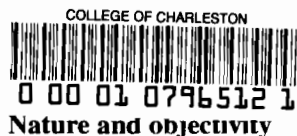


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Hettinger NATURE, AESTHETIC  
PHIL 450 JUDGMENT, AND  
OBJECTIVITY



In this chapter, I consider the view that some aesthetic judgments about nature and natural objects (e.g., "The Grand Tetons are majestic") are appropriate, correct, or perhaps simply true; while others (e.g., "The Grand Tetons are dumpy") are inappropriate, incorrect, or perhaps simply false. If one accepts some such view, one discovers that the opposition falls into two clearly distinguishable groups. On the one hand, there are those who hold that such views are untenable concerning aesthetic judgments in general, whether a judgment be about nature or about art – whether it be "The Grand Tetons are majestic" or "Donatello's David is dumpy." Such objectors often hold some version of a subjectivist, a relativist, and/or a noncognitivist view about all so-called aesthetic judgments. On the other hand, there are those who reject these latter views concerning aesthetic judgments about art, but have serious reservations about rejecting them concerning such judgments about nature. These objectors readily admit and often defend the view that a statement such as, for example, "*Guernica* is dynamic" is appropriate, correct, or true, but find a statement such as "The Grand Tetons are majestic" somewhat worrisome – at least in their theoretical moments, if not in their actual practice. The remarks of this chapter are addressed to only the latter group of objectors. To consider the issues raised by the former group would require not only a much more substantial investigation, but also one with an essentially different focus.

Although the position of the latter group is quite common among aestheticians, it can be properly discussed only by considering a concrete example. One such example is found in Kendall Walton's important essay "Categories of Art."<sup>1</sup> I select Walton's position for consideration for two reasons. First, it presents a persuasive and well-developed account of the truth and falsity of aesthetic judgments about art, an account that does not directly apply to aesthetic judgments about nature, and thus appears to necessitate a relativist view in regard to these judgments. Second, the position is developed in such a way that it makes possible a clear understanding of why aestheticians might hold an essentially objectivist view concerning aesthetic judgments about



Illustration 2 The Grand Tetons, Wyoming (Courtesy of Corbis/Ansel Adams Trust).

art and yet a relativist view concerning those about nature. My general point in considering Walton's position is to demonstrate that a somewhat analogous position does in fact apply to aesthetic judgments about nature. If this is the case, then to the extent that positions of this general type underwrite the objectivity of aesthetic judgments about art, the objectivity of aesthetic judgments about nature is similarly underwritten.

### Walton's position

To begin we must have at our disposal a brief and schematic account of Walton's position together with his reservations concerning its applicability to aesthetic judgments about nature.<sup>2</sup> Essentially Walton holds that the truth value of aesthetic judgments about a work of art is a function of two things: first, the (nonaesthetic) perceptual properties a work actually has, and second, the perceived status of such perceptual properties when a work is perceived in its correct category or categories of art. He provides evidence for the psychological claim that the aesthetic judgments that seem true or false of a work are a function of the perceived status of its perceptual properties, given any category in which the work is perceived; he argues for the philosophical claim that the aesthetic judgments that are true or false of a work are a function of the perceived status

of its perceptual properties, given that the work is perceived in its correct category or categories.<sup>3</sup> He then provides four circumstances which count toward the correctness of perceiving a work in a category (see below).

The above sketch is most succinctly elaborated by means of an example. Consider "*Guernica* is awkward." If this aesthetic judgment is false, it is false as a function of the perceptual properties of *Guernica* (1937), that is, its lines, colors, forms. With this few would disagree. Walton goes further to point out that *Guernica* can be perceived in different (perceptually distinguishable) categories of art.<sup>4</sup> It can be perceived, for example, as a painting, as an impressionist painting, or as a cubist painting. With respect to such categories of art, certain perceptual properties are what Walton calls standard, contra-standard, and variable.<sup>5</sup> For example, flatness is standard for all three of the above-mentioned categories, being colored is variable for all three, but having predominately cube-like shapes is variable for the first, contra-standard for the second, and standard for the third. The perceived status of perceptual properties as standard, variable, or contra-standard is thus a function of the category in which the work is perceived.<sup>6</sup> If *Guernica* is perceived as a cubist painting, its cube-like shapes will be perceived as standard; if it is perceived as an impressionist painting these same shapes will be perceived as contra-standard (or possibly as variable). Walton's psychological claim is that this perceived status affects which aesthetic judgments seem true or false to a perceiver on an occasion. "*Guernica* is awkward" may seem a true judgment when the painting is seen in the category of impressionist paintings, for its cube-like shapes will be perceived as contra-standard (or variable) and thus as counting toward awkwardness. The same judgment will seem false, however, when the painting is seen in the category of cubist paintings, for then its cube-like shapes will be perceived as standard and consequently as counting toward awkwardness no more than its flatness as a painting, for example, is perceived as counting toward its representing flat objects.<sup>7</sup>

But is "*Guernica* is awkward" really true or really false? Walton's philosophical claim is that this depends on the perceived status of the perceptual properties when *Guernica* is perceived in its correct category. In this particular case the aesthetic judgment in question is false because *Guernica* is correctly perceived as a cubist painting; thus the perceived status of its cube-like shapes does not count toward awkwardness. The four circumstances that count toward it being correct to perceive *Guernica* as a cubist painting are:

- that it has a relatively large number of properties standard with respect to cubism;
- that it is a better painting when perceived as a cubist painting;
- that Picasso intended or expected it to be perceived as a cubist painting;
- that the category of cubist paintings was well established in and recognized by the society in which *Guernica* was produced.

Walton argues that generalized versions of these four circumstances are relevant to determining the correct category within which to perceive any work of art.<sup>8</sup>

It follows from Walton's account that, in order to determine the truth value of an aesthetic judgment such as "*Guernica* is awkward," it will not do simply to look at *Guernica*, as it will if we wish to determine the truth value of "*Guernica* is colored." Rather, we must perceive *Guernica* in its correct category. This requires two kinds of knowledge. First, the knowledge that certain factors make cubism its correct category and consequently that cubism is its correct category; that is, certain factual knowledge about the history and nature of twentieth-century art. And second, the knowledge how to perceive *Guernica* as a cubist work; that is, certain practical knowledge or skill that must be acquired by training and experience concerning the category of cubist paintings and other related categories of art. In short, simply "examining a work with the senses can by itself reveal neither how it is correct to perceive it, nor how to perceive it that way."<sup>9</sup>

We are now in a position to consider the relevance of a Walton-like position to aesthetic judgments about nature. Walton holds that his philosophical claim is not applicable to most aesthetic judgments about nature, and that these judgments are perhaps better understood in terms of what he calls the category-relative interpretation. On this interpretation aesthetic judgments are relativized to any category in which a person happens to perceive something. For example, if this interpretation were applied to aesthetic judgments about works of art, then judgments such as "*Guernica* is awkward" and "*Guernica* is not awkward" need not be incompatible, for the first may amount to the judgment that "*Guernica* is awkward as an impressionist painting," and the second to the judgment that "*Guernica* is not awkward as a cubist painting." Walton argues that, in regard to aesthetic judgments about art, this interpretation is inadequate for it does not allow such aesthetic judgments to be mistaken often enough. We say that the judgment "*Guernica* is awkward" is simply wrong, false; we say that the individual making such a judgment does not appreciate the work because he or she perceives it incorrectly. Similarly, we say that judgments we ourselves made about works before we appreciated them properly were simply false or wrong. But the category-relative interpretation does not allow for these facts; thus, in order to accommodate them we must accept that certain ways of perceiving works of art are correct and others incorrect.

However, although Walton rejects the category-relative interpretation of judgments about art, he proposes it for aesthetic judgments about nature. He says: "I think that aesthetic judgments are in some contexts amenable to such category-relative interpretations, especially aesthetic judgments about natural objects (clouds, mountains, sunsets) rather than works of art."<sup>10</sup> He suggests that we simply attribute aesthetic properties to natural objects in the same way in which we could, or would have to, concerning a work of art "about whose origins we know absolutely nothing" and that we are, consequently, not "in a position to judge...aesthetically."<sup>11</sup>

### Nature and culture

It should be clear that Walton's account is a concrete example of one of the positions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: aesthetic judgments about art are true or false and can be determined as such, but aesthetic judgments about nature are in some sense subjective or relative. Walton has an essentially objectivist account of aesthetic judgments about art and yet a relativist account of those about nature. Concerning the latter, the implicit view is that such judgments are relative to the way in which a perceiver happens to perceive a part of nature or a natural object on a particular occasion. There seem to be no essentially correct or incorrect categories in which to perceive nature, and thus with nature one can only attribute to it certain aesthetic properties rather than judge which aesthetic properties it has. With nature it appears to be a matter of aesthetically appreciating whatever one can and as much as one can, but not a matter of getting it aesthetically right or wrong, not a matter of making true or false aesthetic judgments.

This position has an initial implausibility that leads one to ask why Walton and other aestheticians accept it. Its implausibility can be seen by noting that not only do many aesthetic judgments about nature strike us as clearly true (e.g., "The Grand Tetons are majestic") or clearly false (e.g., "The Grand Tetons are dumpy"), but also that many of such judgments seem to be paradigmatic aesthetic judgments — ones in virtue of which we initially grasp aesthetic concepts (e.g., graceful gazelle, majestic mountain, sublime sunset). In light of these considerations a position that bifurcates the class of aesthetic judgments and suggests an essentially different and weaker philosophical account of those about nature than of those about art seems counterintuitive. If such an account is inadequate, it might be suggested that this is due to the fact that, as explained in Chapter 1, aestheticians have until very recently paid relatively little attention to the aesthetics of nature.<sup>12</sup> However, although it is perhaps true that philosophers hold less adequate views about that to which they give less attention, this cannot be the complete explanation for a position such as that sketched above. There are more important reasons that can be made explicit by further considering our example.

As we saw above, Walton provides four circumstances that count toward it being correct to perceive a work in a given category of art. The latter two circumstances are respectively that the artist who produced the work intended or expected it to be perceived in a certain category or thought of it as being in that category, and that the category in question is well established in and recognized by the society in which the work is produced. These circumstances cannot count toward it being correct to perceive parts of nature or natural objects in certain categories, for nature is not produced by artists who intend or expect it to be perceived in certain ways and it is not produced within certain societies. Consequently an important aspect of Walton's philosophical account is, as Walton says, "not readily applicable to most judgments about natural objects."<sup>13</sup> Essentially, this is because works of art are produced by artists

within societies and nature is not. Moreover, not only are works of art the products of societies, but in a similar way so are the categories of art themselves. Consequently, not only do the circumstances for a category being correct not readily apply to nature, but the categories themselves do not apply. In short, nature does not fit into categories of art.

These remarks enable us to see more clearly the basic reason why some aestheticians hold an essentially objectivist view concerning aesthetic judgments about art and a relativist view concerning those about nature. In short, it is because the objectivity of the former class of aesthetic judgments is based on a certain kind of account of the nature of aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic qualities, and/or aesthetic objects. The relevant accounts are in some sense societal, institutional, or more generally, cultural.<sup>14</sup> The two circumstances of Walton mentioned above make reference to certain cultural facts and his categories are themselves culturally established and maintained. It is the difficulty of bringing aesthetic judgments about nature into the general framework of these cultural accounts that seemingly leads aestheticians to abandon such judgments to relativism.<sup>15</sup>

Once it is clear that cultural accounts of the aesthetic are the basic reason for a bifurcated view of aesthetic judgments, we might be tempted to remedy the situation by rejecting such accounts. However, although there are philosophical problems with these accounts, I think this temptation should be resisted.<sup>16</sup> Cultural accounts of the aesthetic are simply more promising than other alternatives. Consequently, in regard to the aesthetics of nature, the interesting issue is the extent to which we can develop an analogous account which applies to aesthetic judgments about nature. In order to pursue this issue we must consider carefully the important differences between art and nature that cultural accounts of the aesthetic force to our attention. I have briefly indicated these differences in this section, but they need to be further discussed if we are to move toward a unified account of aesthetic judgments. I return to them shortly. Initially, however, it is fruitful to see exactly how much of a cultural account roughly of the kind outlined by Walton does directly apply to nature and how well it applies. This will allow us to see more clearly exactly what and how much needs to be said about these differences in order to achieve a unified account.

### Nature and Walton's psychological claim

Walton's position embodies not only a philosophical claim but also a psychological claim. The latter is the claim that the aesthetic judgments that seem true or false of a work are a function of the perceptual status of its perceptual properties given any category in which the work is perceived. I think that a similar psychological claim can be demonstrated to hold for aesthetic judgments about nature. In fact Walton presents one case which suggests that this is so:

A small elephant, one which is smaller than most elephants with which we are familiar, might impress us as charming, cute, delicate, or puny. This is not simply because of its (absolute) size, but because it is small *for an elephant*. To people who are familiar not with our elephants but with a race of mini-elephants, the same animal may look massive, strong, dominant, threatening, lumbering, if it is large for a mini-elephant. The size of elephants is variable relative to the class of elephants, but it varies only within a certain (not precisely specifiable) range. It is a standard property of elephants that they do fall within this range. How an elephant's size affects us aesthetically depends, since we see it as an elephant, on whether it falls in the upper, middle or lower part of the range.<sup>17</sup>

This case illustrates the application of the psychological claim to natural objects and provides an example of a relevant category with properties standard, variable, and contra-standard in respect to that category. The category is that of elephants, a perceptually distinguishable category in which we do perceive certain natural objects – under most conditions, elephants. With respect to this category, size is a variable property while the limits of range on size is a standard property. Thus the small elephant's size is variable in this example. However, were the elephant small enough to fall outside the limits set by the standard property – for example, the size of a large mouse – its size would be contra-standard. In such a case, if we could still perceive it in the category of elephants, other aesthetic judgments would seem true. In addition to (or as opposed to) appearing delicate, it might appear frail or fragile. And it would certainly strike us as being surprising or disconcerting – aesthetic properties related to certain contra-standard perceptual properties. The point illustrated by this case generally holds true for similar cases. Consider, for example, the aesthetic judgments we take to be true of Shetland ponies (charming, cute) and Clydesdale horses (majestic, lumbering). These judgments are made with respect to the category of horses. Similarly a foal (calf, fawn, etc.) typically strikes us as delicate and nimble when seen in the category of horses (cattle, deer, etc.), but a particularly husky one may strike us as lumbering or perhaps awkward if seen in the category of foals (calves, fawns, etc.).

In the above example, particular natural kinds (elephants, horses) constitute categories that function psychologically as do categories of art; and our aesthetic appreciation is directed toward a natural *object*. We also need, however, to consider the application of the psychological claim to a somewhat different kind of example – the aesthetic appreciation of landscapes or of natural environments. In discussing the enriching of aesthetic appreciation, Ronald Hepburn describes the following case:

Supposing I am walking over a wide expanse of sand and mud. The quality of the scene is perhaps that of wild, glad emptiness. But suppose

that I bring to bear upon the scene my knowledge that this is a tidal basin, the tide being out. I see myself now as virtually walking on what is for half the day sea-bed. The wild, glad emptiness may be tempered by a disturbing weirdness.<sup>18</sup>

This case may be elaborated as follows. Note that what is described is a change in which aesthetic judgments seem true of the "wide expanse of sand and mud," and this change is a function of perceiving the expanse in different ways. Initially it is apparently perceived as a beach but then due to the realization that it is half the day under the sea, it is perceived as a sea-bed. Here beach and sea-bed – along the tidal basin – function as categories.<sup>19</sup> These categories are perceptually distinguishable in terms of their perceptual properties, and we can and do perceive things such as a "wide expanse of sand and mud" as in or as belonging to them. Moreover, such perceiving is not a matter of inferring, but rather a matter of simply seeing the expanse in the relevant categories given our experience and knowledge. It is a matter of perceiving a number of perceptual properties characteristic of (standard for) these categories combined into a single Gestalt (see footnote 6).

Once we recognize beach and sea-bed as categories, the aesthetic judgments that Hepburn mentions can be accounted for in terms of standard, variable, and contra-standard properties in respect to such categories. Perceiving the expanse in the category of sea-beds (as opposed to beaches) results in its appearing to possess a "disturbing weirdness." The property of being relatively dry (or above water) and thus such that it can be walked upon is a standard property with respect to beaches and contra-standard with respect to sea-beds. Dryness is among those properties in virtue of which such an expanse belongs to the category of beaches and which tends to disqualify it from belonging to the category of sea-beds (see footnote 5). Thus perceiving the expanse in the category of sea-beds results in its dryness (and the walking upon it) being perceived as contra-standard. Contra-standard properties are ones we tend to find "shocking, disconcerting, startling, or upsetting," and thus results the "disturbing weirdness." The weirdness is the result not simply of the realization that one is walking on a tidal basin, but of the experience of walking where it is, as it were, contra-standard to walk, that is, in perceiving the wide expanse as a sea-bed and perceiving oneself as walking upon that sea-bed.

Similarly, concerning properties that are standard, variable, and contra-standard in respect to beaches we might explain the initial aesthetic judgment involving "wild, glad emptiness." As in the case of the size of elephants, the width and expansiveness of, in this case, a beach is a variable property and the limits on the range of width and expansiveness a standard property with respect to this category. Thus if the "sand and mud" is, as suggested by the quote, quite wide and expansive, that is, in the upper part of the range, the resultant aesthetic impression will be of a "wild, glad emptiness." On the other hand, had the expanse of sand and mud been in the lower part of the range, the beach



may have appeared warm and cozy or perhaps cramped and confining. Of course, the actual aesthetic judgments that seem true will be a function not only of these variable and standard properties of beaches, but also of many others and, of course, of our other experiences with this category and the properties that are standard, variable, and contra-standard with respect to it.

Other examples similar to the above could be provided. In fact I think reference to the kind of categories in which we perceive natural objects and landscapes, and the properties of standard, variable, and contra-standard with respect to such categories, helps to explain which aesthetic judgments seem to be true or false concerning much of nature – whether it be completely natural or modified by humans. Reflection on our judgments about mountains, sunsets, and waving fields of grain appears to bear this out.<sup>20</sup> However, rather than pursue further examples that support this psychological claim, I now turn to the more important question of the correctness of such judgments. In short, given the truth of the psychological claim, I ask whether we should, with Walton and others, opt for the category-relative interpretation of our aesthetic judgments about nature; or alternatively whether there are persuasive arguments for considering certain categories of nature to be correct and others incorrect, as is the case with categories of art. Given the implausibility of a bifurcated account of aesthetic judgments, I assume that the existence of such arguments constitutes adequate reason for rejecting the category-relative interpretation.

### The correct categories of nature

In the remainder of this chapter I sketch some arguments that give grounds for holding that certain categories of nature are correct and others not. These arguments support the conclusion suggested in the preceding chapter: that the correct categories of nature are those given by the natural sciences. Before considering these arguments, however, we should note that there is one obvious way in which certain of such categories are correct and others not. It appears, for example, that the category of elephants and not that of mice is the correct category for perceiving an elephant, regardless of its size. Similarly, to perceive an elephant as a mountain, as a sunset, or as a waving field of grain are clear cases of getting the incorrect category – if such perceivings are even possible. These are easy cases, for in such cases the number of perceptual properties standard with respect to the correct category are relatively large in number – even a very small (or very large) elephant has considerably more perceptual properties standard with respect to the category of elephants than with respect to the category of mice (or mountains). In short, in such cases the correct category is determined by something like Walton's first circumstance for it being correct to perceive a work of art in a given category – and determined by that alone. The more difficult kind of case is that in which the perceptual properties of a natural object or a part of nature do not by themselves clearly indicate a correct category. Such a case is posed when, given the perceptual

properties, it is yet plausible to perceive an object in two or more mutually exclusive categories. Very simple examples are perceiving a sea-anemone as a plant or as an animal, or perceiving a whale as a fish or as a mammal. Yet, even with these examples, it may be argued that perceptual properties are adequate to determine correctness of category – depending, of course, on what properties count as perceptual.

In order to consider my first argument, however, it is not necessary to debate the difficult issue of what counts as a perceptual property. Rather it is more fruitful to simply assume that in such cases perceptual properties are not adequate to determine correctness of category. Consequently, let us assume, for example, that with perceptual properties alone it is plausible to perceive a whale either in the category of fish or in the category of mammals. This makes plausible the claim that for aesthetic judgments about whales there is no correct category, and that we must therefore accept the category-relative interpretation of such judgments. We can see why anyone with a Walton-like position might be moved to this view. Given our assumption, Walton's first circumstance does not determine a correct category and, as already suggested, his third and fourth circumstances cannot determine a correct category.<sup>21</sup> Whales are not produced by artists who intend them to be perceived in certain categories and are not produced within societies. Whales do not fit into categories of art. However, from these truisms, Walton and others apparently move to the view that concerning nature we are completely without resources for determining a correct category. As we have seen, Walton compares making aesthetic judgments about nature with making aesthetic judgments about a work of art "about whose origins we know absolutely nothing."<sup>22</sup>

It is this move and the resulting conclusion that my first argument calls into question. To see how this occurs we must note first that although whales and nature in general do not fit into categories of art, they yet do fit, as noted in Chapter 4, into a number of common-sense and/or "scientific" groups. A whale can be perceived as a fish or as a mammal; as a whale or as, for example, a large porpoise; as a blue whale or as a humpbacked whale. Hepburn's expanse of sand and mud can be perceived as a beach, as a tidal basin, or as a sea-bed. That nature in general can be and is perceived in such biological and geological categories and that such categories psychologically function in a way similar to categories of art is what has already been established by the above discussion of the application of the psychological claim to aesthetic judgments about nature. Once this is granted, we must next observe that although nature is not produced by artists who intend it to be perceived in certain categories and is not produced within certain societies, it does not follow that we know nothing about it or more particularly that we do not know which categories are correct for it. Works of art are produced within societies within which categories are recognized and by artists who intend these to be correct categories; it follows that certain categories are correct for a given work and that we can know which ones are correct. But, as suggested in Chapter 4, human production is

not the only key to correctness of category. In general we do not produce, but rather discover, natural objects and aspects of nature. Why should we therefore not discover the correct categories for their perception? We discover whales and later discover that, in spite of somewhat misleading perceptual properties, they are in fact mammals and not fish.<sup>23</sup> It is plausible to claim that we have discovered the correct category in which to perceive whales. In the first place, that whales are not of our production does not count against this category being correct. In the second, it fits our intuitions about the correct categorization or classification of whales if this issue is considered independent of aesthetic issues. And, in the third place, this correctness of category can function philosophically for aesthetic judgments about nature as the correctness of categories of art functions for aesthetic judgments about art works. The only significant difference is that, concerning the latter, the grounds for correctness are the activities of artists and art critics, while concerning the former, they are the activities of naturalists and scientists in the broadest sense. But given the differences between art and nature, this is only to be expected.

The above line of thought takes us only so far in undercutting the plausibility of the category-relative interpretation of aesthetic judgments about nature. One might say that it at best shifts the burden of proof to those who defend such an interpretation. Moreover, it is based on the (at best unclear) assumption that in a case such as that of whales perceptual properties themselves do not determine the correct category. Consequently we must consider some further arguments that do more than shift the burden of proof and do not depend upon this assumption. To find a realistic case in which perceptual properties are neutral concerning correctness of category it is useful to envisage a situation where humans are involved. We, or landscapers, sometimes construct (or reconstruct) landscapes that are perceptually indistinguishable from natural landscapes. Consider a scenic coastline that appears to be natural, but in fact has been created by human beings. Imagine that it has been carefully planned and designed to be perceptually indistinguishable from a natural coastline, but its construction involved the removal of buildings and parking lots, the redistribution of great quantities of sand and soil, and the landscaping of the whole area to blend with its surroundings.<sup>24</sup> It is in fact a large-scale artifact, but can, and probably would, be perceived in the category of apparent (see footnote 19) natural coastlines. In such a case perceptual properties alone clearly do not determine whether it is correct to perceive the landscape as natural coastline or as artifact, yet the question of which is the correct category can be raised. It is essentially the question of whether it is correct to perceive the object as what it is (an artifact) or as what it appears to be (a natural coastline). It is this form of the question to which I address two additional lines of thought to the effect that certain categories in which we perceive nature are correct and others not. The general direction of these arguments is that it is correct to perceive an object in the category of what it is (as opposed to what it appears to be) even in difficult cases where its perceptual properties do not themselves

count toward one or the other categories being correct (or, if anything, suggest that the category of what it appears to be is correct).

The first of these two additional arguments can be made clear by imagining another coastline. This is a coastline that is perceptually indistinguishable from the above described coastline, but is natural rather than human-made. We can assume it is the coastline that served as the model for the human-made one. Since the two coastlines (call them N for natural and M for human-made) are perceptually indistinguishable, there is one level at which our aesthetic appreciation of the two will be identical. This is the level at which we appreciate only perceptual properties such as the curves, lines, colors, shapes, and patterns of N and M. However, as argued in Chapters 2 and 3, such exclusively formal aesthetic appreciation of nature is problematic.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as suggested in Chapter 4, there is also another deeper level at which aesthetic appreciation occurs.<sup>26</sup> At this level we appreciate not simply, for example, the identical patterns of N and M, but such patterns under certain descriptions. For example, the pattern of M can be described as indicating careful design, as an exact copy of the pattern of N, or as the product of human ingenuity; while the pattern of N can be described as typical of, say, North American Pacific coastlines, as indicating a high-tide coastal formation, or as the product of the erosion of the sea. It is clear that aesthetic appreciation of perceptual properties under such descriptions constitutes an important part of aesthetic appreciation of nature.<sup>27</sup> It essentially involves the contemplation of perceptual properties in light of such descriptions and the appreciation of them as something in virtue of which such descriptions are true.

Given the aesthetic relevance of these kinds of descriptions, it must be recognized that the above descriptions of the patterns of N and M are such that those that are true of N's pattern are not true of M's and vice versa. In fact for any such N and M there are an infinite number of descriptions that are true of N and not of M and vice versa. That any of such descriptions are aesthetically relevant in the way suggested above is all that need be the case in order to establish the importance of perceiving an object in the category of what it is as opposed to what it appears to be. This can be seen by noting that if we, for example, perceive M in the category of natural coastlines (what it appears to be) we become involved in one or both of the following: first, failure to appreciate it under descriptions that are true of it, such as its being carefully designed by humans; second, appreciation of it under descriptions that are false of it, such as its being the result of the sea's erosion. The first alternative is undesirable as it constitutes a case of aesthetic omission. It is possible to contemplate M in light of the description "being carefully designed by humans" and moreover to appreciate it as something in virtue of which this is true, but these possibilities are not likely to be achieved if M is perceived (only) in the category of natural coastlines. The opportunity for such contemplation and appreciation is not provided by perceiving M in this category. The second alternative is undesirable as it constitutes a case of aesthetic deception.

Perceiving M in the category of natural coastlines, of course, provides the possibility of contemplating M in light of the description "being the result of the sea's erosion," but this is a tenuous and misleading contemplation. It is tenuous in that it is always in danger of being destroyed by the knowledge of M's true reality and it is misleading in that it directs our contemplation away from this reality. Moreover, if we appreciate M as something in virtue of which this description is true, we are simply mistaken; our appreciation involves a false belief. On the other hand, if we perceive M in the category of artifact or perceive N in the category of natural coastlines - the categories of what each in fact is - then aesthetic omissions and aesthetic deceptions of the kind described above need not occur.

There are two things to observe about the preceding argument. The first and most important is that it provides grounds for construing the category of what something is as the correct category and the category of what something only appears to be as an incorrect category. The grounds are essentially that doing so avoids both aesthetic omissions and aesthetic deceptions. Consequently, we have reason to hold that even in cases where perceptual properties do not by themselves determine correct and incorrect categories, there are yet grounds for this determination and, therefore, grounds for rejecting the category-relative interpretation of our aesthetic judgments about nature. The second is that this conclusion depends neither upon the example involving very broad categories (natural coastline versus artifact or human-made coastline) nor upon it involving one "non-natural" category. As suggested earlier, these features of the example are due to the desire for a realistic case in which perceptual properties themselves cannot be construed as determining the correctness of one or the other category. In this regard it is important to note that this same line of argument applies to, for example, our earlier case involving the categories of beach, sea-bed, and tidal basin. Different aesthetically relevant descriptions are true of the wide expanse of sand and mud depending upon whether it is in fact a beach, a sea-bed, or a tidal basin. And only perceiving the expanse in the category of what it is will avoid various aesthetic omissions and deceptions. Consequently, in such cases, we similarly have grounds for the determination of the correct category and for rejecting the category-relative interpretation of aesthetic judgments.

The second argument for construing the category of what a natural object is as the correct category and what it only appears to be as an incorrect category is in part an ethical argument. It is essentially the contention that this is the best way to keep our aesthetics and our ethics in harmony. Consider the aesthetic appreciation of a Playboy centerfold model.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not this is considered aesthetic appreciation of nature, there is a common line of argument concerning such aesthetic appreciation. It is argued that this is to aesthetically appreciate the model not as what she is (in the category of human beings), but only as what she here appears to be or is presented as being (in the category of sex objects). And, the argument continues, this is ethically suspect for to engage

in such aesthetic appreciation is to endorse and promote (in ourselves, if nowhere else) a sexist attitude toward woman. I think this kind of argument has merit for the following reason: it is clear that we do not aesthetically appreciate simply with our five senses, but rather with an important part of our whole emotional and psychological selves. Consequently, what and how we aesthetically appreciate cannot but play a role in the shaping of our emotional and psychological being. This in turn helps to determine what we think and do, and think it correct for ourselves and others to think and do. In short, our aesthetic appreciation is a significant factor in shaping and forming our ethical views.

If this argument has merit, it is especially pertinent to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. If our aesthetic appreciation of nature helps to determine our ethical views concerning nature, then our aesthetic appreciation of nature should be of nature as it in fact is rather than as what it may appear to be. By aesthetically appreciating nature for what it is, we will shape our ethical views such that there is the best opportunity for making sound ethical judgments about matters of environmental and ecological concern. Consider again the human-made coastline. What if we discover that it causes environmental and ethical problems? Perhaps it greatly decreases the possibility of successful upstream migration by spawning salmon, or perhaps it causes an undercurrent that is exceedingly dangerous to swimmers. If we perceive the coastline in the category of natural coastlines (and are entrenched in doing so), a sound ethical view might involve noting that fish and human beings have in such cases long accepted and met the challenges of nature. Consequently perhaps we understandably conclude that we should let nature take its course and swimmers take their chances. On the other hand, if we perceive the coastline in the category of artifact or human-made coastline, a sound ethical view might involve regarding our environmental and ethical responsibilities quite differently. Perhaps we, ethically and ecologically, should construct a fish ladder up the coast (as has been done to allow salmon migration around hydroelectric dams), and perhaps we, ethically, should forbid swimmers to use the area. An actual case of this kind might be the way in which ethical views about whales apparently alter as a function of perceiving them as mammals rather than as fish. At the very least it appears that some of the arguments advanced for preserving whales presuppose perceiving them as mammals and aesthetically appreciating them as such. Strictly analogous arguments could not be advanced for preserving, for example, sharks (although different arguments could be).

This ethical line of argument does not by itself clearly establish that there are correct and incorrect categories in which to perceive parts of nature or natural objects nor does it clearly establish that the correct categories are the categories of what things in fact are. However, it does, I think, establish that there is ethical merit in regarding certain categories as correct and others as incorrect, and in regarding as correct the categories of what things in fact are, or, as we described them earlier, the common-sense and/or scientific categories

that are determined by the naturalist and the natural scientist. Consequently, if this argument together with the others offered above give adequate grounds for-claiming truth and falsity for our aesthetic judgments of nature (rather than accepting the category-relative interpretation), then these arguments help to establish a position that has additional merit. This is the merit of bringing the interests and points of view of aesthetics, ethics, and natural science together such that they reinforce one another, rather than stand in opposition as they so often appear to do.

### Conclusion

I conclude these remarks by further emphasizing one consequence of the position I have attempted to establish. The consequence can be brought out by noting the extent to which the position remains within the general confines of a cultural account of the aesthetic. There is a difference of emphasis, of course. As noted in Chapter 4, when the aesthetic appreciation of art is considered in light of a cultural account, the relevant part of our culture is that embodied in and revealed by art history and art criticism; when aesthetic appreciation of nature is so considered, on the other hand, the relevant part of our culture is natural history and natural science. Nonetheless, in the manner in which a cultural account of the aesthetic requires knowledge of art history and art criticism to play an essential role in our aesthetic judgments about art, likewise a cultural account requires knowledge of natural history and natural science to play the same essential role in our aesthetic judgments about nature. We can, of course, approach nature as we sometimes approach art, that is, we can simply enjoy its forms and colors or enjoy perceiving it however we may happen to. But if our appreciation is to be at a deeper level, if we are to make aesthetic judgments that are likely to be true and to be able to determine whether or not they are true; then we must know something about that which we appreciate. We must know that certain factors make aspects of nature and natural objects belong to certain categories and that they are therefore correctly perceived in these categories. And we must know how to perceive those aspects of nature and natural objects in the categories in question.<sup>29</sup> This reinforces the conclusion reached in Chapter 4: that for significant aesthetic appreciation of nature, something like the knowledge and experience of the naturalist is essential. It is not surprising that individuals such as Muir, Ruskin, Audubon, and Leopold, who demonstrated an acute aesthetic appreciation of nature in their paintings and writings, were not simply appreciators of nature but also accomplished naturalists.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review*, 1970, vol. 79, pp. 334-67.

- 2 The following necessarily brief sketch of Walton's position fails to capture its detail and subtlety. Footnotes 4 to 7 are designed to supplement the sketch to some extent.
- 3 Walton puts his psychological and his philosophical claims in terms of what aesthetic properties a work seems to have or has, as opposed to in terms of what aesthetic judgements appear to be or are true or false of it. I prefer the latter and nothing, I believe, turns on this way of putting his position.
- 4 Walton, op. cit., pp. 338-9:

Such categories include media, genre, styles, forms, and so forth – for example, the categories of paintings, cubist paintings, Gothic architecture, classical sonatas, paintings in the style of Cezanne, and music in the style of late Beethoven – if they are interpreted in such a way that membership is determined solely by features that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner.

The latter condition is what makes a category of art "perceptually distinguishable."

- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 339:

A feature of a work of art is *standard* with respect to a (perceptually distinguishable) category just in case it is among those in virtue of which works in that category belong to that category – that is, just in case the lack of that feature would disqualify, or tend to disqualify, a work from that category. A feature is *variable* with respect to a category just in case it has nothing to do with works belonging to that category; the possession or lack of the feature is irrelevant to whether a work qualifies for the category. Finally, a *contra-standard* feature with respect to a category is the absence of a standard feature with respect to that category – that is, a feature whose presence tends to *disqualify* works as members of the category.

- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 340

To perceive a work in a certain category is to perceive the "Gestalt" of that category in the work. This needs some explanation. People familiar with Brahmsian music – that is, music in the style of Brahms (notably, works of Johannes Brahms) – or impressionist paintings can frequently recognize members of these categories by recognizing the Brahmsian or impressionist *Gestalt* qualities. Such recognition is dependent on perception of particular features that are standard relative to these categories, but it is not a matter of *inferring* from the presence of such features that a work is Brahmsian or impressionist.

As is evident in the above and in footnote 4, Walton uses "perceive" in a rather broad sense. I follow his usage throughout this chapter.

- 7 In general Walton's view is that properties perceived as standard are aesthetically inert or "contribute to a work's sense of order, inevitability, stability, correctness" *Ibid.*, p. 348; properties perceived as variable contribute to a work its representational, symbolic, and expressive nature; and properties perceived as contra-standard contribute to a work a shocking, disconcerting, startling, or upsetting nature. *Ibid.*, see pp. 343-54.
- 8 *Ibid.*, see pp. 357-63.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 367.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 355. →
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 365, my italics.

- 12 This has been noted in different ways by a number of writers. See, for example, Ronald W. Hepburn, "Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," in H. Osborne (ed.) *Aesthetics in the Modern World*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1968, pp. 49-66; Mary Carman



- Rose, "Nature as an Aesthetic Concept," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 1976, vol. 16, pp. 3-12; Michael Hancher, "Poems Versus Trees: The Aesthetics of Monroe Beardsley," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1972, vol. 31, pp. 181-91.
- 13 Walton, op. cit., p. 355.
- 14 It should be clear that the position concerning the aesthetics of nature that I here exemplify by means of Walton's article can also be seen as a natural consequence of George Dickie's institutional analysis of aesthetic objects (not simply of art). See *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974, Chapters 7 and 8, especially p. 169 and pp. 198-200. I do not consider Dickie's analysis as he does not explicitly endorse a relativist position for aesthetic judgments about nature. He does however make certain remarks that suggest it. For example: "Where natural visual aesthetic objects are concerned, we can be content to appreciate whatever happens to 'fall together' into a visual design" (Ibid., p. 169). In spite of such comments, it is nonetheless clear from the concluding paragraphs of the book that Dickie wishes to leave open the question of the status of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. The view that I elaborate in this chapter constitutes a partial response to some of the issues raised in those paragraphs.
- 15 As noted in Chapters 1 and 4, one means by which aesthetic judgments about nature can be brought under cultural accounts of the aesthetic is in virtue of the practice of perceiving nature as if it fits into certain kinds of artistic categories. There is, for example, a tradition of perceiving landscapes as if they fit into various landscape-painting categories. Paradoxically, however, such perceiving of landscapes seemingly lends support to a category-relative interpretation of aesthetic judgments of nature, for it is difficult to justify the claim that any such artistic categories are correct for nature, rather than simply imposed upon nature. I think imposing such categories upon nature poses certain difficulties that I discuss in "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1979, vol. 37, pp. 267-75 (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 4).
- 16 There is, of course, no lack of philosophical problems with cultural accounts of the aesthetic. Some of the particular problems inherent in Dickie's institutional analysis of aesthetic objects are brought out in the following: Gary Iseminger, "Appreciation, the Artworld, and the Aesthetic," in L. Aagaard-Mogensen (ed.) *Culture and Art*, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1976, pp. 118-30; Robert McGregor, "Dickie's Institutionalized Aesthetic," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1977, vol. 17, pp. 3-13; Michael Mitias, "The Institutional Theory of the Aesthetic Object," *The Personalist*, 1977, vol. 58, pp. 147-55.
- 17 Walton, op. cit., pp. 350-1. Walton, I suspect, would agree that the psychological claim applies to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. This is not only evidenced by his use of the elephant example, but also by his remark to the effect that what the claim purports "is obviously not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon, but a pervasive characteristic of aesthetic perception" (p. 354).
- 18 Hepburn, op. cit., p. 55.
- 19 In discussing the psychological claim, the categories involved are, strictly speaking, the categories of, for example, apparent beaches, apparent seabeds, or apparent elephants, that is, the categories of things which because of their perceptual properties look like beaches, sea-beds, or elephants. See Walton, op. cit., p. 339. Constant repetition of "apparent" is not necessary as long as it is clear that the categories involved are perceptually distinguishable (see footnote 4).
- 20 Mountains seem a particularly good case in point for testing the psychological claim. See Marjorie Hope Nicolson's classic work *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1959.
- 21 I do not mention Walton's second circumstance, for I think it directly relevant in the case of neither art nor nature. This is because it seems not to be a circumstance

constitutive of correctness as are the other circumstances. In contrast to these, the second circumstance seems only to provide some evidence for correctness. At best it might be construed as a "tie-breaking" consideration somewhat analogous to the way in which simplicity is viewed in regard to theory testing. It is possible that this is also the proper way in which to view the ethical considerations I discuss near the end of this chapter.

- 22 Walton, op. cit., p. 364. my italics.
- 23 It may be held that the idea of *discovering*, for example, that a whale is in fact a mammal is simplistic - that the more correct description is in terms of something such as inventing and applying a conceptual system. Although I do not wish to assume any such views here, to the extent that they are plausible, my general line of thought is strengthened. Such views help to bring the categorization of art and the categorization of nature more in line with one another.
- 24 I owe this example to Donald Crawford. Certain ideas in the present chapter were initially developed as comments on Donald Crawford's unpublished paper "Art and the Aesthetics of Nature," which was presented at the Pacific Division of the American Society for Aesthetics at Asilomar, April 1980. I thank Crawford and other participants for valuable discussion of those ideas.
- 25 I bring out some of its problematic aspects in "Formal Qualities in the Natural Environment," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 1979, vol. 13, pp. 99-114 (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 3).
- 26 Hepburn, op. cit., p. 62. notes:

Suppose the outline of our cumulus cloud resembles that of a basket of washing, and we amuse ourselves in dwelling upon this resemblance. Suppose that on another occasion we do not dwell on such freakish aspects, but try instead to realize the inner turbulence of the cloud, the winds sweeping up within and around it, determining its structure and visible form. Should we not be ready to say that this latter experience was less superficial than the other, that it was truer to nature, and for that reason more worth having? If there can be a passage, in art, from easy beauty to difficult and more serious beauty, there can also be such passages in aesthetic contemplation of nature.

Compare Hepburn's general remarks on pp. 60-4 with the argument that follows.

- 27 Note, for example, the following remark by Aldo Leopold, "Conservation Esthetic," [1953], in *A Sand Country Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River*, New York, Random House, 1974, p. 285 (my italics):

Consider...a trout raised in a hatchery and newly liberated in an over-fished stream...No one would claim this trout has the same value as a wholly wild one caught out of some unmanaged stream in the high Rockies. Its esthetic connotations are inferior, even though its capture may require skill.

The inferior aesthetic "connotations" of one trout as opposed to the other can only be a function of what descriptions are true of one as opposed to the other.

- 28 This illustration was suggested to me by Donald Crawford.
- 29 I make suggestions concerning this issue in "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," op. cit. (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 4).