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Admiring the High Mountains: The Aesthetics of Environment

JOHN HALDANE

*Department of Moral Philosophy,
University of St Andrews
Fife KY16 9AL, Scotland*

ABSTRACT: In recent years there has been a dramatic expansion of the range of studies, policy directives and initiatives concerned with the environment. For the most part these are unphilosophical, pragmatic responses to perceived threats of pollution and other forms of environmental degradation. However, they invariably presuppose certain conceptual and normative commitments, and the examination and evaluation of these has been a major concern of environmental philosophy. To date the primary focus of interest has been on ethical and political values, but there is a developing sense of the need to consider issues relating to the aesthetics of environment. After outlining a general philosophical structure for understanding the nature of aesthetic experience, its objects and values, a little known theory – that of Aquinas – is explained and defended.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic experience, aesthetic values, environmental aesthetics.

EXPERIENCES OF LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

My main title is drawn from a passage in St Augustine's *Confessions* (x. 8. 15) as quoted by Petrarch in a famous letter addressed to Francesco Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, an Augustinian professor of theology. Dated 26th April 1336, it recounts an ascent of Mont Ventoux (the 'Windy Peak') made that same day by Petrarch, his brother and two servants. After describing his preparations for the climb and its early stages he turns to religious matters, drawing parallels between the difficulties of the physical ascent and the process of spiritual formation. Having reached the highest summit he reflects on his recent past and then, as the sun begins to set he looks around again in all directions:

I admired every detail, now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to higher spheres after the example of my body, and I thought it fit to look into the volume of Augustine's *Confessions* ... Where I fixed my eyes first it was written: "And men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean, and the revolutions of the stars – and

desert themselves.” I was stunned, I confess. I bade my brother, who wanted to hear more, not to molest me, and close the book, angry with myself that I still admired earthly things. Long since I ought to have learned, even from pagan philosophers, that “nothing is admirable besides the mind; compared to its greatness nothing is great.” [Seneca, *Epistle* 8. 5] I was completely satisfied with what I had seen of the mountain and turned my inner eye toward myself. From this hour nobody heard me say a word until we arrived at the bottom.¹

This is an interesting passage and for more than one reason. It belongs within a corpus that bears the marks of the emerging renaissance humanism, and the letter itself has often been referred to as anticipating later European mountaineering interests; but what I think we should be struck by is the unironic willingness with which Petrarch sets aside his aesthetic delight as unworthy of the human mind. We have become accustomed to praising natural beauty and to thinking of its appreciation precisely as a mark of a refined sensibility and as something to be approved of and cultivated. Thus the implicit opposition of aesthetic and spiritual concerns is hard for us to accommodate. Consider how unexceptional (and congenial to modern environmentalism) seem the ideas, if not the form, of Hopkins’ sonnet “God’s Grandeur”²

The world is charged with the Grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then not now reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Of course Petrarch was writing over six hundred and fifty years ago, long before romantic quasi-panteism, and addressing a theologian with whom he shared an admiration for Augustine. This large historical and intellectual gap helps to explain the otherwise puzzling deprecation of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Yet even in more recent times sensitive and thoughtful authors have dismissed what are now canonised landscapes in terms which are at least striking and which some will regard as blasphemous. Consider, for example, the following description from the pen of Dr Johnson writing of Scottish scenery:

[The hills] exhibit very little variety; being almost wholly covered with dark heath, and even that seems to be checked in its growth. What is not heath is nakedness, a little diversified by now and then a stream rushing down the steep. An eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility. The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and disinherited of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation.

It will very readily occur, that this uniformity of barrenness can afford little amusement to the traveller; that it is easy to sit at home and conceive rocks and heath, and waterfalls; and that these journeys are useless labours, which neither impregnate the imagination, nor enlarge the understanding.³

This text and Petrarch's letter should serve as reminders that there is nothing perennially obvious about the present-day reverence for nature and the elevation of its appreciation to the higher categories of human consciousness. The 'aesthetics of the environment' is like the 'politics of the home' a term of art invented to label a set of concerns and an associated field of academic study each developed over time and out of particular cultural histories. In what follows I first sketch something of the relevant philosophical background and then discuss an account of the aesthetics of beauty suggested by remarks of Aquinas.

Recent years have seen the rapid rise to prominence of a range of studies, policy directives and initiatives concerned with the environment. These are sometimes unphilosophical, pragmatic responses to perceived threats arising from, for example, heavy industrialisation and increasing levels of human activity. Very often, however, they are presented through patterns of judgment and justification that are avowedly moral, not to say moralistic. Those involved in such presentations are then liable to speak in terms of 'environmental *ethics*', or more likely of 'an environmental *ethic*'. Although there are reasons for doubting whether values can be thought of in compartmentalised isolation I want for present purposes, and so far as is possible, to place ethical concerns on one side and to focus on *aesthetic* considerations.⁴ More precisely my interest is in whether, and if so how, philosophical aesthetics might be brought into contemporary thinking about the natural environment.

In advance one might suppose that the effect of introducing any kind of objective aesthetic element into the discussion of environmental values (what might be termed 'environmental axiology') would be to strengthen the case for 'deep' ecology. It is, after all, a common plea made by those concerned with protecting the natural environment from the effects of industry, say, that these deface the landscape, transforming what is naturally beautiful into something ugly. How then could an interest in the aesthetic qualities of nature be other than an instance of respect for the environment considered as something valuable in and of itself? In order to answer that question I need to say something about the general character of aesthetic theory.

SOME ELEMENTS OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

From antiquity, through the middle ages, the renaissance and the enlightenment, to the present day, there has been a movement in philosophical discussions of beauty and other aesthetic values (such as the sublime – and in later periods the picturesque) from attention to the *objects* of aesthetic experience to the character of the *experience* itself, and of the modes of attention or *attitudes* it involves. Although there is no agreed inventory of the elements or aspects of aesthetic experience, and certainly there is no agreement on their inter-relationships, the following schema (Figure 1) sets out something of the broad range of favoured possibilities.

<i>Aesthetic Object</i>		<i>Aesthetic Value</i>		<i>Aesthetic Response</i>	<i>Aesthetic Attitude</i>
<i>Anything at all</i>	<i>Specific things</i> reality; emotion; form; etc.	<i>Intrinsic values</i> content; form; sensuous qualities; etc.	<i>Extrinsic values</i> satisfac - tion; release; under- standing; etc.	Pleasure; interest; universal validity; satisfaction; understanding; etc.	Detachment; disinterest; contemplation; isolation; psychical distance; interpretation; etc.

FIGURE 1
The Elements of Aesthetic Experience

Again considered historically, the focus of interest has moved from left to right. Thus in *pre-modern aesthetics* (to the extent that one can reasonably speak in these terms of a subject that is often thought to have originated only in the eighteenth century⁵) aesthetic objects and values are generally taken to be prior, with aesthetic responses and attitudes being held to be posterior to and explicable in terms of these. So, for example, it might be argued that the ‘objects’ of aesthetic experience are the forms of natural entities, and that aesthetic value consists in the harmonious organisation of parts realised in such forms. An aesthetic experience will then be any experience in which these forms and values are attended to and appreciated, and an aesthetic attitude will be an (or perhaps *the*) attitude induced by such experiences.

Clearly any view of this sort, if it is to avoid explanatory circularity, must postulate certain objective features that are the basis for our experiences of beauty. The task of doing so is a challenging one and though there are still efforts

to complete it many have come to think it is impossible. Such scepticism together with other factors led, in the *modern* and *enlightenment* periods, to the development of broadly subjectivist accounts of aesthetics. By 'subjectivist', here, I do not mean arbitrary or idiosyncratic. Rather, the unifying feature of such accounts is that the direction of explanation runs from the attitude or experience to the value or object. One might, for example, identify the aesthetic attitude as one of detachment from theoretical and practical concerns or of disinterested contemplation, thereby specifying the character of aesthetic experience as being that of expressing or being conditioned by such an attitude. Following this one might then say that an aesthetic object is any object attended to in that kind of experience, and an aesthetic value is any feature singled out in such an experience as rewarding of attention, or, and more likely, any feature of the experience itself which is found to be pleasant or beneficial. Once again explanatory circularity will only be avoided so long as one does not at this point appeal to aesthetic objects in order to specify the relevant class of attitudes and experiences.

Even if that can be done, however, it is tempting to suppose that a consequence of a subjectivist approach is that there can then be no question of correct or incorrect aesthetic judgements, or relatedly of better and worse judges; for without autonomous aesthetic objects surely there can be no aesthetic objectivity. One familiar reaction to this thought is to welcome it, arguing that one of the main reasons for favouring subject-based approaches is precisely that aesthetic judgements lack criteria by which to be assessed. However, a subtler response recognises that in giving explanatory priority to the aesthetic attitude and aesthetic experience one is not wholly precluded from having external criteria of greater or lesser, coarser and more refined aesthetic sensibility; for one may hold that there are *intersubjective* standards.⁶

Consider the case of table manners. At the level of serious reflection we should not be tempted to suppose that there are objectively offensive modes of eating. Rather we should say that manners are a function of culturally shared interests. A mode of eating is offensive for a given community if in normal circumstances it would be judged offensive by a competent member of that community. Competence here being explained not in terms of an ability to discern objectively offensive eating practices but by reference to mastery of certain social conventions governing public eating. Although these norms are *subjective*, in the sense of being rooted in the dispositions of *subjects*, none the less their existence allows for the idea that some member of that community can go wrong in his style of eating, and thereby correctly be described as ill-mannered.

It should be clear then that the resources of certain 'subjectivist' aesthetic theories are more considerable than might initially be supposed. Moreover, as Figure 1 indicates, there are many different elements and combinations that might be included in an aesthetic theory of either objectivist or subjectivist

orientations. Rather than pursue these possibilities in detail, however, I want to consider next how the aesthetics of the environment is likely to fare when considered from these perspectives. An objectivist approach will look for certain features of environments which will serve as the basis for aesthetic experience and evaluation. Immediately, however, various difficulties suggest themselves. To the extent that we think of artworks as the paradigm class of objects involved in aesthetic experience we will see a problem in seeking for beauty in nature. If, like Hopkins, one were a creationist, holding that the universe is an artefact fashioned by God, then of course one could treat it formally in just the same way. But traditional theists are likely to be cautious of aestheticising Divine creation; and others will find the theistic assumption at least unwarranted and perhaps incoherent.

However, while denying that the natural world is the product of deliberate design one might nevertheless regard it *as if* designed, and maybe even speak of 'Nature' itself as the source of aesthetic order. This move, however, generates problems of its own. Consider the question of how many pictures there are in a given art gallery, or performances in a particular concert hall. Notwithstanding elements of the avantgarde this would, in principle, be a relatively easy matter to settle by reference to the form, content, matter and source of the works. However, if one eschews any claim of literal creation it seems in principle impossible to say where one work of nature begins and another ends. The category of the scenic view, for example, is all too obviously one of our own fashioning. If there is any element of art-making in nature it is surely present through the selective attention of spectators to aspects of a continuous realm. Furthermore, in deciding where to locate the boundaries of one scene our designs are influenced by the experience of actual artworks. In short, the effort to identify aesthetic objects in nature tends quickly to return one in the direction of the subject of experience and of his or her interests, cultural presuppositions and classifications.

Whether for these or other reasons, an objectivist might not choose to employ the artwork model but try instead the sort of approach I described as being characteristic of pre-modern thinking. That is to say, he or she might hold that the objects of environmental aesthetic experience are natural forms, by which I mean, primarily, the forms of organisms and derivatively those of non-organic entities. Something of this view is suggested by the fragmentary but very interesting remarks made by Aquinas in his discussions of beauty. He explicitly denies the claim that something is beautiful simply because we like it, insisting by contrast that our appreciation is directed towards the beauty of things, and that a thing is beautiful to the extent that it manifests its proper form or natural structure. He writes:

“Three things are required for beauty. First integrity or perfection (*integritas sive perfectio*), for what is defective is thereby ugly; second, proper proportion or consonance (*proportio sive consonantia*); and third clarity (*claritas*).⁷

The background assumption is that each substance or individual is possessed of a nature which, in the case of living things, is at once a principle of organic structure and a determinant of its characteristic activities. Integrity and proper proportion are directly related to this nature or form (*forma rei*) and the issue of clarity arises from them. *Integrity* consists in the possession of all that is required by the nature of the thing, such and such limbs and organs, active capacities and so on; while *proportion* includes both the compatibility of these elements and their being well-ordered. These two factors are then presupposed in the idea of *clarity*, for that concerns the way in which the form of a thing is manifest or unambiguously presented.

This neo-Aristotelian account has certain merits from the point of view of those interested in developing an objectivist environmental aesthetic. Forms are real, mind-independent entities, there to be discovered and contemplated. Thus the question of whether one member of a natural kind better realises the species' common nature is one that it makes sense to ask and one which informed attention can hope to answer. Also values and policies seem to be implicit or rootable in such facts. A 'good' specimen is *ontologically* better than a 'poor' one; and it is clear enough how industrial practices can be detrimental to these natural values by causing harm to individual organisms and injuring the species. Thus, unlikely as it might have been supposed given the tone of Petrarch's fourteenth century reflections, it may seem that in the thirteenth century writings of Aquinas there is a promising source for a deep ecological aesthetic, i.e., one in which the relevant values owe nothing to man's interests – save of course where the forms in question are human ones.

However, this conclusion would be a mistake and it is important to see why that is so. First, although Aquinas is insistent that beauty is not simply a function of subjective preference his account of its conditions indicates that there is a subtle form of subjectivity, in the sense of relativity-to-a-subject, in its very constitution. Recall that beauty requires perfection, proportion and clarity. The last of these I glossed as unambiguously presented or manifest form. The existence and character of a given form may be a wholly mind-independent affair, but to speak of its presentation implies actual or possible knowers. Furthermore whether something is unambiguous or clear is in part a function of the cognitive powers and accomplishments of the actual or imagined subject. So to say that something is beautiful if the perfection of its form is clearly presented indicates that, of necessity, beauty is something which involves a spectator. It is also apparent both from what Aquinas says and from the logic of his position that the spectators in question require the sort of intellectual capacity which there is little reason to think is possessed by any creature other than man. In short, natural beauty is *constitutively* tied to human experience.

Second, on Aquinas' view there is an equivalence between goodness and beauty – known as the 'convertibility of the transcendentals'. What this means is that in thinking or speaking of these attributes one is referring to the same

feature of reality, *viz.*, the condition of the natural form that constitutes an item's essential nature. Thus a thing is good and beautiful to the extent that its form is perfected. This is an interesting thesis, and on reflection a plausible one with relevance for environmental philosophy. But it has a corollary that moves aesthetics deeper into the territory of humanistic ecology. If the referents of 'good' and 'beautiful' are one and the same how do the terms differ? Aquinas answers that each expresses a distinct kind of interest in, or concern with, the forms of things.

The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire by being seen or known. Consequently those senses chiefly regard the beautiful which are the most cognitive, *viz.*, sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds ... Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty: so that *good* means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the *beautiful* is something pleasant to apprehend.⁸

Thus although Aquinas roots his account of beauty in objective fact, the existence of aesthetic objects and values involves human subjects taking delight in perceptually and intellectually discernible structures. His view should be congenial to those concerned with environmental axiology in general and with aesthetic values in particular. It accords a major role to natural forms and can accommodate within this classification entities more extensive than individual organisms, such as species and even eco-systems. Further, unlike the aesthetics of the scenic it need not confine itself to the 'visible surface' of the world. It can, for example, allow the aesthetic relevance of ecological history and of the sorts of environmental structures to which Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* did much to draw attention. In "Marshland Elegy" Leopold writes:

Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes, lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words.

This much though can be said: our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unravelling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.⁹

It should be clear, however, that like the earlier attempt to conceive an aesthetics of the natural environment along the lines of a philosophy of art, an element of which is also present in Leopold's thinking, Aquinas' theory of natural beauty has an ineliminable subjective aspect.

CONCLUSION

We have come a long way from Petrarch's revulsion at his own delight, but we do not as yet have a clear and complete account of the nature and value of the aesthetics of environment. The task that remains, therefore, promises both theoretical and practical rewards. My general conclusion, however, is that whichever side of the diagram one starts from – focusing on the aesthetic attitude or the aesthetic object – one should be led to think that human experience plays a constitutive role in environmental aesthetics.

NOTES

¹ Petrarch, 1956 (1336), p. 44.

² Hopkins, 1970, p. 66.

³ Johnson, 1944 (1773), pp. 34-5. It is interesting to compare these remarks with those of Thomas Gray: "I am returned from Scotland, charmed with my expedition: it is of the Highlands I speak: the Lowlands are worth seeing once, but the mountains are ecstatic and ought to be visited in pilgrimage once a year. None but those monstrous creatures of God know how to join so much beauty with so much horror. A fig for your poets, painters, gardeners and clergymen, that have not been among them, their imagination can be made up of nothing but bowling greens, flowering shrubs, horse ponds, Fleet ditches, shell grottoes and Chinese rails. Then I had so beautiful an Autumn. Italy could hardly produce a nobler scene, and this so sweetly contrasted with that perfection of nastiness and total want of accommodation that only Scotland can supply." Letter of 1765, Gray, 1935, p. 899. I am indebted to Christopher Smout for this quotation. He uses it to introduce a fascinating discussion of attitudes to Scottish landscape; see Smout, 1990.

⁴ For a discussion of the way in which ethical concerns may constrain aesthetic appreciation see Foster, 1992.

⁵ The first philosophical use of the term 'aesthetics' to identify a (more or less) autonomous field of experience is to be found in Baumgarten 1974 (1734). Baumgarten claims that the subject is the science of sensitive knowledge, "*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*".

⁶ This in effect is the position advanced by Hume in his classic essay "Of the Standard of Taste", see Hume 1965 (1757).

⁷ Aquinas, 1914 (c. 1270) Ia. q. 39. a. 8. For a brief account of Aquinas' view and of related ways of thinking see Haldane, 1993.

⁸ Aquinas, 1914 (c.1270) Ia, IIae, q.17, a.1, ad. 3.

⁹ Leopold, 1989 (1949), p. 96. For an account of the aesthetic dimension of Leopold's writings see Callicot, 1983.

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