grove
 Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream
 Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
 The earth is all before me. With a heart
 Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
 I look about; and should the chosen guide
 Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
 I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!

Here we find nature as not only restorative, but also as a guide to shaping the self; directing one's life in positive ways. Thoreau is also well known for his reflections – based on first-hand experience – of the uplifting qualities of contact with wild nature:

My spirits rise in proportion to the outward dreariness. Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness! ... When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most terminable ... the most dismal swamp ... The wild-wood covers the virgin mould and the same soil is good for men and for trees. A man's health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck (Thoreau 1993: 111).

Wild nature has long been valued as a tranquil haven from the chaos, noise and pollution of the city and a cure for the stresses of modern life, but rural nature may also have a healing effect. In a new book, *Nature Cure*, British naturalist,

conservationist and writer, Richard Mabey, gives a deeply moving account of his gradual recovery from serious depression through the restorative effects of his explorations and discoveries in rural England: 'What healed me, I think, was ... a sense of being not taken out of myself, but back in, of nature entering me, firing up the wild bits of my imagination' (Mabey 2005: 224).

Evolutionary and psychological research supports many of these reflections. In relation to wild nature, Edward O. Wilson's 'biophilia hypothesis', defined as the 'innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes' (and involving aesthetic engagement with nature) argues that 'to explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process of mental development ... To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents' (1986: 1). Douglas Porteous cites a range of psychological studies which show how both passive contemplation of nature and more active engagement through gardening and recreational activities promote human well-being (Porteous 1996: 134–8; Ottosson and Grahn 2005). These studies support the long-standing 'nature tranquillity hypothesis', which recognises the benefits of nature for humans and has had an important role in urban planning and landscape design, including the work of Frederick Law Olmstead, who designed Central Park and Prospect Park in New York, among other green urban spaces (Porteous 1996: 135).

Some of the most interesting support for the restorative value of nature is found in discussions of people-plant relations. The activity of gardening creates feelings of peacefulness and tranquillity and may have physical and mental health benefits (Parr, forthcoming; Cooper 2006: 73–6; 91). Community gardens are widely believed to 'promote sociability, reduce vandalism, and generate neighbourhood revitalization' (Porteous 1996: 134). Besides contributing to positive community and family relations, community gardens may also offer opportunities for developing caring relationships between humans and nature within an urban context (Light 2003). Isis Brook has shown how the 'person-plant-place relationship' develops into a caring attitude toward place, and grounds place-attachment: 'the most powerful way of establishing co-nurturing relationships is by engaging with plants first-hand: planting seeds, nurturing growth, learning about their needs and shaping their and our environment through such interaction' (Brook 2003: 232).

The benefits of wild and cultivated nature for human well-being are clear. Leisure activities such as gardening and spending time outdoors engage us more intimately, more concretely, with a range of environments, and aesthetic experience lies at the heart of many of these experiences. Qualities such as tranquillity and beauty are appreciated for themselves but also for their relaxing and emotionally uplifting effects. These are strong reasons to protect both wild and other green spaces, and some conservationists are already using these reasons to argue for new management policies. For example the 'Wild Ennerdale' initiative in the English Lake District seeks to 'join urban need with rural opportunity and

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articulate the restorative and spiritual qualities of the wild' (Evans 2005). As Brook points out, the relationships we may develop are 'co-nurturing', in other words, as we nurture ourselves we may in turn nurture nature. Along with Brook, I want to emphasise the possibility of reciprocal nature-human relationships. Deeper engagement with the natural environment through activities more and less aesthetically motivated offer the potential of care for nature as well as caring for ourselves. However, it would be mistaken to put too much emphasis on positive experiences of nature, since many encounters with nature's power and cruelty can be frightening and devastating for humans. Nonetheless, cultivating positive experiences and attempting to overcome the effects of negative ones ought to have benefits overall.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I should point out that I have said little about how aesthetic value might underpin a non-instrumental valuing of nature or how aesthetic valuing is a route to valuing nature for its own sake rather than any benefits it has for humans. This strategy could support a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic. But this is the topic of another paper, so I merely suggest it here as a possible direction (see Brady 2003: 128–42). Rather than pursuing arguments in relation to the intrinsic value of nature, I have wanted to show other, more pragmatic avenues for understanding how aesthetic valuing of nature might support environmental protection, namely by showing how it is already a given in many other environmental values. I have done this quite apart from arguing for or showing the obvious and explicit ways we already value nature from a rich aesthetic perspective. If aesthetic value is embedded in the practices I have outlined above – moral, scientific, leisure and otherwise, it has a key place which needs proper recognition. Perhaps in this way the fundamental importance of aesthetic experience will become plain.

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