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X*—FORMAL NATURAL BEAUTY

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ABSTRACT I defend moderate formalism about the aesthetics of nature. I argue that anti-formalists cannot account for the incongruousness of much natural beauty. This shows that some natural beauty is not kind-dependent. I then tackle several anti-formalist arguments that can be found in the writings of Ronald Hepburn, Allen Carlson, and Malcolm Budd.

I

Varieties of *Anti-formalism and the Qua Thesis*. Some things have *dependent beauty*, in Kant's sense.¹ Things that are dependently beautiful have a function, and they have a beauty that expresses or articulates that function. If we are accurately to judge the dependent beauty of a thing, we must subsume it under a category that picks out the function it has. But not all beauty is dependent beauty. Some beauty does not express a function, but depends entirely on how the thing is considered in itself. That beauty is *free* or *formal*.² Dependent beauty is non-formal beauty. Extreme formalism says that all beauty is formal beauty. Anti-formalism says that all beauty is non-formal beauty. Moderate aesthetic formalism says that there is much beauty of both sorts.

In my view, moderate formalism is true of both art and nature. Both art and nature include things that have dependent beauty, and both art and nature include things that have free beauty. I have elsewhere argued this in the case of art.³ But perhaps nature is different?

Allen Carlson is a staunch anti-formalist about the aesthetics of nature. He thinks that we must *always* subsume natural things

1. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), section 16.

2. See my 'Feasible Aesthetic Formalism', *Noûs*, 1999.

3. See 'Feasible Aesthetic Formalism'; 'In Defence of Moderate Aesthetic Formalism', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 2000, and 'Defusing Anti-formalist Arguments', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 2000.

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under correct historical and functional categories if we are to ascribe aesthetic properties to them.⁴ One demanding form that such anti-formalism might take would be to hold that the correct aesthetic appreciation of nature depends on a *scientific* understanding of it. But a less demanding thesis would be merely that we must appreciate natural things as the *kinds* of things they are, where these kinds can be common-sense natural kinds. On the common-sense kind view, we must appreciate things *as* things of their kinds, but we need not have a *scientific* understanding of these kinds. On either view, however, the natural kinds under which things fall fix the categories under which we should perceive them if we are to appreciate their aesthetic properties.⁵

The question we have to consider is: do natural things have their aesthetic properties *qua* the natural kinds they are members of?

We can distinguish weak and strong versions of this 'Qua thesis'. According to the strong version, we must subsume things under either the correct scientific or the correct common-sense natural categories. We must appreciate a natural thing as the *particular kind* of natural thing it is. But all the weak Qua thesis holds is that one need only appreciate a natural thing as *a* natural thing. Malcolm Budd expresses the weak thesis when he writes:

Just as the aesthetic appreciation of art is the aesthetic appreciation of art *as art*, so the aesthetic appreciation of nature is the aesthetic appreciation of nature *as nature*.⁶

Carlson defends the strong thesis. Budd (I think) only endorses the weak thesis. But in my view, *both* theses should be resisted. What is unacceptable about both the weak and strong theses is their generality. However, these theses are not so far from a thesis which I think *is* acceptable. What I think is acceptable is the

4. See his essays, collected in the volume *Aesthetics and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

5. One person who has attacked the scientific thesis is Noel Carroll. He thinks that we can be moved by nature without erudite scientific understanding; see his 'On Being Moved by Nature', in *Landscape, Natural Beauty, and the Arts*, S. Kemal and I. Gaskell (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). I agree with that. But, as Carlson said in reply to Carroll, that leaves in place the common-sense thesis, which I also want to question; see his 'Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation, and Knowledge', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1996.

6. Budd, 'The Aesthetics of Nature', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 2000, p. 138. See also his 'The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1996.

thesis that in *many* cases we must appreciate a thing as the particular natural kind it is. But this is a different matter from a quite general thesis that we must *always* appreciate a thing as art or as nature or as the particular natural kind it is.⁷

Carlson developed his view from a critique of some remarks of Kendall Walton's on the aesthetics of nature in his paper 'Categories of Art'. Walton's general thesis is that aesthetic judgements should be made in the light of some category. But he also thinks that art and nature differ in that there are correct and incorrect categories under which we should think of works of art, whereas this not the case for nature.⁸ Walton thinks that both sorts of aesthetic judgements are *category dependent*, but only aesthetic judgements about nature are *category relative*. So a natural thing can be beautiful relative to C1 and not beautiful relative to C2, where C1 and C2 have equal validity or lack of validity. Like Walton, Carlson *accepts* the *category-dependent* thesis about both judgements about art and nature, but by contrast with Walton, he *rejects* the *category-relative* thesis about the aesthetics of nature. For Carlson holds that there *are* correct categories under which we should perceive natural things.⁹ By contrast with both Walton and Carlson, my view is that we should reject the category-dependent thesis as a quite general thesis about both art and nature. I think Carlson is right to reject Walton's category-relative view of nature. But I think that he should do that without accepting Walton's general category-dependent thesis about aesthetic judgements.

There is something suspicious about the way anti-formalists like Carlson set up the debate. Having been persuaded by Walton's general category-dependence thesis, they accept the conditional that *if* aesthetic judgements about nature were not category-dependent *then* they would have no claim to 'objectivity' or 'correctness'. If this is the fear that is motivating Carlson and others, it is baseless. Aesthetic judgements about nature

7. We can reject Budd's thesis while agreeing with him that it is a mistake to think that we (have to) experience nature as art.

8. Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review*, 1970, p. 355.

9. See his essays 'Appreciation and the Natural Environment' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1979, and 'Nature, Aesthetic Judgement, and Objectivity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1981, both reprinted in his *Aesthetics and the Environment*.

might claim objective correctness despite being category-independent. The trouble is that many of the participants in the debate over natural beauty accept Walton's category-dependent view of aesthetic judgements about *art*. This is, I think, why they accept the conditional I say we should reject. However, according to moderate formalism, many aesthetic judgements about art are not category-dependent.

As a moderate formalist, I *partly* agree with Carlson about *biological* nature. It *sometimes* matters aesthetically what kind of creature we are appreciating, or what part of a creature we are appreciating. If so, we have cases of dependent beauty. But I think that nature also has purposeless beauty. And about *inorganic* or *non-biological* nature, I do not agree at all. Inorganic nature, I say, *only* has formal aesthetic properties. I shall defend these views after considering one preliminary matter.

II

Methodological Reflections. In philosophy, we often argue by appealing to examples, actual or imaginary. In particular, we often appeal to indiscernible counterparts. But those who do so often manage to convince themselves more speedily than their opponents. For their opponents often refuse to agree with the proffered interpretation of the examples. In the aesthetics of nature, I am tempted to offer arguments like the following.

(1) Consider very good quality plastic or silk flowers (and suppose that they have also been augmented with the right fragrance and texture). Do they differ aesthetically from real flowers? I think not. To be sure, part of one's pleasure in flowers is from the thought that they are or were living things. But that might be a nonaesthetic pleasure.

(2) Suppose we find out that the fjords were artificially constructed (just as some lakes are artificial). For a while, after the revelation, wandering around the fjords, one's experience would perhaps be different and perhaps disturbed. But after a while, would it not revert to what it was previously?

(3) For the theist, nature *is* art. (As the hymn goes: 'All things bright and beautiful, the Lord God made them all.') But is the theist's aesthetic experience of nature so different from that of the atheist's? I think not. What if someone loses his faith, or

indeed gains it? Does his aesthetic experience of nature alter (in the long term)? Again, I think not.

Such examples *may* persuade those who are undecided to come over to the formalist camp. But those who have already signed up with anti-formalism are unlikely to be impressed. The examples probably serve only to elucidate *my* intuitions about cases, which are probably infected by my commitment to moderate formalism, whereas I expect that anti-formalists like Carlson will have different intuitions. Such examples of indiscernibles will cut little dialectical ice with those with implacably different intuitions. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of examples is audience-relative. If we can find examples that our audience agrees with, or has a tendency to agree with, then one can use that fact as a dialectical fulcrum to gain some leverage on their more theoretical views. I shall try to put examples that appeal to the waverers, and also to hidden repressed formalist sympathies buried deep in the breasts of those who are publicly and consciously committed to anti-formalism.

III

Qualess Biological Beauty. Let us first consider biological, living things—things that have teleological natures. Since I am a moderate formalist, I leave room for the idea that biological things are beautiful qua the biological kind they are.¹⁰ But I also leave open the possibility that these things also have *qualess* beauty. That is, I think that biological things have aesthetic properties that are *not* dependent on their biological kind.¹¹

An obvious example to think about is that of the whale. Does it make a difference to its beauty that it is a mammal and not a fish? Is a giant shark beautiful in quite a different way from the

10. However, this idea is far from straightforward. In particular, things fall under *many* natural kinds. What determines *which* kind is relevant? Is a leopard beautiful as a leopard *and* as a member of the cat family *and* as a mammal *and* as a land animal *and* as a living thing?

11. The Qua thesis is most plausible if we consider *parts* of a creature. The beauty of a part of a creature is plausibly a beauty which is relative to its function. One may have to know what the part does—that is, we may have to know its function with respect to the whole organism—in order to see, not just its free, formal beauty (if it has any), but also its dependent, non-formal beauty. The part is beautiful as a thing with its function. But *whole organisms*, and the way they move, in my view, often have a free, formal beauty.

way that a whale is beautiful, since it is a fish and not a mammal? I think not. But this is inconsistent with the strong Qua thesis. However, Carlson does not agree with me about whales. Our intuitions clash.¹² So there is a problem making dialectical progress here.

I want to set more store by the following example. Consider the elegant and somewhat dainty beauty of a polar bear swimming under water.¹³ Surely, we need not consider its beauty as the specific type of animal that it is. If so, the strong Qua thesis is wrong.

This example also puts pressure on the weak Qua thesis as well as the strong one. Need one consider the underwater-swimming polar bear as a beautiful *living* thing or a beautiful *natural* thing or just as a beautiful *thing*? I think this last will do. It is a formally extraordinary *phenomenon*. It might even turn out to be an artfully choreographed swimmer dressed in a polar bear suit. No matter. It is still a beautiful *spectacle*. It has a free, formal beauty. Similarly, consider the extraordinary beauty of the way an octopus moves under water. That beauty would remain even if the octopus somehow turned out to be a fish, or a mammal, or even if it were somehow an artifact.

Hence I reject even the weak Qua thesis as a general thesis. We need not judge nature *as* nature in order to ascribe aesthetic properties to it. Carlson may be right that *many* aesthetic properties are only revealed to us once we conceptualize nature in the right way. What I resist is the thought that *we must* conceptualize nature according to its natural kinds in order to appreciate it aesthetically.¹⁴ Nature has formal aesthetic properties as well as dependent aesthetic properties.

Now perhaps Carlson will try to reject what I have just said about underwater polar bears and octopuses, just as he rejects my intuition about whales. So let me draw attention to an aspect

12. Carlson writes: 'The rorqual whale is a graceful and majestic mammal. However, were it perceived as a fish, it would appear lumbering, somewhat oafish, perhaps even a bit clumsy (maybe somewhat like the basking shark)', 'Nature and Positive Aesthetics', *Environmental Ethics*, 1984, p. 25. This paper is reprinted in his *Aesthetics and the Environment*.

13. Some zoos, such as those in Washington D.C. and San Diego, have a glass panel that enables one to see this.

14. I use 'appreciation' to mean 'appropriate appreciation' or 'appreciation of the aesthetic properties that the thing really has'.

of the polar bear example, in order to forestall this intransigent reply.

The striking thing about the beauty of the under-water polar bear is that it comes as a *surprise* in the light of the limited amount that most of us know about these animals. That beauty was the last thing we expected. Our surprise shows that it is *not* a beauty that we took to be dependent in some way upon our grasp of its polar-bearness. We did not find it elegant *as* a polar bear. It has a category-free beauty. The underwater polar bear is a beautiful *thing* in beautiful motion, just as a swimming octopus is a beautiful thing in beautiful motion. The underwater polar bear is surprisingly beautiful in the sense that it has a formal beauty that is surprising given that we know that it is a bear and our limited knowledge of typical bear activities. It does not have the kind of formal beauty that we expect bears to have. Moreover if bears were to have dependent beauty, a beauty that they have *qua* polar bears, then it would surely not be like *this*. For, amazingly enough, the underwater polar bear was *dainty!* Whatever next?: a *dainty polar bear!* Given our background beliefs about polar bears, that is not at all how we would have thought that a polar bear would look under water. We think of its aesthetic character as strong, vigorous, powerful. And if the polar bear were to have aesthetic properties *qua* polar bear, we would expect it to have *those* aesthetic properties or similar ones. Not *daintiness*. In fact, its aesthetic character had nothing to do with its being a polar bear.¹⁵ I cannot see how Carlson can account for this.

There is something important that Carlson and those who follow him have missed in the aesthetics of nature, which is simply that *nature is full of surprises*. In particular, it is full of things that have an *incongruous beauty*. Many natural things have a beauty that seems incongruous to us given what we know of the natural kind categories into which they fall. Sea horses or sea cucumbers are further examples. Their beauty has nothing to do with the natural categories into which they fall, and if anything their beauty preposterously flouts those categories. They are not

15. Suppose there were a creature physiologically like the polar bear—a 'schmolar bear'—which swims under water just like the polar bear but which was also very graceful on land. Is the schmolar bear *less* graceful under water than the polar bear? Surely not.

beautiful *by* flouting those categories. Their beauty gloriously *has nothing to do with them*.

Carlson's Qua thesis cannot give due recognition to the incongruousness of much natural beauty. For Carlson, natural things are to be categorically *tamed*! He thinks that the beauty of natural things is *constrained* by their natural categories. But in fact their natural beauty is often quite at odds with their natural kind categories. The beauty of nature is often categorically anarchic, anomalous. Only moderate formalism can account for this prevalent aspect of the aesthetics of nature.¹⁶

IV

Inorganic Natural Beauty. Extreme formalism about inorganic nature seems obvious to me. Surely, where a natural thing has no purpose, we need only consider what we can immediately perceive, and we need not know about its origin. The beauty of an inorganic natural thing at a time is surely determined just by its narrow nonaesthetic properties at that time. Anything else may be interesting, but it does not (or should not) affect aesthetic appreciation. So it seems natural to think. However, Ronald Hepburn's superb example of a wide expanse of sand and mud creates a difficulty. In 1965, he wrote, famously:

Suppose 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 I bring to bear upon the scene my knowledge that this is a tidal basin, the tide being out. The realization is not aesthetically irrelevant. I see myself now as walking on what is for half the day sea-bed. The wild glad emptiness may be tempered by a disturbing weirdness.¹⁷

Considered as a beach, the stretch of sand and mud seems to have certain aesthetic properties ('wild, glad emptiness'), but considered as the sea-bed of a tidal basin, it seems to have other aesthetic properties ('disturbingly weird'). This example is rather like Walton's *guernicas* example.¹⁸ It is an example of narrow

16. The extraordinary film 'Microcosmos' celebrates the extraordinary and surprising beauty of nature. The snail sex scene is particularly notable.

17. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetic and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *Wonder and Others Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 19.

18. Walton, 'Categories of Art'.

indiscernibles which seem to have different aesthetic properties depending on their broad context. The conclusion is that the aesthetic properties that natural things seem to have are not independent of our beliefs about their history and context. We need to know a natural thing's history and context in order to make an aesthetic judgement about it. Thus the aesthetic properties of inorganic natural things are dependent in part on their history and context as well as their perceivable properties.

In the years following the appearance of Hepburn's example, no one challenged his analysis, and therefore anti-formalism about natural beauty became the default position. I want to dispute Hepburn's anti-formalist analysis. He is obviously on to something interesting in the example. But I think that it is nothing that is incompatible with an extreme formalist analysis.

In Hepburn's example, there is the flat area of sand and mud at the time. Call that 'A'. It has the aesthetic properties it has in virtue of its narrow nonaesthetic properties. But this area can also be considered as part of a wider whole. In this case it is a wider temporal whole in which this area is submerged at a later time. (Note that it is crucial to Hepburn's example that one *imagines* the empty area later submerged, while looking at the expanse of mud and sand.) Call the later submerged area 'B'. We may consider the aesthetic properties of A alone, those of B alone, and also those of A + B. Now it may be that considered in itself, A has certain aesthetic properties (wild, glad emptiness), but that A has other aesthetic properties in the light of the whole, A + B (disturbingly weird). This is like the way that a brief jolly passage sounds strange in a funeral march. Or again, it is like the way a delicate ornament can be out of place in a triumphal arch. Considered in itself, a thing might be jolly or delicate. But as part of a funeral march or triumphal arch it is strange or inappropriate. There is nothing anti-formalist about this phenomenon. Considered as part of a larger whole which has certain aesthetic properties, the part may not have the same aesthetic properties that it has considered in itself. There is no threat to formalism here so long as the thing still retains its own aesthetic properties and these are not annihilated by the wider whole. The stretch of mud and sand does indeed have a wild, glad emptiness considered in itself, but it is *also* disturbingly weird considered as part of a wider whole. It was not a *mistake* to judge

that it had a wild, glad emptiness; that judgement need not be *replaced* by the judgement that it is disturbingly weird. It can be both. One and the same thing can have intrinsic aesthetic properties and relational aesthetic properties.

So Hepburn's example can be dealt with by means of general principles governing the 'organic' combination of the aesthetic properties of parts and wholes. Things can retain their own aesthetic identities despite their contribution to a wider aesthetic whole and despite their aesthetic properties in the light of the wider whole. Hepburn's example can thus be given a satisfactory formalist analysis, which accounts for the peculiar features that tempted us to interpret it anti-formalistically.¹⁹

V

The Frame Problem. The most pressing problem for moderate formalism about natural aesthetics, in my view, is the 'frame problem'.²⁰ The problem is over the *boundaries* of natural things. Works of art are relatively discrete. They are physically bounded. Or else they at least have beginnings and endings. For the most part, it is clear what is part of the work and what is not. (Perhaps there are *some* aspects which are neither clearly part of the work nor clearly not part of it; but many aspects are clearly part of it, or clearly not part of it.) These boundaries are by and large fixed

19. Two other examples in the literature are these. Firstly, Hepburn has the following rock-face example: 'As we look at the rock face in nature, we may realize imaginatively the geological processes and turmoils that produced its pattern. The realizing of these need not be a piece of extra-aesthetic reflection' ('Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', p. 25). *Merely imagining* the geological processes and *really believing* them to have taken place are different. Let us suppose that the latter is required. (The former would have little bearing on our debate.) Then what if the geological theories in question are wrong? Would our experience then be worthless? Surely not. Secondly, Carroll gives the example of the beauty of a thundering waterfall ('On Being Moved by Nature', p. 253). Carroll seems to deny that even a 'common-sense' understanding of the waterfall is necessary. Carlson seems to respond that he thinks that it is ('Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation, and Knowledge', p. 399). The exchange between Carroll and Carlson over this example is somewhat inconclusive. But I think I side with Carroll. Imagine a substance—*Twater*—which is just like water in perceivable respects but which is differently composed. (See Hilary Putnam, 'The Meaning of Meaning', in his *Mind, Language and Reality*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1978.) Does it matter aesthetically whether something is a waterfall or a Twaterfall? Carlson must say 'yes'; but I say 'no', and I think I have intuitive plausibility on my side.

20. Hepburn draws attention to this phenomenon in 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', pp. 13–15.

by the artist's intention. Consider an art gallery with several ordinary paintings displayed. We typically know that we are to consider each work in isolation from the others. In unusual cases, some of them are supposed to form a group, such as triptychs, or Poussin's *Seven Sacraments* in the Edinburgh National Gallery. In these special cases, we are supposed to consider the paintings together. By contrast, with a copse of trees, one is free to consider each tree in isolation, and also the whole aesthetic value of the combination of trees. But apart from rather unusual cases, it would be odd to consider the aesthetic value of a combination of paintings in this way. There is no interesting emergent aesthetic value of a combination of paintings in the way that the aesthetic value of one painting is usually an emergent property of the combination of its parts. But why assess the copse as a unit? Is this not arbitrary? Why not assess the copse of trees plus the lake two hundred yards away? What we select as a unit of evaluation in nature seems arbitrary—unlike our evaluation of art. So it might seem that the idea that nature possesses mind-independent aesthetic properties is rendered dubious.²¹

One reply would be to concede that the frame problem reveals a kind of volatility in the beauty of nature, so that as one modifies the frame, the beauty of the whole which is framed fluctuates wildly.²² This is *possible*, I suppose. But it is not my experience. Of course, conjoining a car park to a copse would be aesthetically bad news. But that is because the car park itself is ugly. (Assume that this is standard British car park; there are attractive car parks elsewhere.) We are adding a beautiful thing to an ugly thing. But if we add some extra daffodils adjacent to the copse, which are in themselves beautiful, or the nearby beautiful lake, then it is likely that the combination—copse plus daffodils or lake—will also be beautiful. This optimism would be reinforced by a weak 'positive aesthetics' thesis, to the effect that nature is by and large beautiful. I do not believe that there are radical fluctuations in beauty as we modify the 'frame' of nature.

21. We should note that by itself the freedom in framing point is clearly quite distinct from the Qua thesis, and provides absolutely no support for it.

22. Let us not overlook the fact that quite ordinary properties, such as mass and colour, also vary as one varies the frame, without that supplying the slightest temptation to think that these properties are mind-dependent.

But what about *substantive* aesthetic properties? Two differently framed natural complexes might be beautiful in virtue of very different substantive aesthetic properties. These surely *do* vary as the frame varies. Many individually *delicate* things might be *magnificently powerful* in concert (such as a hillside covered in flowering gorse).²³ Here I think we must simply accept that nature is *aesthetically complex*. This can be seen to be unproblematic as follows. Suppose we consider a complex whole—for example, copse plus lake plus daffodils (C + L + D). Then we would have no qualms about accepting an internal complexity to this ‘organic’ whole. So C + L might have one substantive aesthetic property while C + D has some other incompatible substantive aesthetic property, while L + D has yet another. All these substantive aesthetic properties can then organically combine to generate a substantive property of the whole. (Of course, internal complexity is usually far greater than this.) But now, if that is acceptable, then it should also be acceptable to consider C + L + D as part of some larger whole, or as a part of an indefinite number of larger wholes. If *internal* aesthetic complexity is unproblematic, then so is this kind of frameless complexity.

Perhaps it is not that the aesthetic of nature is frameless so much as that it is indefinitely framed. Nature *has* the aesthetic properties that it is has in all the frames that there are. Is there somehow some mysterious limit on the *number* of aesthetic properties that nature can have? Aesthetic properties which are relative to a frame can nevertheless be genuine mind-independent features of the world. Frame-dependence is not mind-dependence, for the frames are not mind-dependent. Certain combinations of things exist whether or not we choose to isolate those combinations in our thought. And if those combinations exist, then so do the aesthetic properties they determine. In a sense, nature has contradictory properties, but not in the same place and the same time. That is, one combination of things does not have contradictory properties, but different combinations can do so. There is nothing mysterious about that.

VI

The Magnification Problem. Beauty, in my view, must be manifest to particular modes of sensory perception. It is not

23. See Carlson, ‘Formal Qualities in the Natural Environment’, pp. 109–110, and Hepburn, ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’, pp. 12–13.

independent of sensory experiences. Hence *our* judgements of taste are 'universally valid', but only for all *human* beings, not for all *rational* beings. The beauty that human beings are aware of, I think, has particularly to do with colours, sounds and spatio-temporal appearances as human beings perceive them.²⁴ In this sense, our aesthetic judgements have a peculiarly *human* limitation that moral judgements lack. Morality applies to angels and to other possible life forms and intelligences. But in a sense beauty is relative to kinds of sensory experiences.

Although beauty is relative to the *sensibility* that confronts it, I think that it is not limited by the *human scale*. The enormous and the minute, the large and the tiny, which the telescope and microscope have revealed to us, can both be beautiful so long as those things have colours and sounds (and perhaps other sensory properties) and appear to us to have other spatial and temporal properties.

But perhaps there is a problem here. Malcolm Budd argues that this threatens the idea that nature *has* aesthetic properties independently of us.²⁵ In the case of art, there is a prescribed way of perceiving a work, set by the maker's intentions. But in the case of nature, there is no such control. Budd gives the Blakean example of a grain of sand, and he asks at what level of magnification we should view it. The argument is that it is arbitrary or indeterminate at what level of magnification we should view a grain of sand, and that, if so, what aesthetic properties it has is also arbitrary or indeterminate. So there is here a threat to aesthetic realism about nature. However, I do not think that the magnification problem has the 'relativist' consequences that Budd draws.²⁶

In reply, I think we need a notion of the *total* aesthetic nature of a thing, which is the sum of *all* the aesthetic properties that it possesses. We can view a thing at a number of different levels of magnification. At any particular level, many of its aesthetic properties are revealed. And so long as we can sum the aesthetic properties revealed at all levels, there is no difficulty.

24. See my 'Aesthetic/Sensory Dependence', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1998, and 'Skin Deep or In the Eye of the Beholder?: The Metaphysics of Aesthetic and Sensory Properties', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2000.

25. Budd, 'The Aesthetics of Nature', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 2000, pp. 154–56.

26. The magnification problem may turn out to be a version of the frame problem. But I shall assume not for the sake of argument.

Someone might argue as follows. Suppose that nature possesses an infinite number of levels. And suppose that it is beautiful at the N level but ugly at the $N+1$ level, beautiful at the $N+2$ level, ugly at the $N+3$ level, and so on. If so, it would be indeterminate whether the thing is beautiful

One reply would be to appeal to what is called 'positive aesthetics'. On such a view, we can be confident that there are positive aesthetic properties on all levels or at least on most levels.²⁷ But even if this is true, things might be beautiful in different ways on different levels. That is, there might be conflicting substantive aesthetic properties at different levels. The appeal to positive aesthetics would not solve this problem.

What we said about the frame problem also applies here. It is simply that nature turns out to be enormously complicated and aesthetically varied. We can admit this without compromising the idea that nature *has* aesthetic properties independently of us. A thing might be elegant at a high level of magnification and not elegant at a lower level, just as the top left-hand corner of a painting might be elegant but not delicate while its bottom right-hand corner might be delicate but not elegant. Just move to the top left-hand corner and you will see the elegance, and just move to the bottom right-hand corner and you will see the delicacy. Similarly, look at nature at one magnification and you will see certain aesthetic properties, and look at it at another, and you will see others. It would be arrogant to make the aesthetic properties thus revealed relative to us. It is just that if we place ourselves differently, different aesthetic properties of nature become available to us. It is quite unproblematic that one part of something can have a property that another part lacks. And the same goes for different levels of magnification. For example, things can be differently coloured at different levels of magnification. And something might have a rectilinear design at one level of magnification and a spiral design at another. So even if things do possess conflicting aesthetic substantive properties on different levels, there is no problem is for aesthetic realism.

VII

Active Appreciation. Lastly, and briefly, Carlson has another argument against formalism (derived from Hepburn), which is

27. Carlson, 'Nature and Positive Aesthetics', reprinted in *The Aesthetics of the Environment*.

that our appreciation has an *active* aspect to it. It is not purely contemplative, as he thinks a formalist would require. One is *immersed* in nature, part of it, not distanced from it, as formalism seems to require.²⁸

I agree with this. But I think that Carlson has succumbed to the error which he elegantly diagnoses in the first half of his essay, which is the error of thinking of our appreciation of landscape as we appreciate landscape painting. He calls this the 'landscape cult'. But what possesses aesthetic properties, indeed formal aesthetic properties, are natural *things*, not *views* of natural things. In *this* sense, our aesthetic appreciation of nature is indeed frameless. We do not appreciate landscape as we appreciate a landscape painting, which is as a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional reality. Our movement through and around natural things may help us to wallow in, and fully savour, the many three-dimensional formal properties that natural things possess, independently of us. Being active and immersed in nature might be the best way to appreciate its three-dimensional formal aesthetic properties, just as the best way to appreciate such properties of works of sculpture or architecture might be to walk around such works.

I suspect that Carlson's over-emphasis on *two-dimensional* formal aesthetic properties in his definition of formal properties loads the dice unfairly against formalism about natural beauty.²⁹ Three-dimensional spatial relations between objects can generate formal aesthetic properties. Of course, three-dimensional plastic properties of *paintings* give rise to special problems, given that ways of representing such spatial arrangements are intention-dependent. Nature cannot have such properties. But it can have three-dimensional formal properties, which are best appreciated in an active way.

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In sum, moderate formalism about the aesthetics of nature is not only unproblematic but also attractive. And extreme formalism is plausible about inorganic nature. Anti-formalists want us to

28. Carlson, 'Formal Qualities of the Natural Environment', pp. 109-110; Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', pp. 12-13.

29. See his 'Formal Qualities in the Natural Environment', pp. 99-100.

appreciate nature with the eyes of a *connoisseur*. But I think that childlike wonder is often more appropriate.³⁰

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³⁰ I am grateful for very helpful comments from Allen Carlson, Karen Fearing and Gary Kemp.