

Epistemic Norms, Moral norms and Nature Appreciation

In recent writings about environmental aesthetics a variety of proposals have been advanced about relevant norms that constrain appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature. Some of these norms are cognitive or epistemic. That is, they claim that nature ought to be cognized in certain ways or we ought to form certain beliefs about nature rather than others, and when we do this, this will significantly constrain our aesthetic appreciation of nature. Another proposal is that moral norms rule out certain forms of aesthetic appreciation of natural objects and promote others.¹ If these proposals are correct, then different kinds of value interact in the realm of environmental aesthetics. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate these claims. Such an evaluation inevitably has two parts. One first has to ask whether the purported norms exist. If they do, one has to assess their bearing on evaluative aesthetic judgments.

I will argue that there are weak epistemic norms of nature appreciation but they lack important implications sometimes associated with them. I will also argue that the situation is even less promising for moral norms: no one has successfully identified a moral norm that constrains aesthetic appreciation of nature.

I should mention that the norms just alluded to are not the only proposed norms of nature appreciation. Another type concerns the appropriate objects of such appreciation. I have discussed this issue elsewhere and won't reprise that discussion here.²

Epistemic Norms

That there are epistemic norms for understanding nature, or natural environments, shouldn't be controversial. There might be more controversy if we attempted to state them precisely, but such a precise statement is never attempted in the environmental

aesthetics literature, and won't be here. One can attempt to understand nature through myth and religious doctrine, which for millennia was the most widespread vehicle for making the natural world intelligible, through "common sense", which I suppose is a compendium of current widely-held beliefs, or through science. However, I take it that if one wants to understand natural regularities, grasp the mechanisms underlying natural processes, get explanations of natural events, and even identify many of objects of one's observation, the sciences provides the gold standard (and myth and religious doctrine an extremely unreliable standard with common sense falling in between). Having said that, we should immediately qualify it. There are certain kinds of knowledge that the sciences just don't address and yet are relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Perhaps knowing *that there is* a certain myth about a given land mass such as an island might enhance aesthetic appreciation without one's having to believe the myth itself. More generally, there are cultural facts relevant to appreciating some parts of nature that it is appropriate to bring to bear in aesthetically appreciating them. More fundamentally, there is a great deal of *observational knowledge*, such as the appearance of a mountainside in a certain season, at a certain hour, in certain condition of light that has no scientific significance but great aesthetic significance.

What is controversial is how epistemic norms for acquiring knowledge of nature bear on aesthetic judgments about nature. A view known as scientific cognitivism attempts to enlist the epistemic norms just mentioned in formulating further norms for *aesthetic* judgment. A rough statement of scientific cognitivism is that the appropriate or correct way to appreciate nature is to do so by employing scientific categories.³ There is a weak and a strong reading of scientific cognitivism. The above rough statement perhaps

suggests the strong reading: That every appreciative judgment of nature is correct or every appreciative experience of nature is appropriate only if it employs scientific categories. This strong reading is suggested by the use of the expression “the correct or appropriate way” in the rough statement. What could the definite article mean in that statement if not what the strong reading asserts? However, the strong reading is very implausible and seems wide open to counter-examples. I appreciate that tree for its graceful limbs, delicate pastel-green leaves, elegant overall appearance. Unless you implausibly insist that *tree*, *limbs* and *leaves* are scientific categories, this seems like an appropriate appreciative experience of a tree that does not employ scientific categories. I see Mt. Fuji from a passing train and my appreciation is much enhanced by knowing how it has been represented in Japanese painting, described in literary works and its overall significance in the Japanese psyche, but not by knowledge about its geological origins or its current ecology. So a weaker reading might be much more plausible because it is immune to such counter-examples and is still perhaps within the spirit, if not the letter, of the rough statement: for any natural object or environment, *some* aesthetic judgment about that object or environment are correct or some appreciative experiences are appropriate only if they employ scientific categories.

It is very hard if not impossible to give a counter-example to the weak reading because one cannot prove that *no* appreciative experience of a given object would be opened up by bringing *some* scientific category to it. So I shall assume it is correct, and ask, what insights about the aesthetic value of nature does it purchase? Some very strong claims have been made in this regard. I consider three: 1) when we employ scientific categories, our aesthetic judgments about (pristine, inanimate) nature will always be

positive⁴; 2) when we employ scientific concepts in appreciating nature, our aesthetic judgments will always be objective⁵; 3) when we employ scientific concepts, our aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment will be deeper or more significant.⁶ I will argue that none of these claims are true and that the arguments offered for them are inadequate.

Positive Aesthetics

We first take up the doctrine known as positive aesthetics. This is the view that nature, or pristine nature, possesses only positive aesthetic value. Negative aesthetic value judgments about (pristine, inanimate) nature are always incorrect. Part of the justification of positive aesthetics is that when natural objects are viewed through the lens of applicable scientific concepts, they will be seen as having positive aesthetic value. That in itself is a somewhat puzzling claim which we will take up in a moment. However, it's worth pointing out that if only the weak reading of scientific cognitivism is correct, its truth would fall well short of justifying positive aesthetics as a general thesis about the natural environment. This is so because there are host of perfectly correct aesthetic judgments of nature that do not employ scientific categories, and these might well be at times negative.

So let us now restrict the discussion to aesthetic judgments and appreciative experiences that do employ scientific categories or concepts. Would positive aesthetics be more plausible when so restricted? One very common argument for 1 is that when one perceives natural object or environments under scientific categories, one will inevitably perceive unity, balance and harmony in nature. These are all positive aesthetic properties

the perception of which ought to be valued for its own sake. Hence, one will inevitably find natural objects and environments to have positive aesthetic value.⁷

However, this argument is flawed on two distinct grounds. In the first place, even if sound, it establishes too little. It at most shows that one will inevitably find *some* positive aesthetic value in nature. This falls short of showing that all natural objects and environments (or all those found in pristine nature), are aesthetically good *on balance or overall*. This is so because the argument does nothing to show that one won't also find negative aesthetic qualities in natural objects and environments. Positive aesthetics claims that nature, when aesthetically judged using scientific concepts, only, or at least on balance, has positive value and the argument above fails to support this claim.

Second, it ultimately fails to support even the weaker claim that one will inevitably find some positive value in nature because it equivocates on the notions of balance, unity and harmony. In what sense does the perception of nature under scientific concepts guarantee that we will find such properties in nature? I believe the only sense in which it *guarantees* this is a sense that is non-aesthetic. Science allows us to discover order and regularity in nature. Facts that seem disparate and disconnected become unified under laws of nature. However, it must be remembered that terms that sometimes stand for aesthetic properties often also have non-aesthetics senses, and this is the case here. The unity, connectedness, orderliness just mentioned is aesthetically neutral. To see this, it is important to remember that the same laws of nature apply both to pristine nature and nature tainted by human intervention. Consider the balance, unity, and harmony one can find in the lawlike relationship between the release of human, animal and factory waste into a river and the pollution that results. There is a perfect balance between the release of

such products and the levels of pollutants in rivers. There is a wonderful unity in the release of the pollutants and perceptible effects: brown, murky water, pungent odor and so on. These states of affairs are self sustaining as long as the practice continues. However, there is nothing aesthetically good about this relationship. The aesthetic properties that result are negative rather than positive. So are the aesthetic experiences of the polluted river.

Now it may be replied that positive aesthetics is usually thought to apply to pristine nature. A polluted river is hardly an example of that. However, the proponent of positive aesthetics now has to explain what it is about pristine nature that makes scientific order inevitably aesthetically pleasing or at least of positive value. Is it necessarily or only contingently so? Is it really invariably so. A good test case of the latter issue is a rotting maggot filled carcass of an elk, which illustrates both the flaws we have found in the argument for positive aesthetics. Holmes Rolston III claims that when contemplated within its role in an ecosystem, even this sight will have positive aesthetic value.⁸ But first, even if one can find an *aesthetic* harmony in this relationship, that still has to compete with the unpleasant sights, sounds and smells that carcass produces. More important, Rolston does not even establish that there is an aesthetic harmony to be found when viewing the carcass with its ecological role in mind. The fact that the carcass provides nutrients for other creatures does not in itself imply aesthetic value.

There is one further qualification of positive aesthetics that should be considered. This restricts its application not only to pristine nature, but also to inanimate nature. This rules out some of the more obvious counter-examples to positive aesthetics such as rotting carcasses, injured, diseased, or deformed animals or plants. A rationale for this

restriction is that the natural beauty of organic creatures depends on the functional fitness of their parts, and injury, disease, deformity and death, which deprives them of this fitness, also deprives the creatures of much of their positive aesthetic value. But inorganic nature does not have functional parts, and so there is nothing to deprive it of its intrinsic beauty.⁹

This distinction between grounds of aesthetic value in organic and inorganic nature is fair, but the question remains whether it is correct to assume that even pristine, inorganic nature is always of positive aesthetic value overall. Since in the next section, I give an example of an inorganic natural object about which people could legitimately differ over its aesthetic value, I won't pursue the issue further here. If the point made below questioning the objectivity of such judgment about the object is correct, it can also be used to question whether pristine inorganic natural objects are invariably have positive aesthetic value.

Objectivity

There may be other arguments for positive aesthetics when nature is conceptualized through scientific categories, but I want to turn now to the second thesis commonly advanced by scientific cognitivism, viz. that when we employ scientific concepts in appreciating nature, our aesthetic judgments will always be objective. I will argue that in fact scientific cognitivism is neutral between an objectivist, a subjectivist and a expressivist conception of aesthetic judgment. I begin by providing a positive argument for my conclusion. I then look at reasons that have misled scientific cognitivists into believing the contrary.

The core of scientific cognitivism is the claim that, for a subclass of aesthetic judgments about nature, they are correct only if they employ the appropriate scientific categories. One example of this is the aesthetic evaluation of an environment such as a tidal basin. At high tide the basin fills with water and looks quite attractive as landscapes with water tend to do. But at low tide much of the basin is mud-covered and less easy to appreciate. Still appreciation might be possible if one realizes what one is looking at. It is much more likely hopeless if one falsely believed that one was looking at a permanently very muddy beach. It's plausible to claim that there is something wrong, something criticizable about a judgment of ugliness in these circumstances because it is based on a misconception of the object of judgment. One is essentially assigning properties to the object it does not actually have and ignoring others it does have and one is basing one's judgment on this misconception. However notice that this is compatible with just about any meta-aesthetic theory of aesthetic judgment other than an anything-goes approach. It is compatible with sophisticated versions of subjectivism, which agree that there are constraints on appropriate aesthetic judgments, but deny that this will lead to a convergence of judgments. A subjectivist might rule out a class of inappropriate judgments but still claim that aesthetic judgments report the positive or negative aesthetic experiences of appreciators and this allows for appropriate non-converging judgments about aesthetic "properties" of an object or environment and overall aesthetic evaluations of it. An expressivist account of aesthetic judgment can follow the trail blazed by the sophisticated subjectivist. An expressivist claims that we are expressing rather than reporting attitudes about objects. She can admit that some attitudes expressed in aesthetic judgments can be impugned, but might claim that non-converging others are equally

appropriate. So one person, even with full scientific knowledge of tidal basins might view the mudflats that emerge at low tide and try as he might, just find the experience uninspiring. He expresses a negative aesthetic attitude toward the flats. Another, similarly informed may discover patterns of color, or enjoy the sight of clam diggers ankle deep in mud, or, as the cognitivist would especially approve, enjoy the constantly changing but life-sustaining appearance of the basin over the period of a day. For any of these reasons, she expresses a positive attitude toward the mudflats. The two might be a couple who are having an outing and share their different experiences without being able to get the other to change their evaluation.

One might claim that, while overall aesthetic evaluation of the mudflats might diverge, there would be more agreement on specific, lower level aesthetic properties that it possesses among those who share common scientific understanding of the flats. But, why should a common scientific understanding lead to agreement about *aesthetic* properties? Return to our couple who both understand what a tidal basin is, that they are currently seeing one at low tide, what life forms live in the mud, and the role of these in the ecology of the basin. One may still find that the flats are visually dull in color and topography, while the other is stirred by minor variations of these non-aesthetic properties perceived as subtle signs of the life that lies below. What one finds dull the other perceives as stirring.

In the argument just presented, I am not denying that nature possesses objective aesthetic properties or that one member of the couple has a better take than the other on the aesthetics of the tidal basin. Of course, I am not affirming this either. My point has been that, while the scientific cognitivist thesis may show that some aesthetic judgments

are incorrect or faulty, it leaves open which meta-aesthetic account of such judgments should be preferred.

If this argument is correct, what explains the view that pervades scientific cognitivism that it underwrites an objective aesthetics of nature? The answer is: a somewhat one-sided diet on the matter of aesthetic theory, but in addition, a misunderstanding of nutritional elements available with this food. More plainly: From the beginning, the theoretical basis for the view has been an appeal to ideas found in Kendall Walton's excellent "Categories of Art,"¹⁰ and an argument contra Walton that they can be transferred from the domain of art to that of nature. That this is possible was one of the earliest insights of Allen Carlson in developing his version of scientific cognitivism.¹¹ Thus, early on Carlson argues, "to the extent that positions of this general type [i.e., Walton's] underwrite objectivity in art, the objectivity of the aesthetics of nature is similarly underwritten."¹² Carlson does not hesitate to affirm the antecedent of this claim asserting that "Categories of Art" provides a clear understanding of an "essentially objectivist view concerning aesthetic judgments about art."¹³ From this it straightforwardly follows that objectivity of judgments about nature are similarly underwritten.

In "Categories of Art," Walton does assert that there are correct and incorrect aesthetic judgments and that it is sometimes an objective matter which aesthetic properties an artwork possesses. His claims on this score are more nuanced than Carlson's tend to be. For example, Walton points out that it can be indeterminate which of two possible categories a work belongs to and this leaves indeterminate which aesthetic properties it actually possesses. But Walton in this paper, like Carlson, tends to

assume that once we perceive which categories applies to a work, we will get right what aesthetic properties it possesses. “Our judgments of [an artwork] when we perceive it in [the correct categories] are likely to be true...”¹⁴ “If a work’s aesthetic properties are those that are to be found in it when it is perceived correctly....”¹⁵ Notice though how cautious Walton’s claims are in these passages. In the first, he says it is only “likely” that ones judgments will be true when we perceive a work in its correct categories (a claim that, I would argue, is still too strong). That qualification is not found in the second quotation, but what is quoted there is not asserted in its own right, but is part of a conditional.

While Walton (in his careful and qualified way) does assert these things, they are not the main point *argued for* in “Categories of Art.” Objectivity is in fact common ground between Walton and his chief targets in this paper, philosophers like Monroe Beardsley. His main point is expressed by the whole conditional from which I earlier quoted just an antecedent: “If a work’s aesthetic properties are those that are to be found in it when it is perceived correctly, and the correct way to perceive is determined by historical facts about the artist’s intention and/or his society, no examination of the work itself, however thorough, will reveal those properties.”¹⁶ This conditional, and the further claim that the correct way to perceive a work is determined by historical facts such as those just mentioned are the chief claims the “Categories of Art” sets out to establish. A corollary that Walton also argues for is that a miscategorization will tend to mislead. But we have seen that all of these claims are compatible with both an objectivist and a non-objectivist meta-aesthetics. If one wants an *argument* for objectivity, one has to look elsewhere.

I conclude that scientific cognitivism does not entail an objective aesthetics of nature. This is not surprising when one realizes that this view only gives a *necessary* condition for the correctness of a subclass of aesthetic judgments about nature. What is surprising is that it could have been supposed otherwise.

Significance

Finally, let us turn to the claim that when we employ scientific concepts, our aesthetic appreciation will be deeper or more significant than when we do not. Here is an argument in the support of the significance claim.

1. The most significant properties of an object are those that explain the nature of the object or supervene on such properties.
2. The most aesthetically significant properties of an object are those that explain its fundamental aesthetic character or supervene on such properties.
3. Surface or formal properties do not explain an objects fundamental aesthetic character.
4. Scientifically significant properties, or aesthetic properties that supervene on these, do explain this.
5. Aesthetic appreciation of an object is more significant when it is appreciation of aesthetically significant properties of the object.
6. Therefore, our aesthetic appreciation of natural objects is more significant when we employ scientific concepts.¹⁷

Here are qualms about the argument. First, premise 1 seems to be false in virtue of having a false presupposition. The questionable presupposition is there is such a thing as *the* significant properties of an object. Significance is always relative to purpose or context. Suppose we have a large chunk of granite. What are its significant properties?

That depends on the context in which this question is raised. If we want to know what makes it granite, then one set of properties will be significant. If we want to know whether it will be good material for a sculpture, or a good surface in a kitchen or bathroom, or a good decorative material around a fireplace, other properties will be most significant relative to each of these questions. So there is really no such thing as the significant properties of an object. Having said this, we might also note that it's not clear that this argument really needs the first premise. It could just agree to abandon it and start with the second premise.

However, this second premise is also afflicted with problems. For it too has a presupposition – that objects have a fundamental aesthetic character – which also seems to me questionable. But there is another problem in the case of this premise – that even if one grants the presupposition, it still is questionable. Lets take each problem in turn.

Do objects have a fundamental aesthetic character? Perhaps some do. A flower which looks pretty much the same during its entire existence might have such a character. The flower of the night blooming cerius appears in the night and is spent by morning. It has an intense gingery odor, and brilliantly white, large delicate petals. It is an evanescent burst of vivid, delicate beauty. If it has an aesthetic character, that seems to capture it. But what is the aesthetic character of Lake Michigan? It is way too large for any one encounter to reveal, even one that lasts for days and traverses large areas of the lake. The character of aesthetic experience from a particular shoreline is so different from the character of experience far from shore. Its character at one stretch is entirely different from its character at another. And similarly for different seasons, times of day, states of weather. Then there are other large, complex natural objects such as the Grand Canyon

that may have certain important aesthetic properties that are fairly stable. For example the canyon is awesome partly as a result of its vastness whether seen from one of its rims, on the way down to its floor, etc. In this case, scientific knowledge at least enhances this property because, with it, its vastness in width and depth is matched by the vast time it took to form, made visible by the layers of strata for those who can see these in geological terms. But it still doesn't have a single aesthetic character because such steady features as awesomeness or grandeur constitute only an aspect of its character which really does change depending location, season, time of day, state of weather and so on.

So far, I have suggested that a stable aesthetic character is most easily found in small stationary objects. When we are appreciating larger scale entities or environments there is no aesthetic character they have per se, though they may have certain persisting properties that partly constitute the character of virtually any aesthetic experience of the environment. But now let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that this claim is mistaken. Let's suppose that the aesthetic character is captured by those persistent aesthetic properties it has in virtue of being a certain type of environment. The aesthetic character of the Grand Canyon derives from its being a vast, arid canyon created by millions of years of erosion: an awesome, sublime, seemingly bottomless space, with walls consisting of subtly colored layers, and variegated, temple-liked crowns. Making this assumption may settle the issue of aesthetic character by stipulation, but it hardly settles the issue of aesthetic significance. Rather it veils a controversy over what such significance really consists in. On one side of the controversy are those that claim it consists in the appreciation of aesthetic character as just defined. Another side claims that aesthetic significance consists in getting beyond those rather general aesthetic features to

take in its appearance-in-the-moment with as much specificity and detail as possible. This hardly exhausts the options but suffices to indicate that there is no settled view on aesthetic significance. Parallel controversies have often arisen in the history of art. For example in painting, whether landscape and portraiture should attempt to present a kind of ideal type or the impression of the moment in the case of landscape, the peculiar human being in the case of portraiture. While my view is that these are controversies best left unresolved having no right answer, what should be absolutely clear is that it cannot be settled by a stipulated sense of aesthetic character. Hence the second premise is problematic whether we challenge the existence of aesthetic character or not.

Finally, premise 3 is also problematic. Even if we restrict ourselves the stipulated sense of aesthetic character and assume the most aesthetically significant properties reveal this character, at least some of these properties will be formal or surface features. The variegated, temple-like crowns and subtly colored layers of wall, the canyon's dizzying depth are essential parts of that character, but all are features of shape, color or volume, and while they all supervene on the canyons geological properties, no knowledge of these geological properties are needed to perceive these aesthetic features.

A Proposal

I have endorsed weak scientific cognitivism, though not the purported implication of it. Scientific cognitivism is an instance of a more general view that knowledge, or at least true belief, is needed for appropriate aesthetic appreciation or correct aesthetic judgment. If this view is merely saying that some knowledge is required for correct aesthetic judgments about nature, it is true. But what knowledge is required? First, I should have enough knowledge to identify a sufficiently determinate object of judgment.

Suppose I don't know the difference between a beech tree and a birch tree. I judge, of a certain beech: that is a beautiful birch. The judgment is indeed not true in virtue of *that* not being a birch. It is factually incorrect and hence, incorrect. But I can retreat to the claim: that is a beautiful tree, and still have a sufficiently determinate object for this new judgment to be correct, even though it still derives in part from my false belief that that is a birch. However, if I mistake the sky for water, or a stick for a bird, one's appreciation is defective from the start. If I am unwilling to say the sky is beautiful or stick has an intriguing profile, there is no determinate object of aesthetic judgment. Hence, for proper appreciation and correct judgment one must at some level correctly identify the object of appreciation. Second, judgments based on false beliefs about which there is common knowledge about the objects being judged are defective. Today, an aesthetic judgment based on the belief that a whale is a fish would be faulty in this way. Even if I retreated to: that is a beautiful animal, my judgment would be defective if it were derived from the inference: that is a beautiful fish, fish are animals, hence it is a beautiful animal. Finally, and probably most importantly, my judgment needs to be based on true observations. Beyond that various kinds of knowledge – scientific or cultural - may enhance but are not required for appropriate aesthetic appreciation of a given object. Of course, they are required for aesthetic appreciation of the very properties of the object revealed by that knowledge, which is exactly what weak scientific cognitivism claims.

Moral Norms

There is a large literature about the interaction between ethical value and aesthetic value in the arts. The central question asked by this literature is whether the fact that an artwork has an ethically valuable property entails that it has an aesthetically valuable

property. Put another way, do ethically good properties of artworks enhance the aesthetic value of a work and morally bad properties detract from a work's aesthetic value.

Is there a comparable question with regard to nature or the environment? Yes, there is. We do evaluate states and events as good for the environment or bad for the environment and I'll just stipulate that we shall count those evaluations as moral or ethical in nature. We can now ask whether the fact that something is an ethically bad state of nature entails that it is aesthetically bad. Put another way, we can ask whether ethically bad states of nature detract from the aesthetic value of that state of nature and ethically good states of nature enhance the aesthetic value of that state.

If there is any hope to resolve this issue, we need a plausible conception of an ethically bad state of nature. There are certain types of events in nature that we tend to think of as bad: the extinction of a species, reductions in biodiversity, the destruction of ecosystems, and the loss of natural habitat. However, when such events occur through purely natural processes completely apart from human intervention, they are not ethically bad. The mass extinction of the dinosaurs, the reduction in biodiversity caused by ice ages, the destruction of an ecosystem caused by a massive volcanic eruption are regarded, I guess, as nature taking its course, as neither good nor bad. It is only when human behavior are implicated in these events that they are ethically bad occurrences. So let's stipulate that extinction of species, reductions in biodiversity, the destruction of ecosystems, and the loss of natural habitat are bad, other things being equal, when caused, directly or indirectly, by human behavior.

Sometimes such ethically bad events *cause* aesthetically bad conditions. Polluted rivers and urban sprawl are or tend to be ugly. Sometimes, though, invasive species such

as mute swans and purple loosestrife, introduced by human activity, are quite beautiful. Whether knowledge of their effect on the environment, assuming it is a bad one, changes our aesthetic appreciation of them is highly variable. I know of no criteria of sound aesthetic judgment that adjudicates among these differing responses. So I have to conclude, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere¹⁸, that there is no entailment from ethically bad state of nature to aesthetically bad states.

However, there is another way that the ethical has been thought to interact with the aesthetic in the case of the environment, which is not analogous to the literature that concerns the arts. This way begins with the assumption that nature is something that we should respect, and proceeds to ask whether respect for nature dictates that certain ways of aesthetically appreciating nature are inappropriate in virtue of lacking respect, while others are appropriate in virtue of showing respect. I believe that recently this has become the more dominant approach to linking ethics and aesthetics in this area.

Let us begin with the idea that nature deserves respect, and this respect makes some aesthetic judgments inappropriate and others appropriate. I grant that nature deserves respect. We readily condemn the wanton destruction of natural habitats, the disregard exhibited by carelessly littering a beach, much less polluting a river. These are disrespectful but only because they are bad for the environments they effect, and this bad effect is inflicted on nature deliberately or negligently. Nothing comparable is done when we make aesthetic judgments about nature. So we need a story about, or even better an argument for, the claim that some aesthetic judgments exhibit disrespect.

One important idea that has been put forward is that respect requires taking nature “on its own terms”, a thought first put forward by Yuriko Saito. According to Saito, “the

appropriate appreciation of nature... must embody a moral capacity for recognizing and respecting nature as having its own reality apart from our presence, with its own story to tell.”¹⁹ Let us grant that recognizing and respecting nature as having its own reality is at least in part a moral capacity or stance. (It is surely in part a cognitive capacity.) How does this constrain appropriate aesthetic judgment? I suspect it constrains it very little at least given Saito’s handling of the idea. Saito is a pluralist when it comes to legitimate approaches to nature appreciation. She endorses a scientific-cognitivist approach especially one driven by biology, geology and ecology. But she also endorses an approach guided by folklore which offers very different “explanations” of the same phenomena. What both have in common for her is that they attempt to “make sense” of nature in a way that permits a close scrutiny of the “specific characteristics of natural objects.”²⁰ Yet she also ultimately includes pictorial, associationist, and Zen-inspired approaches as providers of appropriate aesthetic appreciation even though she regards them, for a variety of reasons, as less satisfactory. A pictorial approach (in which visually attractive landscapes are appreciated) not only provides the easiest entree to nature appreciation, but picks out a genuine aspect of natural beauty which only becomes problematic when it is our exclusive means of appreciating the natural environment. (All approaches, in my opinion become problematic when they are used to the exclusion of all others.)

The idea of appreciating nature in its own terms would at worst be innocuous, if unhelpful, if it leaves so many approaches in place, but there is also something problematic in Saito’s employment of the idea. When she fleshes out this idea in terms of stories nature has to tell, and when she finds paradigms of such treatment in discovering

“nature’s poems carved in tables of stone” (Muir) and the “song of the river... the speech of the hills” (Leopold), we are very far, it seems to me, from treating nature in its terms but rather in terms of the products of human creative activity. Let me emphasize that the problem here is not in applying human concepts (i.e. concepts humans use) to nature. Human concepts are the only concepts we have and understanding and appreciation proceeds only by their application. The problem arises when nature is regarded as creating things that only humans literally can create. Again this is not problematic in itself but only as exemplars of treating nature in its own terms. If treating nature on the model of human creative activity is treating it in its own terms then it becomes unclear when we fail to so treat it.

Glen Parson’s uses the same concepts – exhibiting respect for nature by treating it in its own terms – more austere and, in virtue of this, as a stronger constraint on acceptable aesthetic judgment.²¹ Unlike Saito, he uses it to criticize a variety of approaches to the aesthetic appreciation of nature and as one argument validating scientific cognitivism. One object of criticism is Penny whose appreciation of the starry night sky is guided by Greek mythology. She imagines that the stars are lovers flung into the sky by fickle gods and that the setting sun is Apollo driving his chariot across the heavens. Penny does not always behave this way, but she is in Greece and thinks such imaginings are especially appropriate in the circumstances. (Here I embellish on Parson’s very minimalist story of Penny.) According to Parson, Penny’s approach to appreciating the night sky fails to take it in its own terms. The stars are not lovers and the sun is not Apollo and his chariot. She thereby fails to show respect for nature and this is an ethical failing that impugns the validity of her aesthetic appreciation. On the other hand, Sam’s

appreciation of the Milky Way as a vast spiral galaxy does take its object in its own terms because the Milky Way is as Sam conceives it. In virtue of taking the Milky Way in its own terms, Sam shows respect for it and, for this reason, his aesthetic appreciation of it does not have the moral failing of Penny's.

I am unconvinced by this assessment of Penny's and Sam's aesthetic judgments, and, in particular, skeptical that Penny's judgment is *morally* defective. I find support for this skepticism in Parson's attempt to specify what treating a thing in its own terms consists in. According to him, taking something in its own terms simply involves recognizing important or central truths characterizing the thing in question: that the Milky Way is a spiral galaxy, for example. But it does not imply any particular behavior toward the thing. "Regarding things on their own terms does not... entail that one adopt any particular course of action with respect to them.... You agree to take ... X in his own terms..., as an honest, trusting but not too bright fellow.... You might decide to con X precisely because of the person he is."²² This gives the game away. Penny's "responsibility" is to know something about the nature of stars and the setting sun. But if that doesn't prescribe any particular behavior, taking these things in their own terms is quite consistent with aesthetically appreciating them based on *imagining* them to be something quite different from what one responsibly believes them to be. Hence, Parson's argument impugning Penny's aesthetic judgment is invalid. Penny may consistently fulfill her "responsibility" and appreciate just as she does. Just as important, the notion of taking a thing in its own terms has been stripped of moral significance. If it entails no particular behavior, it has no moral bite. Penny may be a far better caretaker of the environment than Sam, who, while letting his responsibly formed beliefs guide his

aesthetic judgments is far less careful than Penny about where he drops his litter.

Epistemic responsibility has been substituted for and conflated with moral responsibility in Parson's handling of the concept. So I conclude that the form of respect endorsed by Saito and Parsons – taking things on their own terms – plays no significant role in constraining appropriate aesthetic appreciation.

One might still think that there is something to this idea even if the authors discussed above do not succeed in capturing it adequately. I agree with this, but I'm not convinced that problem is a moral failure of some kind. We saw above that there are weak epistemic norms of nature appreciation. Some failings (when there really is one) that were characterized above as moral may really be epistemic. Other failings such as over-sentimentalizing nature are simply aesthetic ones. I doubt there is a single explanation that unifies all of these.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are weak epistemic norms for the aesthetic appreciation of nature, and these include the truth of the weak reading of scientific cognitivism. However, these norms do not have any of the implications sometimes claimed for them by scientific cognitivists. An interesting question that I have not tried to settle is whether aesthetic judgments enriched by certain kinds of knowledge are better in some way than others that are based on a more limited knowledge of nature. I have argued that it is controversial what kind of knowledge, if any, gets at the most significant aesthetic properties of an object of aesthetic nature appreciation, and expressed doubt whether it is possible or desirable to settle this issue.

On the other hand, I have been unable to find moral norms that constrain the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Perhaps others will be able to discover such constraints.

Notes

1. Allen Carlson has argued that epistemic or cognitive norms constrain aesthetic judgment in many of his writings. See especially, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, 1981, 15-27, and "Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation, and Knowledge," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53, 1995, 393-400. Also see *Aesthetics and the Environment: the Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture*, London: Routledge, 2000 and *Nature and Landscape: an Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Marcia Eaton and Glen Parsons have argued that both epistemic and ethical norms constrain aesthetic judgments of Nature. See Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, Eaton, "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 1998, 149-156, Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature*, London: Continuum, 2008, "Theory, Observation, and the role of Scientific Understanding in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 36, 2006, 165-186. Yuriko Saito also argues that moral norms constrain aesthetic judgments of nature, in "Appreciating Nature on its own Terms," *Environmental Ethics*, 20, 1998, 101-111, reprinted in Carlson and Lintott (eds.), *Nature Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: from Beauty to Duty*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 151-168.

2. Robert Stecker, "The Correct and Appropriate in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 37, 1997, 393-402, and *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 2nd ed., Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, 15-37.
3. This rough statement as well as the more precise strong and weak versions of scientific cognitivism are borrowed from Glen Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science, and Positive Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 42, 2002, 282-3.
4. Allen Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," *Environmental Ethics*, 6, 1984, 5-34. Reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics and Environmentalism*, 205-37. For other critiques of this thesis, see, Malcolm Budd, "The Aesthetics of Nature," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100, 2000, 137-157 and Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science, and Positive Aesthetics."
5. See Carlson, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment and Objectivity."
6. See Glen Parsons, "Freedom and Objectivity in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46, 2006, 17-37 and Parsons and Carlson, "New Formalism and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62, 2004, 363-76.
7. Carlson, *Nature and Positive Aesthetics* 229-30.
8. Holmes Rolston III, "From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics," in *Nature, Aesthetics and Environmentalism*, Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (Eds.), New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 333.
9. This argument is found in Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, 130-36.

10. Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review*, 79, 1970, 334-67,
Reprinted in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, Revised ed., Joseph Margolis (ed.),
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, 88-114.
11. Carlson, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," and *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 54- 71.
12. Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* 55.
13. Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* 54.
14. Walton, "Categories of Art" 103.
15. Walton, "Categories of Art" 108.
16. "Categories of Art" 108-9.
17. Parsons and Carlson, "New Formalism and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature"
369-71.
18. Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 2nd ed, 29-31.
19. Saito, "Appreciating Nature on its own Terms" 163.
20. "Appreciating Nature in its own Terms" 163.
21. Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature*.
22. Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* 31