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Three Problems for the Aesthetic Foundations of Environmental Ethics[1]

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Abstract: *This essay takes a critical look at aesthetics as the basis for nature preservation, presenting three reasons why we should not rely on aesthetic foundations to justify the environmentalist program. First, a comparison to other kinds of aesthetic value shows that the aesthetic value of nature can provide weak reasons for action at best. Second, not everything environmentalists want to protect has positive aesthetic qualities. Attempts have been made to get around this problem by developing a reformist attitude towards natural aesthetics. I argue that these approaches fail. Third, development can be as aesthetically positive as nature. If it is simply beauty we are looking for, why can't the beauty of a well-constructed dam or a magnificent skyscraper suffice?*

Aesthetic considerations clearly have played a major role in the rhetoric of environmentalism, from 19th century landscape painting to contemporary Sierra Club calendars. Aesthetic considerations have also played a big role in the psychological motivations of environmentalists, both famous and rank and file. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* tells us a great deal about the role of aesthetics in environmental rhetoric and psychology. It does this first of all by being an influential environmentalist book that owes its influence to its beauty and its ability to convey the beauty of nature both majestic and ordinary. More importantly, Leopold is often explicit about the fact that aesthetics is a big part of his motive for adopting his environmental ethic, and he claims that it is crucial for other people and the environmental ethic they adopt. In "Conservation Esthetic," for instance, he describes the codes of sportsmanship promulgated by hunters and notes, "It is clear, though, that these economic and ethical manifestations are results, not causes of the motive force. We seek contacts with nature because we derive pleasure from them" (Leopold 1949, 167–168).

Given the prominence of aesthetic considerations in environmental rhetoric and psychology, it is natural to ask what actual justificatory power such considerations have. This line of investigation is further motivated by the fact that many philosophers have suggested that the value of nature is primarily aesthetic (e.g. Sober 1986). The most important example of this view is Eugene Hargrove's

Foundations of Environmental Ethics (1989). In this book Hargrove argues that aesthetic considerations justify an environmental ethic and the existence of the environmentalist movement, where the former is the ethical imperative to preserve natural species, habitats, and objects, and the latter is the political movement, active since the 19th century, to promote an environmental ethic. A couple of features obscure the fact that Hargrove's aim is essentially justificatory. The first is that Hargrove's thesis is in part a claim about the historical roots of the environmental movement. Thus he writes, "The ultimate historical foundations of nature preservation are aesthetic in a broad context that encompasses the value perspectives of nineteenth-century naturalists, painters, and poets" (ibid, 168). Hargrove tells a detailed story about the origins of contemporary environmental attitudes in the interaction between 19th century romantic poets, landscape painters, and artistically minded natural historians. Hargrove's strictly historical story, however, leads him to a philosophical argument, the "ontological argument for the preservation of nature" (ibid, 191). The ontological argument follows G.E. Moore in asserting that the actual existence of objects with positive aesthetic qualities is valuable apart from those objects being experienced. It is then argued that we have a duty to preserve the existence of positive aesthetic qualities in nature that is akin to our duty to preserve works of art with positive aesthetic qualities. This argument is intended to be more than a historical reconstruction of our actual motivations for preserving nature. It is a philosophical argument designed to justify such motivations. The argument's philosophical nature can be seen in the fact that it is defended against various objections, such as the claim that it is impossible to carry out in practice (*Ibid*, 199).

The other factor that clouds the justificatory nature of Hargrove's enterprise is his pragmatic, pluralist attitude toward ethical foundations. He admits that a day may come when better foundations for environmental ethics are discovered (*Ibid*, 10–11). He also asserts that ethical foundations do not form a coherent system of rules that can be rigorously applied in ethical decision making, but rather consist of isolated rules used to sharpen our sensibilities in ethical education (1985; 1989, 6). However, even if other justifications for environmental ethics may exist in the future, Hargrove offers no indication that satisfactory nonaesthetic justifications exist now. Furthermore, whether our rules are applied directly as a coherent system of decision making or are used to sharpen our ethical sensibilities in moral education, they ought to be justified, in the sense that they are supported by good reasons. In the end, Hargrove's position is straightforward: aesthetic arguments for environmentalism are not just rhetorician's tricks or quirks of the psychology of environmentalists. They are the best reasons we have right now for embracing an environmental ethic.

In this essay, I will argue that aesthetic considerations do not have this kind of justificatory force. My primary target will be Hargrove, because his is the most developed aesthetic foundation for environmental ethics. However, most of my arguments will apply to anyone who advances a program like Hargrove's. In what follows I will take my definitions of key concepts from Hargrove. By an environmental ethic I mean a *preservationist* ethic, not merely a conservationist one. The goal of environmentalism is to leave much of nature in its original state or to restore it to that state. I will also follow Hargrove in assuming that environmentalism is a (somewhat) unified movement, which began with folks like John Muir and continues today with issues like the struggle over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I will not attempt to define an environmental ethic more concretely than this, but will instead rely on examples of things environmentalists have demanded or done, assuming that these are representative of what an environmental ethic demands. I will use the terms 'foundation' and 'justification' more or less interchangeably. I assume that the job of a foundation of environmental ethics is to provide a good justification—one that uses the kind of arguments that are likely to lead to truth—for the kinds of demands that environmentalists have made over the years.

I will argue that aesthetics are not sufficient to ground an ethic of the preservation of nature. My assumption will be that this shows we should find other justifications for environmentalism. These justifications could either be a supplement or a replacement for aesthetic foundations; however, if I am right, aesthetic considerations could only play a limited role in the foundations of environmental ethics. The other arguments will do most of the heavy lifting. One can, of course, draw a very different conclusion from the arguments of this paper. If aesthetic considerations play a big role in the rhetoric of environmentalism and psychology of environmentalists, but have no real justificatory force, then the environmentalist program should be abandoned. Nothing I say will rule this out. Those who take this option may also want to challenge the assumption that there is one environmentalist program. Perhaps the failure of aesthetic foundations will not lead to the demise of environmentalism, but a change in environmentalism.

In what follows I will suggest three problems for the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics, which I will label the superficiality problem, the range of habitat problem, and the technology-is-beautiful

problem.

The Superficiality Problem

The problem of superficiality asserts that aesthetic considerations involving nature are weak and cannot motivate the kind of substantial measures environmentalists routinely recommend.[2] Environmentalists routinely ask people to sacrifice their jobs and economic well-being for the environment. Environmental concerns motivate intrusive regulations of many industries. If aesthetic considerations were the only thing at stake, all this would be unjustified. The way to gauge the strength of aesthetic considerations regarding nature is by analogy to the strength of other kinds of aesthetic considerations. Whether you think that there is one thing called "aesthetic value" or that aesthetic values form a family of related properties, we should expect them all to lead to similar levels of ethical duties, *ceteris paribus*.

The standard way to motivate duties to preserve positive aesthetic qualities in nature is by analogy to our duty to preserve positive aesthetic qualities in art. The duties generated by positive aesthetic qualities in nature can be seen in a different light if we compare them to another kind of aesthetic consideration: the duty to protect and preserve positive aesthetic characteristics in humans. We respond to the positive aesthetic characteristics of other humans, particularly physical beauty, at least as strongly as we respond to the positive aesthetic characteristics of nature. Even if a face never really launched a thousand ships, comely faces are often implicated as the cause of many fistfights. Moreover, there is good reason to think that our judgments of positive aesthetic characteristics of humans, like our judgments of positive aesthetic characteristics in landscapes, are likely to have an evolutionary basis. Advocates of prospect-refuge theory (Appleton 1975) argue that our instincts about beautiful landscapes are shaped in part by the sort of landscapes that afforded our hominid ancestors both good shelter and a view of approaching predators and prey. Advocates of evolutionary psychology present evidence that some of our sense of what makes a face attractive is based on features that indicated good health in the potential mates of our hominid ancestors. On the other hand, there is no plausible case to be made that our sense of positive aesthetic qualities in art is so hardwired, except when it draws on either positive aesthetic qualities in humans or in nature.

Nevertheless, the duties generated by human positive aesthetic qualities are weak at best. To keep the analogy straight, I will not look at the things we do to maintain our own beauty, which are associated with disreputable traits like vanity, and focus on duties that might be generated by the beauty of others. This will give us a better analogue to the duties to protect and preserve natural places and objects that we do not own.[3]

The contrast between positive aesthetic qualities in humans and in nature comes when we consider the behavior that they are thought to license. In Western society we do act to preserve positive aesthetic qualities in humans, in that we shower many rewards on people—models, movie stars—who are beautiful or who make themselves beautiful. But our attitude here is exactly reversed from our attitude toward beauty in nature. We quite willingly spend money in adoration of the Tom Cruises of the world, but (hopefully) feel a little ashamed of it, thinking it a little silly and a waste of resources. On the other hand, people have to be compelled to preserve the beauty of nature, and when they do so we call it a virtue. So if we model the duties generated by positive aesthetic qualities in nature off of duties generated by positive aesthetic qualities in humans, we will have to change what we do. Seen in this light, environmental organizations are like clubs devoted to promoting the careers of models other people find unattractive. A worthwhile goal, I suppose, but not the sort of thing that would justify intrusive government regulation of the fashion industry. In general, we do not let human physical beauty play a role in important decision making. If a doctor had to choose between giving one of two patients a heart, she could not justify her decision by saying that one of the patients was more beautiful than the other (or more sublime, or more in possession of any other positive aesthetic characteristic). A doctor certainly couldn't let aesthetic characteristics outweigh nonaesthetic characteristics, like the likelihood of survival past five years. But if a doctor cannot make a decision regarding who gets a heart based on aesthetics, how can environmentalists ask thousands of loggers to give up their jobs and way of life on the basis of aesthetics?

If the positive aesthetic qualities of nature are analogous to the positive aesthetic qualities of humans, and environmentalists are motivated by aesthetic concerns, then most environmentalists would be superficial, and some would be genuinely psychotic. Consider the activist Julia Butterfly Hill, who spent two years in a redwood to keep it from being cut down and to protest the clearing of the surrounding forest.[4] She put her life in serious jeopardy, exposing herself to cold, storms, and lightning strikes, not to mention harassment from employees of Pacific Lumber. If one were to try to come up with someone who went to similar lengths over human physical beauty, one would

have to think of a kind of stalker. Consider a man who sees a woman on the subway, becomes fixated on her, and spends two years outside her apartment window. Suppose further that he believes he is doing this for the benefit of the person he is stalking: perhaps he is saving her from imagined dangers, or perhaps he simply thinks she would be happier if she were with him. Now we would certainly condemn such a person because he invaded his victim's privacy. We also condemn him for not consulting with the person he is trying to protect, but simply forcing his actions on her. These are certainly the stalker's biggest crimes. But there is something else askew about him, besides these violations of someone's rights. His priorities are just weird. You should devote your energies to people you know more deeply than by sight. But if in the case of human physical beauty, we consider someone spending two years outside an apartment window to be psychotic, then, if we regard Hill's motivations as purely aesthetic, we would regard her too as psychotic. Therefore, if we want to view Hill's actions as noble, she must be motivated by more than mere aesthetics. (This is in fact the case. Hill uses a variety of arguments to justify her protest, both anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric.)

There are several objections that might be made at this point. First, one might protest that the proper analogy for Hill's protest would not be to someone who spends two years stalking a woman he sees on the subway, but to someone who enters into a two-year relationship with someone he met on the subway. Certainly this better captures the relationship Hill developed with Luna, the tree she sat in. (When asked if she had a boyfriend, she replied, "Who needs a boyfriend? I have a tree" [Hill 2000, 231].) But this change only reinforces my point. Here I am trying to separate aesthetic reasons for valuing nature from other reasons for valuing it. Aesthetics, as Allen Carlson points out, "is the area of philosophy that concerns our appreciation of things as they affect our senses" (2000, xvii). A relationship is deeper than mere aesthetic appreciation. If we want to find the analogue to the purely aesthetic appreciation of nature, we would have to look to the purely aesthetic appreciation of humans, and this will be something like the acquaintance one has with someone when one knows them purely by sensory qualities. While a romantic relationship may be a more accurate model of the actual relationship Hill had with Luna, a stalker is a more accurate model of Hill had she been motivated by purely aesthetic concerns. The fact that actual activists have deeper motivations than stalkers only shows the inadequacy of the aesthetic model.

A deeper objection might claim that we only object to overvaluing the aesthetic qualities of humans because it obscures the deeper value that humans have (their Kantian worth as rational agents, the achievements they worked hard for and value about themselves, etc.). When we accuse someone obsessed with the beauty of humans of being superficial, we do so because she is failing to recognize these more important values. While I grant that human physical beauty can obscure other sorts of worth, I think there are more problems with overvaluing it than this. The problem with Tom Cruise being overpaid is not that we are failing to appreciate the real Tom Cruise. The problem is that no one should be paid millions of dollars for looking good, when hundreds of millions go malnourished every year worldwide.

One might object, third, that overemphasis on the physical beauty of humans is only superficial if you only value certain humans.[5] We regard someone who places an inordinately high value on small-waisted and large-breasted humans as superficial, but someone who highly values the appearance of all humans equally might be deeper. This is important because often those who endorse the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics also tend to endorse so-called positive aesthetics, which assert that all natural objects are beautiful because they are natural. Hargrove endorses a weak form of this thesis.[6] But if the correct analogue of the aesthetic attitude toward nature is the belief that all humans are equally beautiful, then one cannot accuse the person who tries to motivate the preservation of nature on aesthetic grounds of being superficial.

The problem with this objection is that simply viewing all humans as equally beautiful is not enough to avoid the charge of superficiality. One might be seen as more open minded, but one is still focused on properties that we consider less important. Certainly we feel as though those who merely appreciate someone for their physical appearance have a superficial appreciation of that person, even if they have a similar appreciation for everyone else. Indeed, it could be that those who are most enamored of appearances do find a wider range of humans attractive. Plato's description of the lover of boys is often quoted because it rings true: "Or isn't that the way you people behave to fine and beautiful boys? You praise a snub-nosed one as cute, a hook-nosed one you say is regal, one in between is well proportioned, dark ones look manly, and pale ones are children of the gods" (*Republic* 474e).[7] But despite the amorous person's ability to excuse any body type, we still find him essentially superficial.

If we compare positive aesthetic qualities in nature to positive aesthetic qualities in humans, the duties generated do not seem so strong. But what about the more typical comparison, duties to positive

aesthetic qualities in art? This is certainly the comparison that Hargrove relies on. To make this defense work, however, one must argue that of all the kinds of aesthetic objections in the world, art objects are the best analogy for aspects of nature with positive aesthetic qualities, and no such argument has been given. Further, it is not even clear that should such an argument be given, the analogy to duties to art objects would demonstrate strong duties to nature. It is true that the positive aesthetic qualities of art do demand sacrifices, but do they really demand the level of sacrifice that environmentalists ask us to give for the environment? Environmentalists are currently asking oil companies to forgo drilling in the "1002" area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) for the sake of preserving a pristine ecosystem. This is a potential loss of between 4.3 and 11.8 billion barrels of oil and the accompanying profits (USGS 1998).[8] Prodrilling partisans, using an estimate of 10 billion barrels of technically recoverable oil and a price of $22 a barrel, have estimated that drilling would bring a peak of $800 million dollars a year to the state of Alaska (The McDowell Group 2002).[9] By contrast, the total budget for the National Endowment for the Arts in the year 2002 was $115 million (Weinberg 2002). Admittedly, any dollar analysis is crude, and the numbers I have provided were merely those that were closest to hand, but I think they provide a flavor of the scale of the ethical imperatives that are being placed on people.

Advocates of aesthetic foundations typically rely on some account of the metaphysics of aesthetic properties to account for the duties generated by them. They might, inspired perhaps by Plato, insist that The Beautiful is close to The Good or identical with The Good, that once we understand what beauty really is, our drive toward beautiful things will be channeled into a drive to what is truly good; that the positive aesthetic qualities we are discussing here are not things like mere beauty, but things like sublimity, which must entail real duty. Such accounts of the duties generated by aesthetic properties face a dilemma, however. Accounts that manage to show that aesthetic properties generate strong duties must ask us to radically reform our ordinary notions of aesthetic properties. Plato is a prime example of this: his form of beauty winds up being quite far from anything his audience would have recognized as beautiful, had they not followed Plato down his dialectical path. This kind of radically reforming program in aesthetics is not helpful to environmental ethics, though, because it essentially creates more obstacles for the public acceptance of the environmentalist program, rather than providing a strong justification. Without the reforming metaphysics, however, the duties generated by aesthetic properties remain superficial. Thus a dilemma for the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics: either adopt a difficult to swallow account of the metaphysics of aesthetics and have strong duties, or adopt a more standard metaphysic and have weak duties.

Hargrove's account of the roots of aesthetics attempts to follow the first path and offer a reforming account of the metaphysics of natural positive aesthetic qualities. He also runs into the same problem that others on that horn of the dilemma do: he must convince us of his unusual metaphysic. Hargrove argues that natural objects have positive aesthetic qualities because they are the product of a creativity that does not proceed according to a plan or a creative imagination. The processes that created natural objects proceeded blindly.[10] As a result "their existence precedes their essence" (1989, 184). This is what puts the "ontological" in the ontological argument. This also means that the positive aesthetic qualities of natural objects are bound up in their existence in a way that is not true for artificial objects. In sections entitled "The Superiority of Natural Beauty" and "The Ontological Argument for the Preservation of Nature," Hargrove argues that this tie leads to stronger duties to positive aesthetic qualities in nature than in artificial objects. With artificial objects there is a plan that preexists the object, and that plan can be the bearer of aesthetic qualities, to the extent that it can even substitute for the existence of the actual object. "Sketches for a work of art that was never finished can serve as an adequate source for the beauty that would have been in the original. Such is not the case, however, with natural beauty" (ibid, 193). With natural objects, aesthetic properties must be discovered by investigating the actual object. Thus it is more important that we hang on to the actual object than it is with artificial objects.

As an account of the nature of positive aesthetic qualities in nature, this is not very appealing, largely because it fails to draw a real contrast with positive aesthetic qualities in art. First of all, not all art is produced according to a plan. Beat poetry, the free jazz of Ornette Coleman, and John Cage's aleatoric pieces (pieces that incorporate chance processes) all attempt to minimize the amount of planning that goes into the work. Moreover, these art forms are not always attempts to undermine existing conceptions of art, but grow out of existing traditions.[11] Coleman's free jazz was a natural extension of existing rules of jazz improvisation. Up to that point, jazz had been improvised within a regimented harmonic structure, which presented worthy challenges to knowledgeable and agile players like Monk and Coltrane. By eliminating the harmonic regimentation, Coleman gave

license to the expressive, pure improvisatory aspect of jazz. It was a bold move, certainly, but not an attempt to undermine Western norms of art.[12] Similar remarks can be made about the beat poets: by his own admission, Allen Ginsberg's early work looks in retrospect more like an extension of Walt Whitman's project than something bold and new.

Second, it is not at all clear to me that preliminary sketches are even remotely a substitute for the actual work. Hargrove's example here is a work of Christo, *Valley Curtain*. Hargrove notes that most people only know the work through architectural plans for it shown at a gallery. Hargrove claims that the appreciation of these plans does not depend on the knowledge that they were actually carried through. Perhaps this is an irreconcilable clash of intuitions, but my appreciation of Christo's work is completely dependent on the knowledge that these gigantic projects were actually carried through, and I'm certain that seeing the plans is no substitute for seeing the actual projects. He actually wraps up these enormous buildings! That's impressive. If my intuitions are anywhere close to the main, then Hargrove's argument fails. Existence is just as important for artificial objects as it is for natural objects.

One might object, finally, that in all these arguments I am focusing on extreme members of the environmental community, thus making the strength required of aesthetic considerations too strong. One might think, for instance, that Hill is in fact as crazy as a subway stalker and that aesthetic foundations are perfectly adequate for the sane members of the environmental movement. One could add that Hill's tree sit was in part supported by Earth First!, whose extreme version of nonanthropocentrism is not something the foundations of environmental ethics needs to justify. In reply I would note that Hill distances herself from Earth First! (2000, 85) and second, that the example of ANWR shows that throughout the environmental community individuals are being asked to sacrifice their interests to a degree that would be ludicrous if the goal were simply aesthetic value.

The Range of Habitat Problem

The range of habitat problem runs like this: if we are to preserve nature because it has positive aesthetic qualities, then it seems as though we should only preserve a limited range of landscapes—those that we find positive aesthetic qualities in. Thus we have a strong duty to protect the Grand Canyon, but a weaker duty to protect less attractive areas. However, the typical environmentalist does want to protect the less attractive areas. The issue is pressing: it is frequently noted in the debate over developing the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that the refuge is not a particularly inviting place.[13] Similar issues come up with the preservation of species. *Prima facie*, it seems as though the believer in the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics can only support the preservation of charismatic megafauna. Elephants and Bengal tigers are safe, but the snail darter can go. Thus it appears that the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics will not justify the protection of the full range of entities environmentalists are currently fighting to protect.

There are three basic lines of reply, none of which work in the end. The first two both work by expanding our notion of what has positive aesthetic qualities. The first, more moderate reply is to establish some standard of objectivity in aesthetic judgments of nature and then argue that the seemingly unattractive species and landscapes are actually full of positive aesthetic value. Almost every major environmental figure since the 19th century has spent some time arguing that some ordinarily disdained aspect of nature is actually beautiful. Prominent examples include Muir (1894, ch. 4) and Leopold (1949, pt. 1 ch. 4). Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986) is, in part, an attempt to do this for the barren arctic landscape one finds in the 1002 region of ANWR. A more rigorous extension of this tradition would begin by establishing a standard of taste. One could say, for instance, with Allen Carlson (2000) that proper aesthetic appreciation of nature requires a scientific background. Appreciating a landscape involves understanding its ecology and geology. Appreciating an animal involves understanding its biology. Once one establishes an objective standard of taste, one can then argue that traditionally underappreciated landscapes and species are actually full of positive aesthetic qualities and deserve protection.

The problem with this approach is that there is no guarantee that a scientifically informed aesthetic will lead us to preserve the range of habitats and species environmentalists want to preserve. A lot depends here on the way in which scientific knowledge is supposed to affect our aesthetic judgments. One might say that scientific knowledge is important because it reveals harmony and balance. Carlson thinks this is what Holmes Rolston (1975, 101) has in mind when he talks about how ecological science can reveal values in nature. But if we do this, we will be stuck whenever we find our scientific work revealing discord and disequilibrium. This is a very real possibility. Indeed, the trend in ecology right now is to emphasize the instability of natural processes.[14] Suppose science revealed that ANWR is a chaotic, unbalanced place. Suppose, as is perfectly likely, that the size of the Porcupine River caribou herd (which breeds in the 1002 region) varies dramatically, even when

undisturbed. Would we then say that ANWR really lacks positive aesthetic qualities and therefore is not worth saving? It doesn't seem that we should make our judgments about what to preserve hostage to such contingencies.

One might say, with Carlson, that the purpose of scientific knowledge is to provide the kind of background that knowledge of art history provides for the judgment of art. For Carlson, this is a matter of finding the right categories under which to judge something. Carlson compares judging the beauty of van Gogh's *The Starry Night* with judging the beauty of a rorqual whale. To judge the beauty of *The Starry Night* one must know that it is postimpressionist. As a postimpressionist painting it is "vibrant and dynamic" (2000, 88). If, on the other hand, one thought of it as a German expressionist painting, it would appear "more serene, somewhat subdued, even a bit dull" (ibid). Similarly, to judge the beauty of the rorqual whale, one must know that it is a mammal. As a mammal, it is "graceful and majestic." If one were to mistake it for a fish, it would appear "lumbering, somewhat oafish, perhaps even a bit clumsy" (ibid, 89). (One might add that if one regarded the whale as a bird, it would appear bizarre and freakish.) The idea that natural objects should be viewed in light of some equivalent of genres does wonders for the appreciation of places like ANWR. Criticizing ANWR for being desolate now looks like criticizing the movie *Pulp Fiction* for being violent. Of course *Pulp Fiction* is violent, it's a trashy exploitation flick. Similarly, one should not be surprised to find ANWR barren. Having a very low biomass is just part of what it is to be an arctic ecosystem.

Unfortunately the remark about *Pulp Fiction* clues us into a possible problem with this approach. Defending *Pulp Fiction* by saying that all members of its genre are violent doesn't get one very far against a critic who dislikes the whole genre. Certainly we have a tradition of critics going back to Plato who would simply do away with whole genres of art. Similarly, someone who felt ANWR was ugly and not worth protecting could simply say that the whole category of arctic ecosystem is not worth protecting. We still do not have a reason to protect the whole range of ecosystems environmentalists want to protect.

The second way to expand our notion of which habitats and species have positive aesthetic qualities is to simply declare that all natural things, to the extent that they are natural, only have positive aesthetic qualities. This means adopting the so-called positive aesthetic mentioned earlier. This stance is radical, but it has had numerous adherents historically. Both John Muir and William Morris have made comments indicating that they felt all landscapes are beautiful.[15] Hargrove endorses a weak form of this thesis.[16] This approach makes all landscapes worthy of defense, eliminating the range of habitat problem. But positive aesthetics has a famous defect: it seems to make *being natural* the property that eliminates all negative aesthetic qualities. However, there are all kinds of things that are natural that have profoundly negative aesthetic qualities: tapeworms, smallpox, an animal eating its young. One might, if one had a particularly dark turn of mind, learn to find such things aesthetically positive, but clearly the burden is on the positive aesthetician to show how this is possible or even desirable.

Rather than attempting to expand our notion of what species and habitats have positive aesthetic qualities, we might attribute instrumental value to the species and habitats we do not find positive aesthetic value in. Wetlands may be dismal, swampy places, but they filter our water, fight erosion, and provide a vital habitat for species we do find beautiful (Owen et al. 1998, 245). By taking this stance, one is not abandoning the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics. We still believe that the ultimate value of nature comes from its positive aesthetic qualities. We are simply arguing for the preservation of the parts of it that lack positive aesthetic qualities on the grounds that they are necessary for the parts that do have positive aesthetic qualities.

This third attempt to defend against the range of habitat problem is quite effective, as far as it goes. Certainly for many habitats and species, this kind of instrumental value will be manifest. But one can't count on it always being present. For many endangered species, as Rolston (1985 62) points out, the very fact that their numbers are so diminished often means that they cannot play a big role in the stability of the ecosystem. Rolston goes so far as to assert "If all seventy-nine plants on the endangered species list disappeared, it is doubtful that the regional ecosystems involved would measurably shift their stability" (ibid). The preservation of habitats faces similar problems. While many habitats contribute to the health of the surrounding areas or even the global environment, some simply do not.

I conclude that the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics cannot support the preservation of the full range of habitats and species environmentalists wish to preserve. Now this may be a prime place in the argument to say that the problem is not with the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics, but with the environmental program as it is typically pursued. If environmentalists wish to protect a species that has no positive aesthetic characteristics, and is not necessary for the survival of any other species that does, then environmentalists are

overreaching their foundations. This option might be especially tempting to those who think that we don't need to save every species and every natural habitat. Again, nothing I have said will rule out this move.

The Technology-Is-Beautiful Problem

The technology-is-beautiful problem stems from a simple fact: a well-designed piece of technology can have a wide variety of positive aesthetic qualities. This means that by technologically altering the landscape, one is not necessarily making it more ugly. Development, rather than being the defacement of a beautiful painting, can be more like replacing one painting with another. The idea that technology can be beautiful might seem anathema to many environmental ethicists, but it must be acknowledged that it is at least a possibility. Whole departments on our campuses are devoted to the study and production of good-looking buildings. One can hardly say that they always fail. Millions flock to see tourist attractions like the Hoover Dam and the Empire State Building. Done properly, the technological alteration of a landscape can be breathtaking. Cable television is full of channels like National Geographic and Animal Planet, which capitalize on the appeal of nature, but it is also full of channels which capitalize on the appeal of technology, like TechTV or The Discovery Channel: Wings, which is devoted to airplanes.

There are several possible replies to this objection. The first is to say that although technology can be beautiful, the sort of development of the landscape that angers environmentalists has no positive aesthetic qualities. Strip mines, suburban sprawl, and smog- belching factory complexes are simply eyesores. My reply is to admit that we do find these things ugly, but to ask whose fault this is. Recall that the aesthetically based environmentalist has already asked us to revise our perception of what has positive aesthetic qualities in order to bring seemingly unattractive ecosystems under her protective umbrella. Why isn't the same option open to the advocate of development?

Such a change in our aesthetic tastes has precedent. In the 17th and 18th centuries, aesthetic attitudes were radically different than what they are today, strongly favoring the artificial over the natural. Mountains, for instance, were considered grotesque eruptions from the soil. A typical traveler writing in 1622 called the Alps "high and hideous" (quoted in Reynolds 1909/1966, 8). In part, the ugliness of mountains can be attributed to the danger and hardship in passing them in an era when roads were not well built and maintained (Reynolds 1909/1966, 13). However, there are deeper problems at work here. Reynolds notes that the two charges most "persistently and definitely brought against mountains are that they are useless, and that they are a deformity on the face of the earth." Reynolds goes on to add, "Now the first of these is but another expression of the dominant utilitarian standards of value, and the second is an outcome of the prevailing desire for orderly and systematic arrangement" (1909/1966, 14). If we could only return to the days when an efficiently used landscape was the aesthetic ideal, then those who want to develop nature would have their game made.

Note further that the situations of the advocate of nature and the advocate of development are exactly parallel. Both can point to obvious cases of great beauty. The advocate of preservation can point to spectacular vistas like the Grand Canyon, and the advocate of development can point to great architectural achievements like the Empire State Building. Both the advocate of preservation and the advocate of development also have to defend the beauty of things that people do not typically find aesthetically positive. It is not at all clear who presents the stronger case.

The second objection says that while natural objects do not necessarily have more aesthetic qualities than artificial objects, the loss of natural objects represents the loss of a particular kind of aesthetic value. The loss of wild places might be akin to someone painting over all of the cubist canvasses, for example. The problem with this objection is that genres of art fall by the wayside all the time and no one considers it a great loss. Few people perform medieval morality plays any more. Genres are not the only things to disappear. Whole media fall by the wayside. In the 19th century, large narrative or landscape paintings were rolled up in cylinders and gradually unrolled before an audience, accompanied by a lecture or music. These panoramas were an ancestor of film, and died away completely when movies were invented. One might object that in the death of morality plays or panoramas, what disappears is a performance tradition. The physical objects themselves—paintings, texts—remain.[17] But this kind of preservation is akin to species surviving only in captivity or landscapes recorded in photographs and paintings. It is not the kind of preservation environmentalists lobby for.

I have identified three problems for the use of aesthetic considerations to found an environmental ethic: the superficiality problem, the range of habitat problem, and the technology-is-beautiful problem. I conclude that aesthetic considerations cannot play a significant role in the foundations of environmental ethics. If we environmentalists are to adequately press our case, we need to find a better way to characterize the value we find in nature.

Notes

1. This paper began as some thoughts I had at an NEH Summer Institute run by James Liszka entitled "Environmental Ethics and Issues: Alaska as a Case Study" at which Eugene Hargrove was a visiting scholar. I am indebted to Hargrove, Liszka, and the participants of the Institute. Versions of this paper have been presented at the 2001 meeting of the Alabama Philosophical Society, October 26–27, and meeting of the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World, Santa Fe, NM, July 26, 2002. Thanks go to the audiences. Some material was submitted to another journal and received anonymous referees comments, which were extremely helpful. Molly Hinshaw read almost every draft of this paper and was always helpful.

2. Gary Varner makes a similar point in passing, putting it in terms of the duties one might have to objects and the interests possessed by sentient creatures: "Given the centrality of duties of beneficence and non maleficence to our shared conception of morality, it is difficult to see how these *prima facie* duties [duties arising from aesthetic qualities] could override duties generated by the existence of interests" (1998, 21–22).

3. The need to clarify this point was brought to my attention by an anonymous referee for another journal.

4. For Hill's story, see Hill (2000).

5. I owe this objection to Molly Hinshaw.

6. He says that all natural things are beautiful, but some are still more beautiful than others (1989, 179). This idea seems to be self-contradictory, however. Positive aesthetics assert that a negative aesthetic judgment of nature is never warranted, but if some things are more beautiful than others, then there is a simple negative judgment that is warranted. If X is more beautiful than Y, one can condemn Y by saying it is not as beautiful as X.

7. Grube and Reeve's translation in Cooper, ed. (1997).

8. The numbers represent the amount of oil that is technically recoverable, not economically recoverable.

9. The partisans here are Supporting Alaska Free Enterprise, an activist group founded in March 2002 and funded by mostly by Alaska business people (Bradner 2002).

10. Hargrove maintains that is true even for theists, but at the cost of assuming an answer to the Euthyphro question. Things are good because God loves them. God does not love them because they are good.

11. I owe this point to a question raised by an anonymous reviewer for another journal.

12. Wilson (1999) also argues for seeing Coleman as a natural extension of the existing tradition.

13. A flyer from Arctic Power, a lobbying group created by the Alaska state legislator to promote development in ANWR, states, "This is no Serengeti. The Coastal Plain is a frozen barren for nine months of the year." Another flyer bears a picture of vacant, windswept tundra with the caption, "This is what Alaska is like for most of the year, including the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge." (Both flyers are available at www.anwr.org.) Mortimer Zuckerman, editor of U.S. News and World Report, writes, "In the first place, the coastal plain isn't the Alaska of the famous postcard vistas…Rather than the calendar art of the last frontier, the land at issue is a flat boggy treeless place where temperatures can drop as low as 40 degrees below zero" (Zuckerman 2001).

14. For an overview of this trend, see Callicott (1996).

15. Morris: "For surely there is no square mile of earth's inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way" (1898, 24). Muir: "None of Nature's landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild." (1901, 6–7).

16. He says that all natural things are beautiful, but some are still more beautiful than others (1989, 179).

17. An anonymous reviewer for another journal raised this point.

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