

## Evaluating Positive Aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Positive aesthetics (=PA) is the view that all of nature is beautiful. More precisely, it is the idea that nature—to the extent it is not influenced by humans—is specially and predominantly beautiful. John Muir, the naturalist founder of the Sierra Club, was one of the first to embrace the doctrine claiming that “None of nature’s landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild ” (1901, p. 4). Although its roots are in 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic attitudes toward nature, PA appeals to contemporary environmentalists who want to protect wild nature from the human onslaught. If we assume (as is plausible) that human-manipulated environments and constructed objects are not specially and predominantly beautiful, then PA gives us strong aesthetic reasons for protecting nature.

Some of the most prominent figures in environmental ethics and aesthetics have defend PA. Holmes Rolston, III, a founder and leading figure in the field was an early proponent:

The Matterhorn leaves us in awe, but so does the fall foliage on any New England hillside, or the rhododendron on Roan Mountain. Those who linger with nature find this integrity where it is not at first suspected, in the copperhead and the alligator, in the tarantula and the morel, in the wind-stunted banner spruce and the straggly box elder, in the stormy sea and the wintry tundra. . . . This value is often . . . aesthetic and invariably so if we examine a natural entity at the proper level of observation or in terms of its ecological setting. The ordinary rock in microsection is an extraordinary crystal mosaic. The humus from a rotting log supports an exquisite hemlock. . . . Should we say that we find all life beautiful (1986/1979, pp. 44-45)?

Allen Carlson, the leading figure in environmental aesthetics, advocated PA in one form or another for over twenty years (before rejecting it in his latest book). His first formulation was

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<sup>1</sup> I need and want to thank \_\_\_\_\_ for significant help with the ideas in this paper.

this:

The natural environment, in so far as it is untouched by humans, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is graceful, delicate, intense, unified, orderly, not dull, bland, insipid, incoherent, chaotic. All virgin nature in short is essentially aesthetically good. The appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive and negative aesthetic judgments have little or no place” (2000/1984, p. 72).

Gene Hargrove, the founder and editor of the journal *Environmental Ethics*, argues that nature’s purposeless creativity insures that “nature is always beautiful and never ugly” because whatever is created in that way “always brings with it compatible standards of goodness and beauty. Put another way, nature is itself its own standard of goodness and beauty, making ugliness impossible as a product of nature’s own creative activity” (1989, p.184).<sup>2</sup>

The idea that all of nature is beautiful is initially as implausible as is the claim that all art is beautiful. As Stan Godlovitch puts it, “Just as there are rotten violinists, so there must be pathetic creeks; just as there is pulp fiction, so there must be junk species, just as there are forgettable meals, so there must be inconsequential forests” (1998-1).<sup>3</sup> As examples of ugly nature, consider diseased, crippled, or injured animals. Or imagine the aroma of a rotting carcass, the harsh squawk of a grackle, the slimy feel of an eel, or the taste of a rotten tomato. Given the intuitive implausibility of PA, it is not surprising that a number of environmental

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<sup>2</sup> Other environmental philosophers who have embraced PA include Robert Elliot [“I endorse . . . ‘positive aesthetics’; namely, the view that all natural objects have aesthetic value” (1997, p. 61)], Janna Thompson [“The idea that all of nature, above all, wild nature, should be judged to be beautiful is extremely appealing, and not one that I want to dispute” (1995, p. 296)], Glenn Parsons [“the essential and universal beauty of nature is not a dubious idea that we must argue for based on whatever our conception of appropriate aesthetic appreciation happens to be, but rather part of the intuitive data that we use in constructing our theories of appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature” (2002, p. 294)]—though he has more recently rejected the doctrine, and John Fisher (2010), who defends PA for wild animals considered as a member of the species they are.

<sup>3</sup> Godlovitch is not endorsing this claim

aestheticians have rejected the doctrine. Malcolm Budd, for example, argues that

An adherent of the view that a natural thing cannot possess a negative aesthetic quality would need to show that none of the ways in which organisms can be defective instances of their kinds could be manifest in their appearance in such a way as to display a negative aesthetic quality. It does not seem possible to establish this (2002, p.126).

Emily Brady argues that it is “naive and idealistic” to think we can “always eliminate negative aesthetic value” and argues that PA is an “incomplete environmental aesthetics, risking an attitude which ignores the true diversity of characteristics possessed by various

natural environments and animals” and “impoverishes” our experience of them (2010. p. 14).

Marcia Eaton argues that those who claim that “nothing in nature can be ugly. . . go too far” and thinks there are “some obvious examples of ugly natural objects” citing not only deformed animals and plants, but “ugly shells . . . left behind as shellers gather the ones they prefer” after rejecting those that are “unattractive or unappealing”(2005, pp. 47-48). Yuriko Saito also rejects the idea that all of nature is aesthetically appreciable arguing that some natural events are too psychologically disturbing to allow for aesthetic appreciation and that moral concerns should prevent us from appreciating natural events that cause great suffering to humans (1998).

This paper identifies various versions of PA, assess their plausibility, and evaluates the cogency of arguments for them. I set out four conditions for an adequate PA:

- (1) It must accommodate the existence of negative aesthetics in nature,
- (2) It must not apply to the rest of the world, including the artworld and human environments (nature should turn out to be specially beautiful),
- (3) It should depend on the actual contingent characteristics of nature, rather than being stipulated a priori or defended on conceptual or theoretical grounds, and

(4) It must be a doctrine useful for conservation of nature.

I am generally supportive of PA and believe that a holistic, knowledge-infused version along the lines articulated by Holmes Rolston does the best job of meeting these requirements. The idea that nature is specially and predominantly aesthetically positive has a good deal of plausibility.

### **Easy Beauty, Knowledge and PA**

PA is useful in combating a prevalent and harmful tendency in nature appreciation toward “easy beauty.” One example of the lazy preference for easy beauty is the “scenery cult,” a type of nature appreciation that limits itself to “nature’s show pieces”(Saito, 1998) (e.g., the Grand Canyon) and finds “the scenically-challenged” (Saito, 1998) parts of nature (e.g., plains and deserts) boring. In response, advocates of PA argue that such landscapes have a subtle, beauty that can and should be aesthetically appreciated. With Aldo Leopold they point out that “In country, as in people, a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches” (1966/1948, p. 276). The insistence on easy beauty is also manifest in a preference for cute animals like panda bears and a dislike for the more difficult and superficially unattractive species like bats or snakes. Similarly, this insistence on easy beauty leads the appreciator to ignore the subtle aesthetic value in a drab tundra plant in favor of the dramatic beauty of a giant sequoia.

An important argument in favor of PA is that as we learn more about nature or natural items, we find more to appreciate. According to Rolston, beauty in unscenic nature

is not so much *viewed* as *experienced* after one reaches ecologically tutored understanding. It is not so much a matter of sight as of insight into the drama of life. In many of life’s richest aesthetic experiences there is nothing to put on canvas, nothing to take snapshots of (1988, p. 241).

PA is thus typically allied with a cognitive focus in the aesthetics of nature whereby knowledge

of nature can improve our appreciation of it. In the case of nature, knowledge tends to undermine negative aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> It can transform the boring and the ugly into something aesthetically valuable. For example, the monotonous prairie becomes the one time home of thundering herds of bison, and once informed that it is 100 years old and withstands 80 mph winds and 30 degrees below zero winter temperatures, the drab tundra plant becomes a stalwart centurion. Similarly, with the right knowledge, the hideous vampire bat becomes a marvelous sonar flying machine. Knowledge of natural history--supported by imagination and emotion based on such knowledge and integrated into the aesthetic experience--allows for the aesthetic appreciation of natural items that might otherwise seem aesthetically negative or neutral.

Leopold is perhaps the best at integrating knowledge into the aesthetic appreciation of nature:

Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men (1966/1947).

Does knowledge about nature, supplemented by appropriate imaginative and emotional response, do away with all negative aesthetics of nature? Yuriko Saito suggests one way that it might, arguing that there are always scientifically-interesting accounts that can make any natural phenomenon appealing:

I cannot think of any stories of nature that are uninteresting or trivial. . . No matter how seemingly insignificant, uninteresting, or repulsive at first sight, natural history and ecological sciences reveal the marvelous works of every part of nature. . . every part of nature is aesthetically positive for its storytelling power (1998, p.

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<sup>4</sup> This is not true in general about bad art or ugly humanized environments. In these case, it is often true that the more we learn, the more we have reasons for finding these objects aesthetically negative.

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Here I think it helps to distinguish between two types of counter examples to PA in nature: the boring (which can be merely aesthetically neutral) and the ugly (which is positively negative). I'm inclined to accept that knowledge of nature (emotionally and imaginatively integrated with perception) will invariably turn tedious, aesthetically neutral nature into something aesthetically positive, though I'm skeptical that the resulting value will be so positive in all cases that we would marvel at it (as Saito's language suggests).<sup>5</sup>

With ugly nature, however, the addition of an interesting scientific (or other?) story integrated into the perceptual experience does not necessarily do away with (or outweigh) the negative aesthetics involved, although it can.<sup>6</sup> Emily Brady uses the example of a scab on human skin: "The scab is ugly, evidence of a wound, and although part of a healing process with positive value, this doesn't convert the scab itself into something beautiful" (2010, p. 4). Understanding how organisms can repair their wounds and that the scab is an essential part of this healing process is the kind of account that can promote a positive aesthetic response. Whether or not it does in this case is not clear to me. Several things can happen in cases such as this: (1) Conversion of the negative aesthetic quality into a positive one; (2) A weakening of the negative aesthetic quality (for example, perhaps a bog stinks less badly when we understand the smell is of decaying plants returning nutrients to the soil, a recycling process that is essential to healthy ecosystems and flourishing life on earth); (3) Addition of positive aesthetic dimensions

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<sup>5</sup> I do not think an analogous case can be made for the claim that additional information will turn boring artworks or monotonous track housing into aesthetically positive human artifacts. In part this is because we will often discover that inept or morally dubious behaviors underlie the aesthetically negative products of humanity.

<sup>6</sup> My discussion here owes a lot to Emily Brady's (2010) paper "Ugliness and Nature."

that may or may not outweigh the negative dimension that remains. It is not easy to distinguish which of these is taking place.

### **Problematic versions of PA: No Negative Judgment and Equal Beauty**

I now discuss and reject what I consider to be two clearly problematic versions of PA: The “no negative aesthetics judgment thesis” and the “equal beauty thesis.”

According to the no negative judgment thesis, negative aesthetic judgments about nature are not possible. Carlson in his first formulation of PA claims the following: “The appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive and negative aesthetic judgments have little or no place” (2000/1984, p. 72). One important class of negative judgments about nature’s aesthetic value is clearly ruled out, and perhaps this is what Carlson had in mind. As Malcolm Budd puts it, nature “is immune to all the defects to which art is liable in virtue of being the product of intelligent design” (2002, p. 98). Nature can’t be trite, sentimental, crude, derivative, or shoddy—as can artworks or other objects of human design, because nature was not designed. In short, the argument is that because there is no design in nature to critically assess, then no negative aesthetic judgments of nature are possible.

This argument problematically assumes that aesthetic evaluation must assess design. Not only is this claim false—pleasing shapes and colors can be aesthetically appreciated independently of any considerations about their being designed—but it also makes *positive* aesthetic evaluation of nature impossible. Some have argued for this very reason (viz., that nature is not designed) that nature appreciation is not aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> But we can dismiss this view not only because if flies

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Robert Elliot once argued that “an apparently integral part of aesthetic evaluation depends on viewing the aesthetic object as an intentional object, as an artifact, as something that is shaped by the purposes and designs of its author.” On whether responses to nature are aesthetic, he says, “I agree that they are not.”

in the face of the fact that nature appreciation is a paradigm of aesthetic appreciation, but also because it is clearly useless as support for PA for nature. The argument for rejecting negative aesthetic judgment about nature based on its lack of design seems unsupportable.

The “equal beauty thesis” should also be rejected. Differential aesthetic judgments of natural items are commonplace and intuitively plausible. The bright red male cardinal is more attractive than his drab female companion. And a recently-emerged avian species can not compare aesthetically (on at least this dimension) with the ancient lineage represented by the crane. The equal beauty thesis rejects such comparative aesthetic ranking: All of nature is equally aesthetically valuable.

The equal beauty thesis is not conceptually tied to PA, but is nonetheless often associated or conflated with it. For example, in his critique of PA, Malcolm Budd often takes aim at the equal beauty thesis. He builds the equal beauty thesis into what he calls “the most ambitious version of positive aesthetics—that *each individual* natural item, *at each moment of its existence* . . . has roughly equal positive overall aes value” (2002, p. 127). Emily Brady once tied the two: “Because I do not follow positive aesthetics, I believe that some natural and modified environments or objects will be judged to have more value than others. One waterfall is more dramatic than another” (2003, p. 214).

Despite this bringing together of these two theses, most contemporary philosophical defenders of PA accept degrees of natural beauty. In response to Budd’s attack on PA as claiming all natural items have equal positive aesthetic value, Carlson writes, “I am inclined to interpret the doctrine [PA] . . . *not* as attributing *equal* positive aesthetic value to all natural

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(2000/1982, p. 79).

things” (2002, p. 233) and later argues that “Positive aesthetics . . . holds not that all natural things have equal aesthetic value, but only that all have only positive aesthetic value” (2005, p. 112). Rolston claims that, “Like clouds, seashores, and mountains, forests are never ugly, they are only more or less beautiful; the scale runs from zero upward with no negative domain” (1998, p. 164.) And Gene Hargrove argues that “There are degrees of beauty, and that some objects are more beautiful than others, and that the more beautiful objects ought to be given priority for preservation over less beautiful ones” (1989, p. 179).

What reasons might be given for the equal beauty thesis? One argument is that the scientific understanding required for improved aesthetic appreciation of nature will render all of nature equally aesthetically valuable. Carlson once argued that nature appreciation involves an “order appreciation” in contrast to the “design appreciation” of art and this led him to the equal beauty thesis (a thesis he subsequently rejected):

All of nature necessarily reveals the natural order. . . It is present in every case and can be appreciated once our awareness and understanding of the forces that produce it and the story that illuminates it are adequately developed. In this sense, all nature is equally appreciable and therefore selection among all that the natural world offers is not of much ultimate importance. As Arp observes, “in nature a broken twig is equal in beauty and importance to the clouds and the stars (2000/1993, p. 120).

Once you understand scientifically why things in nature are the way they are and grasp their history, function, and interrelationships, everything in nature will appear equal in aesthetic value.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I thank John Fisher for this way of putting the point. In his recent paper “All (Wild) Animals are Beautiful,” Fisher not only defends PA for wild animals considered as a member of the species they are, but also defends the claim that they have equal aesthetic value. Fisher thinks of individual animals as performances of species which are aesthetic masterpieces (like performances of great works of art): As to whether a “Bengal tiger is more beautiful than the saltwater crocodile” he says, “such comparative value claims are misguided for great works of art and should be equally resisted for animal species . . . Each species has its own story with its own unique and

In reply, I argue that scientific stories can be more or less interesting and that there are more or less exciting areas of science. For example, Pluto's story is limited to physics, astronomy, and geology, while Earth's story not only includes biology in addition, but its geology is much more fascinating. Earth's scientific story thus has greater aesthetic value than does Pluto's. Similarly learning that horseshoe crabs have been swimming the oceans for 300 million years is a natural history with aesthetic power beyond that of the scientific account of the origin of more ordinary crabs. Again, some plants have capacities that are much more aesthetically stimulating than others: Consider a tree species that sends off chemical signals when under stress. Furthermore, as John Fisher has pointed out, even if the aesthetic values based on science turn out to be of equal, there are other bases for judgments about the aesthetic value of natural objects—such as formal ones—that are not likely to be equal.

Another argument for equal beauty is the idea that grading natural objects is not compatible with respect for them and that aesthetically ranking natural items is somehow unseemly, like ranking God's creations or one's children. When Holmes Rolston (2008) suggests that the Rocky Mountain West is wilder and more aesthetically special than the East (an "awesome" landscape that is "elk country" in contrast to the "charming" East with its mere deer), many might cringe. Precluding degrees of natural aesthetic value can be seen as part of a laudatory, non-judgmental attitude toward nature. Stan Godlovitch worries that once we allow differential aesthetic evaluations of nature we will end up with negative evaluations of nature, e.g., "pathetic creeks" and "junk species" (1998-1, p. 121) and thus have given up on PA.

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marvelous solution to the problem of ecological survival." This argument for equal beauty is limited in its scope, applying only to animals (or possibly all living individuals) regarded in a certain sort of way.

But it is just not true that thinking the Rocky Mountains are aesthetically preferable (all things considered) to the Appalachians will make us unable to positively appreciate the latter. I think the music of the Beatles is superior to that of the Lovin Spoonful, but I still judge the latter to be aesthetically positive. Differential judgments of aesthetic merit are no more inappropriate and incompatible with respect than is grading students on their class work. Equal beauty in nature is also simply improbable: Budd, for example, credibly argues that given the tremendous diversity of natural items (clouds, seashells, gusts of wind, birdsongs, snake skins, etc.) and the variety of scales on which we can focus, that “it would be remarkable if everything in nature, no matter how nature is cut at the joints, were to have a roughly equal positive overall aesthetic value” (2002, p.127).

A final argument for equal beauty is that acceptance of degrees of natural beauty has bad consequences for environmental policy, namely, that it will undermine protection of less beautiful nature. Areas of “outstanding natural beauty” (e.g., Devils Tower, Wyoming) will get protected, while plainer areas will be destroyed,<sup>9</sup> and charismatic megafauna will be saved while the creepy crawlies are left to extinction. Godlovitch argues

If Positive Aesthetics accepts the notion of ‘degrees of beauty,’ . . . the *effect* of such discrimination is tantamount to the denial that things all have positive value . . . Because, as far as protection goes, to declare something to be the least value is tantamount to saying it is the least worth saving. Where not all can be saved—and that is the practical reality--that which is the least worth saving is indistinguishable, for all intents and purposes, from that which is not worth saving (1998-2, p.195).

But all that follows from degrees of natural beauty is that things of lower aesthetic value are not

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<sup>9</sup> In his attack on wilderness, William Cronon (1996) makes the related (false) claim that if we specially value highly wild nature (The Arctic Refuge, the Amazon rainforest), this will result in failing to adequately value and protect local, less wild, nature.

as worth saving (on aesthetic grounds) as things of greater aesthetic value, and that they should not be saved when saving them involves sacrificing natural items of greater aesthetic value.

Natural items of lower aesthetic value may well be worth saving (on aesthetic grounds) when the opportunity costs are not so high. Additionally, the way to respond to the practical worry that once we allow degrees of natural beauty, the less beautiful parts of nature will get left out of consideration is not to deny that there are differential amounts of beauty in nature, but to advocate PA and to educate people about the beauties in all natural items, including the less beautiful ones. Far from being a hindrance to environmental preservation, if aesthetics is going to play a significant role in conservation, differential judgments of natural aesthetic value are required. If all of nature is equally beautiful, because we can't or at least won't save it all, aesthetics can offer no help in determining what nature is to be preserved or restored.<sup>10</sup>

### **Two Types of PA: Holistic and Individualistic**

It is useful to distinguish between individualistic and holistic versions of PA.

Individualistic versions claim that each natural property or each natural thing is aesthetically positive. Individualistic PA has been embraced by Hargrove, Carlson, and Parsons. Holistic versions claim that nature as a whole is aesthetically positive (perhaps including species, ecosystems or other natural kinds such as landscapes), while allowing that some individuals may not be. This type of PA is held by Rolston. I now consider versions of each type of PA.

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<sup>10</sup> John Fisher, in his recent paper "All (Wild) Animals are Beautiful," not only defends PA for wild animals considered as a member of the species they are, but also defends the claim that they have equal aesthetic value. Fisher thinks of individual animals as performances of species which are aesthetic masterpieces (like performances of great works of art): As to whether a "Bengal tiger is more beautiful than the saltwater crocodile" he says, "such comparative value claims are misguided for great works of art and should be equally resisted for animal species . . . Each species has its own story with its own unique and marvelous solution to the problem of ecological survival." This argument for equal beauty is limited in its scope, applying only to animals (or possibly all living individuals) regarded in a certain sort of way.

## Hargrove's Individualism

The most comprehensive version of PA embraced in the literature is Gene Hargrove's individualistic version, Hargrove denies the presence of negative aesthetic qualities in nature entirely.<sup>11</sup> He writes, "According to positive aesthetics, nature, to the degree that it is natural (that is, unaffected by human beings), is beautiful and has no negative aesthetic qualities" (1989, p. 177). His argument for "why nature is always beautiful and never ugly" (1989, p. 184) also entails the lack of negative aesthetic qualities in nature. Because "nature's indifferent creativity . . . always brings with it compatible standards of goodness and beauty. . . Nature is itself its own standard of goodness and beauty, making ugliness impossible as a product of nature's own creative activity" (1989, p. 184).<sup>12</sup>

I believe Hargrove's view is too strong. Plausible examples of ugly nature are too numerous and too diverse for all of nature to be invariably aesthetically positive in every detail. As I argued above, knowledge supplemented with emotion and imagination can perhaps always turn aesthetically neutral (viz., boring) nature into something aesthetically positive, but it is unlikely to have such success with nature that is *prima facie* aesthetically negative. Some natural items (or dimensions of natural items) are brutal, clumsy, chaotic, dangerous, disgusting, destructive, grotesque, merciless, painful, putrid, spoiled, or terrifying. Emily Brady (2010)

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<sup>11</sup> There are stronger version of PA conceivable. For example, consider the "perfect beauty thesis," which holds that nature is maximally aesthetically valuable. As far as I know, no one has held this position and some have explicitly denied it, including Rolston and Carlson. Here is Carlson's rejection: "For all we know, the natural world also could have been different, could have been aesthetically better than it is. In fact, that it could have been seems very likely" (2000/1984, p. 80).

<sup>12</sup> See Parsons and Carlson (2008, p. 131) for a useful criticism of this argument. It is not entirely clear, however, that Hargrove intends his arguments to establish the truth of PA. He sometimes suggest that instead of providing "a proof" of PA, he is simply trying to show that an "argument appropriately grounded in our Western traditions can be formulated" (1989, p. 200) in defense of PA.

mentions slimy textures, rotting stench, and bizarre sounds. It does not seem likely that the negative aesthetics of an open wound oozing pus could be entirely eliminated by the addition of knowledge or contextualization or anything else. For many, diseased, damaged, and malformed animals are the clearest cases of ugly nature. Rolston conveys the ugliness of diseased animals with this example: "Once as a college youth I killed an opossum that seemed sluggish and then did an autopsy. He was infested with a hundred worms! Grisly and pitiful, he seemed a sign of the whole wilderness, . . . too alien to value" (1986, p.128-29, quoted in Carlson 2007, p. 107).

Rolston also powerfully expresses the idea that seeing only beauty in animals is Pollyannaish:

The critic will complain against admirers of wildlife that they overlook as much as they see. The bison are shaggy, shedding, and dirty. That hawk has lost several flight feathers; that marmot is diseased and scarred. The elk look like the tag end of a rough winter. A half dozen juvenile eagles starve for every one that reaches maturity. Every wild life is marred by the rips and tears of time and eventually destroyed by them (1987, p. 192).

The implausibility of the claim that nature has no negative aesthetic qualities becomes even clearer when one considers the variety of ways one can aesthetically attend to nature. If one believes (as I do) that nature appreciation, unlike much art appreciation, is multi-sensory, then one must also must confront the negative smells, tastes, or feels some natural items. Consider the smell of a rotting carcass of an elk, or worse, the taste. Perhaps strong instinctive reactions of disgust are not aesthetic because they do not allow sustained attention to the perceptual object, but then we can simply focus on somewhat less extreme sensations (Brady, 2010. p. 7). Living in the South and escaping to Montana every summer as the weather becomes hot, sticky, and buggy, I feel like I am an authority on the negative aesthetics of weather. I take the feel of a summer day in Montana with the wind on your face and the sun on your back as a paradigm of

positive aesthetic appreciation of nature. The hot, sticky, buggy weather of the American south in the summer surely is an encounter with negative aesthetic qualities.

### **Parsons' On-Balance Individualism and the Beauty-Making Argument**

Perhaps a somewhat weaker version of individualistic PA is more defensible. PA would be too weak however if it simply claimed that there is some aesthetic good in any natural thing. For as Budd points out the “claim that every natural item has some aesthetically valuable quality or qualities” is “a claim that would appear to be almost as plausible for artefacts as for nature” (2002, p. 98). In addition to failing to distinguish PA for nature from the aesthetics of anything else, this view is compatible with all natural items having negative aesthetic qualities, even ones that outweigh their positive qualities. Stronger individualistic versions of PA have been embraced by Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson. Their views exemplify what I call “on-balance individualism.” These versions of PA allow for the existence of negative aesthetic qualities but claim that any natural object will also have positive aesthetic qualities whose value is greater, insuring that the natural object is aesthetically positive on balance.<sup>13</sup> In an early paper defending PA, Glenn Parsons describes the view this way: “I take positive aesthetics to be, roughly, the claim that any natural object, appropriately aesthetically appreciated, is on balance aesthetically good” (2002, p. 288).

Parsons provides an ingenious argument for this view, suggesting that *appropriate* aesthetic appreciation of natural objects maximizes their beauty. He advocates adopting a “beauty-making” criterion that has us choosing categories for appreciating natural objects that

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<sup>13</sup> To work out the details of on-balance individualism, we would need an account of how to individuate natural objects.

“maximize their aesthetic merit” (2002, p. 295). His main rationale for this beauty making criterion is that it avoids the potential problem of conflicting aesthetic qualities of natural objects and the resultant problem of indeterminacy of aesthetic value of natural items. There are multiple categories and perspectives with which to view any natural item (even if we limit these to scientifically-correct categories, as does Parsons) and the aesthetic qualities and judgments resulting from these different categorizations and perspectives may conflict. As Budd puts it: “A natural item cannot be deemed to possess a particular set of aesthetic properties, but will possess contrasting sets for at least some of the categories of which it is a member.” (2002, p. 124). This is a worry for PA (and the aesthetics of nature more generally) because it suggests there can be no single answer to questions about what is the aesthetic value of nature (or a natural item), nor what aesthetic qualities it possesses.

Parsons uses the example of a Venus fly-trap whose jaw-like features appear grotesque (he suggests) when appreciated as a plant, but not when we categorize and appreciate it more specifically as a carnivorous plant (2002, p. 288). So is the Venus fly trap grotesque or not? Parsons’ beauty making criterion lets him solve this problem of multiple, potentially conflicting aesthetic qualities and value of natural objects. Appropriate aesthetic appreciation of an object would have us “view the object under the scientific categories in which it truly belongs and which maximize the aesthetic appeal of the object” (2002, p. 292). Because the jaw-like features of a Venus fly trap look grotesque when conceived of as a plant, we should instead conceive it as a carnivorous plant. It should be noted that Parsons is not recommending that we choose mistaken ways of conceiving of nature in order to maximize its aesthetic value, but rather that we choose between otherwise correct categories and deem the category that maximizes the object’s

aesthetic value as the category required for *appropriate* aesthetic appreciation.

Thus Parsons builds PA into the theory of what counts as appropriate appreciation of nature. “The essential and universal beauty of nature” (i.e., PA), is no longer a “dubious,” “shaky,” and “implausible empirical hypothesis” but “part of the intuitive data that we use in constructing our theories of appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature” (2002, p. 294). “A realization of the deep beauty of nature is not where we need to end up in our theorizing, but the place where we should begin” (2002, p. 295). Parson notes that this argument does not guarantee the truth of PA, for “it may be that despite this particular beauty-making criterion, there are yet natural objects that cannot be construed as aesthetically positive” (2002, p. 295). Perhaps any way of appreciating certain natural objects using scientifically correct categories will result in a negative (overall) aesthetic appraisal of those objects, although this does not seem likely.

Parsons’ innovative argument for PA raises a host of concerns. While beauty maximization is a frequently mentioned and sometimes used theory for art interpretation, it is, in my mind, a highly problematic one. Consider a movie that has superlative special effects, but its acting and story line leave much to be desired. The beauty-making categorization would have us aesthetically appreciate and evaluate it as a “movie with excellent special effects,” rather than as a “movie with poor acting and a weak story line.” Such an evaluation is not just partial, but inadequate, not to say biased. Similarly, the beauty-making criterion applied to nature would also lead to inappropriate appreciation. Our goal for the aesthetic appreciation of nature should not just be to maximize our “aesthetic kicks” from natural objects, but to appreciate them in a rationally justified way. We should not ignore important information or categorizations of

natural objects simply because they lower aesthetic value. For example, if we learn that Old Faithful eruptions have become highly erratic, we should not ignore this fact simply because it decreases our aesthetic assessment of the geyser. Similarly, our positive appreciation of wolves in Yellowstone might be diminished when we learn that their return has decreased the coyote population by fifty percent. But if our goal is appropriate appreciation of wolves, we should not refuse to categorize them as “coyote killers” and insist on thinking of them solely in positive ways. It is unreasonable to focus only on positive aesthetic characterizations rather than to attempt to integrate them with the negative.

Furthermore, a plausible argument for using a beauty-making criterion in art interpretation is lacking in nature interpretation. If we don’t know the intentions of the artist, then a principle of charity suggests that we interpret the artwork in a way that makes it as aesthetically rich as possible, for we can assume the artist was trying to maximize the aesthetic value of the artwork created. Of course, this argument makes no sense in nature appreciation.

Perhaps the strongest reason for rejecting Parsons’ beauty-making defense for PA is its implications for environmental policy. By stipulating the truth of PA as he does, Parsons undermines natural beauty’s role in conservation. County commissioners wondering about the aesthetic value of a natural area will balk at the idea that we must think of it in a way that maximizes its aesthetic value when other correct ways to appreciate it give it lower or negative value. Developers and anti-environmentalists will justifiably claim bias: Why not require that appropriate appreciation of natural areas conceive of them in ways that minimizes their aesthetic value so they can be more easily exploited? From the policy perspective, a beauty maximization criterion is no more justified than a beauty minimization or ugliness maximization requirement.

If we are trying to decide whether or not the community should publicly fund a new art genre, it would be preposterous to suggest we conceive of it only in those ways that maximize its aesthetic merit and overlook those ways of thinking about the genre that are critical of it. So too is the suggestion that in deciding whether natural areas are worth preserving appropriate assessment must choose the most positive perspective.

### **Carlson's On-Balance Individualism and the Science is Aesthetic Argument**

Allen Carlson has also embraced an on-balance individualistic version of PA. Here is a relatively recent formulation: "What seems to me undeniably true . . . each natural thing, at many, if not almost all, levels and conditions of observation, has substantial positive aesthetic value and little, if any, negative aesthetic value" (2007, pp. 122-23). Carlson's on-balance individualism is stronger than Parsons' because of his insistence that the balance of positive over negative value be "substantial" (whereas on Parson's formulation, it could be minimal).

The argument that Carlson has used for 20 years to defend PA is his "science is aesthetic argument."<sup>14</sup> Carlson is well-known for embracing "scientific cognitivism" about nature appreciation. This is the view that appropriate appreciation of nature must be informed by science or natural history (just as appropriate appreciation of art must be informed by art history). Carlson argues that science uses aesthetic criteria, claiming that "a significant consideration in the creation and selection of scientific descriptions is whether or not they make the natural world appear aesthetically better . . . more unified, orderly, or harmonious" (2002, p. 229). Therefore, scientifically informed appreciation of nature will find it aesthetically positive. As he puts it,

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that even before giving up on PA, Carlson began to suggest ambivalence about the success of this scientific cognitivist justification for positive aesthetic: "Is this general line of thought adequate to justify positive aesthetics? I remain undecided" (2007, p. 115).

“Science reads its values into nature; in describing the facts, it does so in such a way that positive aesthetic values are necessarily present” (2007, p. 115). In short, if nature is scientifically intelligible, it is positively aesthetically appreciable.

There are a number of problems with this argument but the most significant is that it is an a priori (or conceptual) argument, virtually guaranteeing the truth of PA whatever the empirical nature of our world. PA can be thought of as an a priori thesis or an empirical one. Verifying or falsifying the a priori versions of PA does not require actual experience of the natural world, nor a knowledge of the particulars of natural history more generally. The empirical versions, on the other hand, depend on such experience and knowledge. Carlson’s argument is significant a priori because as long as nature is such that science can render it intelligible, it will have positive aesthetic value. On Carlson’s account, the truth of PA is independent of nature’s actual characteristics. The existence of sunsets, mountains, rivers, forests, flora, and fauna are not relevant to Carlson’s PA. Carlson’s argument would work just as well for a lifeless, colorless, and geologically inert nature.<sup>15</sup>

I contend that arguments for PA should be empirical in nature. The contingent characteristics of our world should matter to the truth of PA. Nature’s significantly positive aesthetic value is special in part because it need not have been so: Nature could have been relatively boring, significantly chaotic, and generally unappealing. For example, the

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<sup>15</sup> Gene Hargrove (2002) had criticized Carlson in a somewhat related vein. He argues that Carlson’s argument makes science (and scientists) the source of nature’s beauty, rather than nature being the source of its beauty. He writes, “I am troubled by Carlson’s claim that the creativity involved in the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects is in the human activity producing aesthetic categories, not in the activity that produced the natural objects themselves. The problem is that the appreciation is not primarily directed at the appreciation of the natural objects, but rather at the appreciation of the scientists-artists who invent the categories that render the objects ‘masterpieces’” (2002, p. 217). “Positive aesthetics should not be justified in such a way that the beauty and creativity of the natural is reduced to something that is merely attributed to nature ” (2002, p. 223).

insect/flower co-evolution could have produced putrid smells rather than the delightful aromas of our world. Arguments for PA that ignore the impressive beauty of our world and guarantee that any intelligible world is aesthetically positive fail to do justice to the intuitions and motivations that underlie the thought that our natural world is specially and predominantly beautiful. Note that this criticism applies as well to Parsons's beauty-making argument of PA. PA is an empirical thesis to be supported inductively by descriptions and evaluations of the natural world (as in Rolston's work) rather than by conceptual arguments about the nature of science (as with Carlson) or theoretical considerations about the nature of appropriate aesthetic appreciation (as with Parsons).

### **Parsons/Carlson on Functional Beauty and PA**

In their recent book on functional beauty, Parsons and Carlson (2008) explicitly reject PA applied to all of pristine nature. They argue that natural beauty comes from appreciating the fitness for function of natural things, both living and nonliving. We can appreciate the selected fitness for function of a cheetah whose thin powerful legs and narrow shoulders show that it is built for speed and also the causal role function of mud and water which make wetlands fit to function as wildlife habitat, pollution filters, and a flood buffers. But on the functional account of natural beauty, because organic nature can malfunction, living things can be aesthetically negative: "Damaged, diseased, and malformed organisms are aesthetically displeasing in virtue of their apparent unfitness for function. Thus, ugliness in nature seems to arise when damage or some kind of insult causes an object to appear dysfunctional" (2008, p. 133). In contrast, although they argue for functions of inorganic nature, they do not believe that inorganic nature can appear dysfunctional. For when the causal powers of an inorganic system are absent, "so is

the causal role function” of the system and thus the system is not “malfunctioning” (for it no longer has a function that it is failing to perform). They give the following example:

Consider a rock formation that acts to divert a river, directing it onto a plain and so functioning as an irrigator for that plain. We would not call a collapse of the rock formation, due to erosion, that rendered it unable to divert the river a ‘malfunction’ of the rock. . . the rock’s functionality was wholly a matter of its occurrent causal powers and once eroded, it seems wrong to say that it has a function that it cannot fulfil; rather, it has no function at all (2008, p. 135).

This is in contrast to a broken bird’s wing, which continues to have its function even when it can no longer carry it out. They conclude that although “the counter-examples of damaged, diseased, and malformed living things show that Positive Aesthetics does not hold as a general thesis about the natural world,” their explanations about the impossibility of malfunctioning of nonliving nature “shows that Positive Aesthetics does capture something true about the natural beauty of inorganic things” (2008, p. 136).

While this argument is ingenious and perhaps does show that we can’t find inorganic nature aesthetically displeasing in virtue of it malfunctioning, there may well be other reasons for finding inorganic nature aesthetically negative.<sup>16</sup> If a lake once functioned as flourishing fish habitat but it is now sterile due to toxic runoff from a volcanic blast, even if our aesthetic displeasure is not based on the lake “malfunctioning,” it might well be appropriately based on its failure to perform a function it once had. We might appropriately judge a slow moving, silt clogged creek as pathetic, given that in its former glory it flowed rapidly, transporting sediments and oxygenating the water for aquatic organisms. If we can be aesthetically pleased by the instrumental value of an abiotic entity and that entity loses this value and hence its ability to

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<sup>16</sup> Do Parsons and Carlson think they have shown that the only type of natural ugliness that exists is ugliness due to malfunctioning?

deliver aesthetic pleasure based on that value, then given our (legitimate) expectations for that entity, it might now justifiably provoke aesthetic displeasure. Other examples of potentially aesthetically negative inorganic nature include, a once spectacular natural arch that has mostly crumbled, Eaton's "unattractive shells on the beach," and Brady's example of "deformity in rocks (particularly crystals)" understood "in terms of irregularities or malformation" (2010, p. 16).

### **Rolston's Natural Aesthetic Holism**

Rolston's aesthetic holism claims that nature as a whole is beautiful and that this beauty is substantial. Nature, he often says, is "a wonderland." For some natural kinds, each instance of them is aesthetically positive:

"Landscapes always supply beauty, never ugliness. They should unfailingly generate in us favorable experiences if we are suitably perceptive. Anyone who says that a desert, or the tundra, or a volcanic eruption is ugly is making a false statement and behaving inappropriately" (1987, p. 237).

He also claims that grasslands, cliffs, canyons, cascades, and rivers "are never ugly" (1987, p. 237) And he explicitly contrasts this PA for nature with art: "it would seem implausible to say of human works of art that they are never badly done, yet here the positive thesis claims that virgin landscapes are always (more or less) well formed aesthetically" (1987, p. 237).

Unlike individualist versions of PA, Rolston "does not deny that some items in nature are ugly when viewed from certain perspectives" (1987, p. 237) and he wants to avoid what he calls "programmatically nature romanticism." His holism allows for "itemized individual ugliness in nature" (1987, 240), though it insists that nature more generally is aesthetically positive. Nature's individual ugly events should be seen "as anomalies challenging the general paradigm

that nature's landscapes almost without fail have an essential beauty" (1987, p. 243). And when individual ugly items are appreciated contextually, as they should be, their ugliness typically diminishes.

Further Rolston argues for "systemic beauty" (1987, p. 241), the idea that nature has a tendency toward beauty that turns ugliness into beauty. He writes:

Virgin nature is not at every concrete locus aesthetically good: consider a crippled fish that has escaped an alligator. Those who are not programmatic nature romantics will admit this and go on to recover what beauty they can. But ugliness, though present at times in particulars, is not the last word. . . regenerative forces are already present. . . nature will bring beauty out of this ugliness . . . this tendency is already present and aesthetically stimulating now. . . when the point event, which is intrinsically ugly, is stretched out instrumentally in the process, the ugliness mellows—though it does not disappear—and makes its contribution to systemic beauty and to beauty in later-coming individuals. . . There is ugliness, but even more, there are transformative forces that sweep toward beauty . . . disorder and corruption are the prelude to creation, and in this perpetual re-creation there is high beauty. Nature's beauty can be costly and tragic, yet nature is a scene of beauty ever reasserting itself in the face of destruction ( 1987, p. 240-41).

Note that the argument here for systemic beauty and Rolston's articulation and defense of PA generally involve empirical claims about how the natural world on our planet in fact operates. In contrast with Hargrove's, Parsons' and Carlson's defenses of PA, Rolston provides an account of natural history that defends PA through a rich description of the actual character of the natural world. This is tremendous virtue of his view.

Is Rolston's empirical claim about nature's systemic beauty true? I've come to be quite sympathetic to the claim that our nature (on earth?) really does have a tendency toward beauty. One argument for this grows out of Parsons and Carlson's suggestion that ugliness in nature is due to "damaged, diseased, or malformed" living creatures. For there is a clear struggle in nature

against this type of ugliness. Damage to living things (e.g., a wound or broken limb) tends to be resisted, repaired, or regenerated. Organisms fight disease and sickness and strive to heal themselves. Predation, a fundamental feature of nature, also works against this type of ugliness in nature: Predators tend to cull the sick and crippled prey, while the healthy, strong, and well-formed escape. More generally, natural selection, works against ugliness in nature, at least in the Parsons/Carlson sense of editing out malfunctioning organisms. One might even argue that geologically the earth has a beauty heading. Earth builds mountains and an earth with mountains is aesthetically superior to one that is flat. Earth has a continuing water cycle which generates rivers, lakes, waterfalls, snow, and thunderstorms, and these too add significantly to the beauty of the planet.

There have been several criticisms of Rolston's defense of PA. Malcolm Budd accuses Rolston of committing the fallacy of division, arguing that "The idea that each ecosystem (or other natural system) has a positive overall aesthetic value implies nothing about the aesthetic values of the natural items it contains considered in themselves—in particular, that these are always positive" (2002, p. 106). This mistakenly assumes that Rolston is trying to defend the positive aesthetic value of each individual natural item. But Rolston's defense of PA is holistic, and he repeatedly states that there is individual ugliness in nature. Appreciating individual ugliness in its systemic context can "mellow" the individual ugliness and it may become "less ugly than before," but it does not necessarily "disappear."

Yuriko Saito alleges that Rolston's insistence that we appreciate individual ugly events in their context results in the unappealing conclusion that "the only legitimate object for our aesthetic experience of nature is the global ecosphere" (1998, p. 104). Rolston does say that:

“Every item must be seen not in framed isolation but framed by its environment, and this frame in turn becomes part of the bigger picture we have to appreciate—not a ‘frame’ but a dramatic play” (1987, p. 239). Defending his claim that ugliness can be “transformed in ecosystemic perspective” he writes:

If hikers come upon the rotting carcass of an elk, full of maggots, they find it revolting. . . Any landscape looked at in detail is as filled with dying as with flourishing things. Everything is in some degree marred and ragged—a tree with broken limbs, a crushed wildflower, an insect-eaten leaf. An eagle chick plagued with ticks is not a pretty thing. Sometimes there are disfigured, even monstrous animals. So why is this not ugliness in the landscape? It is! . . . If we enlarge our scope. . . we get further categories for interpretation. The rotting elk returns to the humus, its nutrients recycled; the maggots become flies, which become food for the birds; natural selection results in a better-adapted elk for the next generation. The monstrous mutants, unless by luck better fitted for some new niche, are edited out of the system, and the system continues to track new environments by casting forth further mutants. . . . The momentary ugliness is only a still shot in an ongoing motion picture. . . The clash of values, pulled into symbiosis, is not an ugly but a beautiful thing. The world is not a jolly place, not a Walt Disney world, but one of struggling, somber beauty. The dying is the shadow side of the flourishing (1987, p. 239).

Here Rolston is rightly insisting on the importance of context in aesthetic appreciation. Just as an appropriate appreciation of a part of an artwork requires that we appreciate its role in the entire work, so too an appropriate appreciation of natural items requires that we consider them in light of their role in the system of which they are a part.<sup>17</sup> Rolston’s holism is not only aesthetic, but ontological as well. For example, he often claims that a tiger is what it is in its ecosystem; it is not the same tiger when transported to the moon or put it in a cage. One does not successfully preserve tigers by ensuring an ongoing population in a zoo. The aesthetic appreciation of a tiger should be cognizant of its context, just as the aesthetic appreciation of “individualized ugliness in

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<sup>17</sup> Budd makes this point (2002, p. 106).

nature” needs awareness of the roles that the ugly natural item plays in the larger natural systems of which it is a part. Insisting on contextualization of the aesthetic appreciation of a natural item is not the same as changing the subject of appreciation to the system that provides the context.

## **Conclusion**

PA is a provocative thesis worthy of serious consideration. While initially unlikely, it becomes more plausible once one understands the role of knowledge in nature appreciation. A knowledge-based PA is useful in combating the insistence on the easy beauty of the scenery cult and other narrow sorts of nature appreciation. PA is a thesis that comes in a variety of forms. Implausible versions include the rejection of negative aesthetic judgments about nature, the belief in equal beauty of all nature, and the claim that nature has no negative aesthetic qualities. The idea that each natural thing has overall positive aesthetic value on balance is challenged by the existence of diseased, damaged, and malformed living things. I also find problematic the claim that there are no negative aesthetics in inorganic nature. Carlson’s science is aesthetic and Parsons’ beauty making arguments for PA fail because they ignore the actual contingent beauty of our world and this makes the versions of PA they support irrelevant for conservation. Holmes Rolston’s version of PA is by far the most persuasive of any developed in the literature. Better than any other, it meets the conditions I set out at the beginning for a successful articulation of PA for nature: (1) It accommodates the existence of negative aesthetics in nature (better than any other version of PA we have considered); (2) It does not apply to the rest of the world (including art), (3) It is an empirical thesis, defended on empirical grounds, and dependent on the actual contingent characteristics of nature, and (4) It is a doctrine useful for conservation of nature. A holistic version of PA along the lines of Rolston’s is the best we can do to support the idea that

nature—to the extent it is not influenced by humans—is specially and predominantly beautiful.

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