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PHIL 450

Aesthetics & the
Philosophy of Art

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(Rowman & Littlefield, 2005)

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2

Environmental Aesthetics: Natural Beauty

In chapter 1, we said that aesthetics studies art *and* beauty and that these are overlapping but different subject matters. When we think about the appreciation of art, we find that beauty is one, but only one, among the several things that we value. When we think about the appreciation of nature, it is tempting to suppose that beauty is the main thing. It is also tempting to suppose that beauty in nature is a simpler thing than beauty in art because it can be recognized without much understanding of structure or context. It stares one in the face. Go to a beach and look down the strand where water meets sand. Most everyone can see the beauty in that. However, if you encounter a dead, discolored fish in a state of decay as you walk along the beach, you probably won't think, "That is a thing of beauty." When you encounter beauty in nature, it stares you in the face, and when you don't, it stares you in the face—or so it might seem.

This chapter is concerned with the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Environmental aesthetics, as this topic is also called, is a subject that is attracting increasing attention, perhaps in part because of the potential connection with environmental ethics, a connection that is explored later in this chapter in the section titled "Are There Norms of Nature Appreciation?" Examining a variety of concrete cases of aesthetic appreciation of this type will prepare the way for the more theoretical examination of conceptions of the aesthetic in chapters 3 and 4.

If we take it as literally as we should, the expression "environmental aesthetics" is a broader and more complex topic than one concerned only with natural environments. It should also cover the environments that human beings construct and their interface with nature in the very common situation where they meet. We will return to this topic in chapter 12, where we will discuss the aesthetic value of architecture.

Objects and Models

When it comes to art, it is obvious what objects are appreciated. They are the artworks. Where works are performed, we also appreciate the performances. People disagree about the characterization of these objects and in what proper appreciation of them consists but not about these being the appropriate objects of art appreciation.¹

While the way we conceptualize nature divides it up into various parts and objects—into flowers and stones, fields and forests, mountain ranges and ridgelines, ecosystems and solar systems—it doesn't tell us which units are appropriate objects of appreciation. Are there appropriate units, or objects, that would imply that others are inappropriate or incorrect?

There are a number of different views on this topic. Let us begin with a survey, bearing in mind that it is not intended to cover all actual, much less possible, proposals.

Some think that what we should appreciate in nature is not so much objects as properties or appearances that nature presents to us. For example, a mountain range presents a constantly changing visual field. It changes with the light it reflects, with the point of view of the spectator, with the seasons. Proper appreciation, on this view, consists in getting a precise take on the visual appearance of the moment. This view can be extended to the other senses as long as one is careful to focus on the impression of the moment. Call this the impressionist model of nature appreciation, obviously named after the mode of perceiving that is embodied in the landscape painting of the impressionists, whose foremost exponent was Monet. (Another painter, Cezanne, painted a particular mountain,—Mount St. Victoire,—over and over again. Each time it has a different look, though one can recognize it as Mount St. Victoire.)

A second view tells us to focus on particular objects. Thus, we may encounter a stone with lovely colors or an unusual shape or smoothness and appreciate the stone for these pleasing qualities. We could do the same with a pretty flower or with an animal, say, a monarch butterfly or a rainbow trout. Notice that, on this view, we can appreciate natural objects in or out of their natural setting because we are focussing exclusively on the object. It's fine if we encounter such objects "in nature," but it is also fine if we bring them home and appreciate them there. We can pin the butterfly and put it behind glass, we can plant the flower in our backyard, and we can put the stone on the mantelpiece. Call this the object model.

This view resembles the previous one in some respects but not in others. When we focus on a particular object, we are likely to pick out for appreciation surface properties, something also emphasized by the impressionist model. But they may not be quite the same surface properties. We appreciate the flower for its "true" color and shape rather than a momentary appearance it happens to present. We are also conceiving of the objects

in terms of categories, such as flower, fish, and stone. We are required to notice properties as properties *of* objects on the object model, while this is more optional on the impressionist model. In fact, some proponents of the latter model advise us to try to ignore the fact that we are seeing a certain object, so we can see what is "really" before our eyes rather than "see" according to a preconception of what such an object should look like.

A third position treats nature as a landscape. It claims that we should focus on a view rather than a single discrete object. A view or vista is an object that can be seen from a relatively fixed point of view. Sometimes the kind of vistas emphasized by the landscape model is the sort that prompts the creation of "scenic turnouts" on highways: scenes of great, even breathtaking beauty. But there is nothing about the view that the object of appreciation of nature is a landscape that requires that we exclusively focus on such spectacular scenes. Just as the history of landscape painting is a history of shifting emphases that range from the representation of dramatic storms to quiet, ordinary agricultural scenes, our interest may vary in the views we encounter in nature. Human beings have a natural tendency to find beauty in what is available. If what is available are ridgelines with sweeping views of lakes and mountains, one might have trouble finding much beauty in a cornfield. However, if cornfields are what one has to look at, one will start discriminating among them and find more to appreciate in some rather than others, finding some, but not all, quite beautiful. (Availability is just one determinant of our ability to discriminate beauty. Another would be the aspects of nature celebrated, revered, or in other ways made salient by a culture.)

Just as the impressionist and object models are not entirely disjoint, so the landscape model partially overlaps with both of these alternatives. This is because there are not only an enormous variety of views to which one can attend but also different ways of looking at views. One way, of course, is the way recommended by the impressionist model. A different way bears a kinship with the object model since it involves the scrutinizing of specific objects contained in the view. However, the landscape model is not committed to one such way of seeing, and that, along with its fixation on views, differentiates it from the other models.

All three of the models mentioned so far are sometimes associated with a doctrine known as "formalism." This doctrine is more commonly directed at art appreciation and claims that, to properly appreciate an artwork, one should attend to its form rather than content, where form is conceived as something immediately available to the senses. (See chapter 5 for more on formalism in the philosophy of art.) Similarly, formalism in nature appreciation claims that the proper appreciation of nature should be confined to properties or appearances immediately available to the senses, without reliance on background knowledge such as that provided by science. Though the three models mentioned so far tend to emphasize

this kind of appreciation, it is not so clear that any of them make the formalist's claim that nature appreciation should be *confined* to the appreciation of such properties. This issue is discussed further in this chapter in the section titled "A Modest Objection."

Before stepping back to take stock of the models mentioned so far, with their favored objects of appreciation, I will introduce just one more for now. Call it the artwork model. Its main idea is that we should appreciate nature as an artwork. There are two versions of this view: the literal version and the "as if" version. The literal version says that nature literally is an artwork. One source of this version is religion: nature is God's, or the gods', artwork, which, given traditional theological beliefs, would require it being seen not only as an artwork but also as the best artwork. Another possible source of this version is a mistaken idea that I have occasionally encountered that something is art if it is a beautiful thing.²

The "as if" version does not say that nature really is an artwork. In fact, it denies this but nevertheless says that we should appreciate nature as if it were an artwork. A rationale for this view claims that art appreciation is our only real model of aesthetic appreciation, so if we desire to aesthetically appreciate nature, we have to treat it as if it were art.

This view bears some similarities with the landscape model, from which it might draw inspiration. It is easy to drift from the idea that what we appreciate in nature is a (natural) landscape to the idea that we appreciate nature by treating a view as if it were a landscape painting. However, it is important to recall that this is not what the landscape model actually says, nor is the artwork model committed to treating landscape painting as the only art form relevant to the enjoyment of nature.

The Distortion Objection

All these models have come in for a variety of criticisms. I will focus on two: one severe, one modest. The severe criticism is that all these models distort or misrepresent the proper appreciation of nature and that, because they do this, they should be rejected.³ Let us explore this criticism first, before turning to the more modest objection.

Perhaps it is easiest to see the force of the distortion claim by examining how it applies to the last model that we discussed: the "as if" version of the artwork model. Here we are explicitly being asked to appreciate nature by pretending it is something it is not. We imagine that a rock face is carved with the intention of producing the shape on view when in fact it was produced by natural forces such as erosion, forces that operate independently of human intentions. This is actually a double distortion. First, we are being asked to distort the object of appreciation by imagining (though not actually believing) it is an artifact when it is no such thing. In addition, this model distorts what actually happens, typically, when nature is an object of

aesthetic appreciation. When you enjoy the sight of a beautiful sunset, is there a pretense that you are looking at a painting? Would such a pretense enhance your appreciation? This version of the artwork model is based on a faulty understanding of "aesthetic appreciation" as a synonym for the appreciation of art. Almost any object presented to the senses or the imagination can be aesthetically appreciated. As noted at the beginning of this book, the concept of the aesthetic developed historically as something that applied equally to art and nature. Hence, the pretense is neither needed nor desirable and may justly be described as a distortion if it is presented as our characteristic mode of aesthetic appreciation of nature.

Does the distortion objection apply to the other models we have mentioned so far? If it does, it must do so on somewhat different grounds since these other models require no pretense on our part. When we examine a stone, we are not pretending that it is smooth, gray, and solid, that it has a graceful shape and is unaccountably pleasant to touch. Nevertheless, the distortion objection has been put forward against this model as well. What it claims is that when we attend to an object in isolation from its natural environment, some of its properties become invisible, while others take on a false appearance. Because a stone is such a hard and solid thing, looked at in isolation, it may give us a sense of permanence. However, if we see it in relation to and as part of its natural setting, we would be more likely to realize that its current properties are molded by natural forces that were previously invisible to us, and we might be more impressed with its malleability and regard the sense of permanence as a false impression. So the purported distortion that results from adhering to the object model is due to its tendency to hide some aesthetically relevant properties from view while falsely suggesting the existence of others. Or, to put the matter another way, objects, both living and nonliving, possess an "organic unity" with their environments that is the source of much of the object's aesthetic value, and this unity is destroyed when the object is viewed in isolation.

One can also criticize the landscape model and the impressionist model on somewhat similar grounds. The former asks us to appreciate something that is "arbitrarily" framed, that is, "static" and "two dimensional." It reduces nature to something that is purely visual, cutting off the engagement of the other senses. It requires a fixed point of view, whereas nature is in fact something in which we can move around, in which we are immersed. The impressionist model can be criticized for treating objects as mere patterns of light and sound (a rushing river) or shape and color (a mountain in autumn).

Digression: Is Nature an Artwork?

Before evaluating the distortion objection and turning to the not-yet-formulated more modest objection to the models so far laid out, we will

briefly digress to discuss the literal version of the artwork model, which typically derives from a religious conception of nature appreciation. In order to properly evaluate this view, it is important to distinguish two claims that it makes, the first purportedly lending support to the second. It is especially important to distinguish these claims because it is easy to wrongly suppose that they come to the same thing. The first claim is that nature is the creation of an intelligent being or beings. The second claim, for which the first is purportedly a reason, is that nature is like an artwork created by human beings, except that it is a far superior one since it is created by a far superior being or beings.

This view can appeal only to those who are willing to take seriously the initial conception of nature as the result of intelligent design or an intentional, voluntary act of creation. As such it has a more limited appeal than the other models, which can be employed (even if improperly so, if the distortion objection is correct) by anyone with or without religious cast of mind. Nevertheless, many people do accept the religious conception of nature (as created by an intelligent being or beings), and the interesting philosophical question is whether it *follows* from this conception that nature is as artwork. I will argue that the answer is no.

There are three reasons why this does not follow. First, not everything that is created is a work of art, as is made obvious by inspecting the variety of human artifacts. Hence, "x is created" does not imply "x is an artwork" any more than does "x is an artifact" imply this. Second, there is good reason to believe that the manner in which nature is created, if it is, is so very different from the way artworks are created that it becomes positively implausible to think of the former creation as the creation of art. Artists typically craft, or at least select, the individual item that is the artwork, being guided in either case by intentions toward that item. There is a very good reason to believe that nature operates according to general laws. If we wanted to explain the existence of beech trees along a ridge in a forest, we would refer to various features of the forest environment, properties of beech trees, and laws of biology. We would not mention the intentions of an intelligent creator. Such intentions would come in at a very general level—in the intention that nature operate according to the laws that in fact hold and perhaps to very distant initiating events. Finally, if we somehow became convinced that each item that comes into existence is intended to do so by the intelligent creator(s), the content of these intentions is hidden from us. Are objects in nature intended to provide aesthetic relish? We may feel that they must be, but we really don't know.

Given these reasons blocking the inference from the createdness of nature to nature being an artwork, the difference between the "as-if" version of the artwork model and the literal version is less than it seemed on first appearance. There is still a difference since the literal version of this model does not involve pretense. What it does involve are large assumptions. I am

not thinking of the assumption that nature is created but rather assumptions about the intentions involved in the creation. Further, if these assumptions were to lead one to ignore the more immediate causes of the natural world—natural events, forces, and laws—then this model's literal version might be as open to the distortion objection as the other models considered so far. However, we have yet to determine the force of this objection. It is to this we now turn.

Evaluating the Distortion Objection

Do we distort the object of aesthetic appreciation by looking at it in isolation from its surrounding environment, by focusing on a view for the visual pleasures it provides, or by attempting to "capture" the impression of the moment? In other words, will employing the object, landscape, or impressionist model of nature appreciation necessarily lead to such distortion?

Begin with the object model. To appreciate some but not other properties of an object is not to distort it but to appreciate it selectively. Suppose I am admiring a wildflower, a pink trillium, which appears fairly early in the spring in woodlands along riverbanks and other moist places. To admire the pale pink color; the three-petal, three-leaf pattern of the plant; and the shape of petal and leaf is so far to distort nothing. The plants with pink flowers are those near the end of their bloom, and people with this knowledge might appreciate them differently than trillium whose flowers are still white. I also might appreciate the flower more if I realized that I am lucky to catch sight of it in its relatively brief early spring blooming period. I don't know what role the trillium plays in the ecology of its environment, but perhaps such knowledge would also enhance my appreciation. To focus just on this one flower may hide, make invisible, some of the appreciation-enhancing properties just mentioned, but it does not lead me to ascribe to it properties it does not have. The same is true of the smooth gray stone discussed earlier. I may arrive at an impression of permanence by scrutinizing it, but that would just be a possibly faulty inference and faulty only if, by permanence, I meant, implausibly, unchangeability. The other properties I appreciate in the stone are uncontroversially possessed by it.

The real issue raised by the object model and its criticism is not whether it distorts the object of appreciation but whether there is something improper or inappropriate about the sort of selective appreciation this model promotes.

It might seem more plausible that the landscape model really does distort. The critics of this model claim that it requires us to treat nature as a static two-dimensional representation—as a landscape painting. If this is correct, it is certainly distorting since nature is none of the above. The landscape model becomes a version of the artwork model. But is the criticism correct? Is it

fair? Not really. The landscape model directs us to appreciate views or vistas. In doing so, it is also promoting a selective appreciation of a limited set of properties. First, these are strictly visual properties. Second, the object of attention is framed by a more or less fixed point of view. But the model does not claim either that what we actually see is a two-dimensional object or that we pretend it is a representation. Further, this model allows us to engage with a great variety of views of nature from grand vistas to mundane agricultural scenes, from relatively permanent natural features to the most fleeting effects of light. What we see may be influenced by a particular style of landscape painting but is not to be confused with it. One can go further. There is an extremely fruitful interaction between landscape painting and seeing natural landscapes. This is because there are many ways of seeing, many different features of the visible world one may actively seek to focus on, and the interaction just mentioned is what enables us to explore these ways.

The impressionist model also may seem vulnerable to the distortion objection. On the most austere versions of this model, one ignores the fact that one is perceiving a certain kind of object, and one is encouraged to merely take note of colors, shapes, sounds, and so on conceptualized only in terms of such sensory qualities. Pinks, golds, and grays stretch out before me. This is what I see, ignoring that what is responsible for these colors is a winter field covered with snow reflecting the sunset.

Again the temptation to call this distortion should be resisted. These colors are really on view, accurately pinned down like a carefully displayed moth. This way of pursuing the impressionist model raises a different question: does the aesthetic appreciation of nature require perceiving natural objects as those very objects—the perception of a field rather than a mere array of colors in the case at hand?

What is certainly true is that a less austere version of the impressionist model is available and quite possibly preferable. The snowfield at sunset is a more complex object of perception imbued with more aspects than a snowfield considered as a mere array of colors. The former is likely to create a richer impression. For example, when one sees the pinks and golds as snow reflecting light in the winter at sunset, these normally warm colors actually give the scene a colder feel. But some would claim more, namely, that one is not engaged in the appreciation of nature at all when following the austere version because one is not appreciating objects of nature.

So the distortion objection, while inapplicable to the three models of nature appreciation discussed in this section, gives way to two others: that these models promote an incomplete or too selective kind of appreciation and that, to appreciate nature properly, one has to appreciate natural objects as the natural objects they are (rather than mere arrays of sensuous properties). We will discuss these new objections later in this chapter in the section titled “Knowledge and Nature Appreciation.”⁴

A Modest Objection

First, however, we should articulate the more modest objection to the models mentioned but not stated previously. We will see that this objection is obviously correct, at least if each individual model is presented in a certain way. Suppose each model claimed to provide the exclusively correct way to appreciate nature. Then they would be open to the objection that there are at least equally good alternatives provided by the other models. This objection to the models should be accepted since these models focus our attention on different, if overlapping, aspects of nature, and there is no good reason to exclude one at the expense of another. It is not, however, obvious that the models were ever intended to tell the whole story about nature appreciation, to identify the uniquely correct way to appreciate the natural world. The fact that they so obviously don't makes it implausible that they are so intended.

This, however, raises a question, if not an objection. The models are most plausibly interpreted as providing several ways to partially appreciate nature. Even if we set aside the issue of whether such partial appreciations are too incomplete to be legitimate, there is still the question of whether there is a model that provides a more complete picture of nature appreciation. We will now look at the most ambitious and thorough attempt to provide such a model.

The Environmental Model

The environmental model, unlike the models considered so far, claims to be a comprehensive aesthetics of nature, identifying the proper object of appreciation of the natural world and the categories or concepts we need to bring to this context to fully appreciate these objects.⁵ The model makes two central claims. First, it is claimed that the object of appreciation is not confined to discrete objects, views, or impressions but is an object-in-an-environment or a collection of objects that form part of an environment. Second, the properties of these objects that are to be appreciated should be picked out by scientific or at least commonsense knowledge of the environment. If this second requirement is not met, the appreciation is mal-founded or inappropriate.

Is this model superior to the others that we have considered so far? It might appear superior in comprehensiveness in claiming that environments (and what they contain) are the appropriate objects of appreciation. For environments contain the objects and views and provide the opportunity for the impressions that we have so far discussed. But they also provide opportunities for many additional forms of appreciation. So the environmental model appears to free us from any one narrow conception of

the way nature should be enjoyed. So interpreted, it provides a way of collecting together and extending in important ways the models mentioned so far.

However, just how comprehensive this view is and whether it gives us the freedom just mentioned depends on its positive account of the way environments are to be appreciated. Sometimes the proponents of this view favor certain ways of appreciating an environment, which are taken to exclude some of the ways endorsed by the models mentioned previously. Here are three approaches favored on different occasions by such proponents. The *immersion approach* tells us that nature is to be appreciated by immersing oneself in it: wondering through it with all one's senses alive to what is on offer. Not one but a constantly shifting point of view is what is needed. The idea is to take in as much of a given environment as possible with as many senses as possible on a given occasion.⁶ The *ecological approach* recommends that one perceive in nature the relations of dependence, sustenance, or conflict that constitute an environment's ecosystem, finding aesthetic satisfaction in the perceived relations and the balance or harmony they create. Finally, there is what is sometimes called *order appreciation*, where one focuses on the order imposed on selected natural objects by the causes that produce and sustain them (see Carlson 1993). The smooth gray stone perceived as the product of forces of erosion would be an example of order appreciation. Perhaps the ecological approach can be subsumed within order appreciation, simplifying matters a little.

If we combine the immersion approach with order appreciation by saying that nature is to be appreciated through one or the other, we have a fairly wide array of possible appreciations. Notice, however, that we achieve this degree of comprehensiveness by agreeing to a disjunction, two alternative approaches, as equally legitimate. If we can have two, we can have more, supplied by the models discussed in the earlier sections. Whether we need more depends on how leniently we apply the immersion approach and the order appreciation approach. Does the former permit "minimal" immersions in the environment consisting of perusing a clump of flowers or admiring a view that can but need not be parts of more extensive immersions? Or does it require more extensive and more strenuous immersions with multiple perspectives that cover a stretch of countryside? If so, we want to make room for other alternatives. Finally, notice no matter how comprehensive we make the environmental model by being lenient about what falls within it, it may never cover all appreciations of nature. Imagine looking back at the earth from a spaceship and seeing the Americas spread out before one's eyes. This would no doubt be a beautiful sight, and if continents aren't part of nature, what are? Appreciating this sight does not fit any version of the environmental model. The same goes for looking at the myriad heavenly bodies that fill the sky on a clear night in the country far away from city lights.

The most controversial part of the environmental model is its invocation of knowledge as the arbiter of appropriate appreciation. "To aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different environments of nature and of the systems and elements within those environments" (Carlson 1979, 273). This passage tells us that some knowledge is required to properly appreciate nature. It also seems to tell us something about the knowledge needed. It is knowledge of *different* environments, of *systems* and *elements* within them. That looks like a fair sum of rather intimidating technical knowledge.

But if the environmental model is not to be ruled out of court from the start, the knowledge demanded needn't be large or technical. This is acknowledged by the proponents of this model who admit that common-sense knowledge of the environment is an acceptable substitute for scientific knowledge (Carlson 1995). If I know this is a woodland clump of flowers whose surface features are carefully observed and the environment (woodland), system (clump), and elements (observed features) have all been duly noted and all else being equal, this could lead to a presumably satisfactory appreciative experience about which there is nothing improper or in need of correction.

The environmental model might be seen as adding some important options (immersion, order appreciation) for appreciative experience that were not made available by the models we considered earlier rather than finding a way of unifying all of them under a single idea or as revealing the inappropriateness of those alternatives.

However, because of the ambitious claims that it makes, the environmental model also does something else that is of great interest: it raises a number of important questions. When and how does knowledge enhance the appreciation of nature? Is there some minimum of required knowledge for such appreciation to be proper or appropriate? Are there norms of nature appreciation, so that we can say that some attempts at appreciation are malfoounded, improper, or inappropriate? Is the appreciation of nature that we have been talking about throughout this chapter really aesthetic appreciation?

Knowledge and Nature Appreciation

There is no question that the acquisition of knowledge can both enhance and, on some occasions, irrevocably alter our appreciative experience of nature. Some knowledge enables us to perceive nature in more complex ways. Someone who understands how tidal pools work sees a little interconnected world in such an environment, whereas someone lacking this knowledge may merely see a collection of objects. Naturalists or, for that matter, people who fish or hunt see bodies of water or woodlands as habitats for different species of animals and in doing so look at these areas in more fine-grained

ways than someone who merely looks at them for a view. One can enjoy a flower simply for its surface properties, but one can "thicken" this enjoyment by knowing that it indicates a certain stage of spring, when other items one savors also appear, or that it indicates things to come, as blossoms indicate fruit. Knowing that a pink trillium flower is a later stage in the blooming of a previously white one makes one more appreciative of its sighting, though I doubt knowing the chemical basis of this change enhances appreciation. As one becomes familiar with a species of plant or animal, one's perception of what is normal and what is unusual (including what is unusually fine and what is deformed or diseased) will irrevocably alter. Notice that some of this knowledge that has a bearing on appreciation clearly changes one's very perception of nature (knowledge of a species). Some claim that this is *the* unique requirement on knowledge that is relevant to appreciating nature (Matthews 2002). However, this is not obvious because there is some knowledge that enhances appreciation but does not so obviously enhance or alter perception (for example, knowledge that the blooming of trillium foreshadows the appearance of morels). This latter sort of knowledge enhances appreciation by enhancing one's immersion in a complex natural environment. Still other knowledge seems to have no bearing on appreciation, such as knowledge of the chemical basis of color variation in trillium, yet I doubt that we can conclusively predict that it will never have such a bearing.

That knowledge can both enhance and alter the appreciation of nature for individuals does not imply that it must do so uniformly across all individuals. It is an interesting question whether the acquisition of pieces of information has a uniform effect on the appreciative experience of similarly knowledgeable individuals. The answer to this question is uncertain, but I am inclined to give it a negative answer because people are differently disposed to be responsive to the countless aspects of nature capable of aesthetic appreciation.

Another question, one that we raised at the end of the previous section, is whether there is some minimum of knowledge that one *must* bring to the appreciation of nature for it to be proper or appropriate. When evaluating the distortion objection, we discovered an intuition that some such minimum is required. However, our subsequent discussion of the environmental model raises doubts about what this minimum knowledge could be. We found nothing inappropriate in the appreciation of the surface features of individual natural objects, such as a clump of wildflowers. So the thought that such appreciation might be too selective should be rejected. The same should be said of the appreciation of a snowfield as an array of colors. While it is true that we are not appreciating the snowfield as a snowfield, we are appreciating it as something truly contained in nature: shape and color. These are indeed features of nature that are abstracted from particular objects, but who is to say that appreciating nature for its most elemental properties is an inappropriate mode of appreciation?

Such properties as shape and color and such things as edges, fields (as in color fields, not cornfields), and patterns occur both in nature and in artifacts. In fact, a natural object and an artifact might share identical colors, shapes, or patterns. So it might be argued that when we appreciate what we just called elemental aspects of nature, we are not appreciating nature *per se* because they are aspects of the world that are shared by nature and artifacts alike. One can respond to this claim in a number of different ways. Certain patterns of color or shape originate in the natural world (though they can be transferred to artifacts). The pattern of crystals is an example, but so is a pattern of colored light on a snowfield. So one might say that as long as one is appreciating a natural pattern that one encounters in nature as a natural pattern, one is still appreciating nature. Or one might say that appreciation of patterns of elemental properties is aesthetic appreciation, but it is not nature appreciation because it occurs at too abstract a level. Which of these responses do you think is better?

Instead of trying to identify a minimal sort of knowledge that we must bring to nature, a good way to approach the question of whether we need some knowledge to appreciate nature is to ask whether appreciation based on false belief should be regarded as essentially flawed. If such appreciation is flawed, then *some* knowledge is required for proper appreciation. Certain sorts of false belief should be regarded as permitting genuine appreciation of nature if one is faultless in holding them or, in other words, does so with good reason. Imagine being transported to a planet that contains a substance that looks and behaves just like water but in fact has a very different chemical composition. At first, at least, one has no reason to doubt one is seeing water, and as one looks down the beach, one can be enjoying its beauty while falsely believing that one is seeing water breaking over sand. Similarly, there may have been a time when people were faultless in believing whales and dolphins were fish. Should we say they were unable to see the beauty of these creatures? We shouldn't say so, any more than we should think that people of an earlier age could not see the beauty of the human body because they radically misunderstood the nature of this body.

The art of the past shows us that people could appreciate human beauty, even though we know that their understanding of the nature and workings of the human body was deeply flawed, in fact riddled with false beliefs. If they could appreciate this sort of beauty, with equally flawed beliefs, they could appreciate beauty in nature (the rest of nature, for surely we and our bodies are part of nature). Of course, our ancestors had many true beliefs as well about both the body and nature. So none of this shows that some knowledge, or true belief, is unnecessary for proper appreciation. It shows only that some amount of false belief does not disqualify the appreciative experience.

Does the situation change when error is easily avoidable? Someone today who cannot distinguish sea mammals from fish might be thought to

bring an inadequate set of distinctions or categories to the appreciation of this part of nature. Once one has the knowledge made possible by these distinctions, it might be thought that one's perception of the phenomena is bound to change and that only this more refined perception now counts as proper. I am not sure that these claims are true, but they strike me as plausible if the standard of avoidable error or necessary knowledge is kept low. It is common knowledge in our culture that whales are not fish, and so, to the extent that this alters our perception of whales, it can be required of those who wish to properly appreciate them. However, once we get to less widely available scientific knowledge, we enter the arena where it becomes optional whether we bring such knowledge to our appreciative experience. Such knowledge can enhance our experience or change it, but it does not follow that the experience of nature not informed by this knowledge is bogus. As long as it pays careful attention to the appearance of the part of nature under observation or to its perceptible properties, appreciating them as properties of the part of nature in question, the most important bases will be covered.

Are There Norms of Nature Appreciation?

Norms tell us what we *should* do. The norms that you are probably most familiar with are norms of morality, such as those embodied in such codes as the Ten Commandments. You are also familiar with norms of prudence: norms that tell you what to do if you want to pursue your own self-interest or get the things you want. The most abstract or general of these prudential norms tells us that once you decide to do something or to achieve some goal, you ought to adopt the means necessary to achieve your end. Aesthetic appreciation or enjoyment is one of our ends, one of the things almost all of us want in our lives, and so the general norm of prudence just mentioned applies to its pursuit.

A way of putting the final conclusion of the previous section is that with regard to the knowledge we must bring to our subject, the norms of nature appreciation are weak though not nonexistent. Some knowledge of nature is needed for proper appreciation, but this is mostly observational rather than theoretical scientific knowledge, with the exception of scientific concepts that have become part of common knowledge. Additional knowledge can enhance or alter our appreciative experience, but it is usually optional whether we employ such knowledge.

The following examples might be used to challenge such a claim. First, consider the plant purple loosestrife. It is not native to the U.S. Midwest but has been introduced as a garden plant because of its tall, spiky, purple flower. Unfortunately, it has come to thrive in the wild, including in wetlands, where it has the ability to take over and dry up this valuable envi-

ronment. If you were to look at an area full of purple loosestrife in bloom without this knowledge of its effect on the environment, one would find it very beautiful. But what about after one has this knowledge? Will one cease to find the scene beautiful? Some people report that when they look at this plant after learning what purple loosestrife does to the environment, their aesthetic experience changes. Has this knowledge corrected their judgment of the scene's beauty by changing their experience?⁷

Consider next sunsets, something that seems a paradigm of harmless but considerable beauty. Apparently, however, the sunsets we would find most beautiful are caused by the refraction of light due to the higher-than-normal occurrence of certain kinds of particles in the atmosphere. A typical cause of the increase in particles is air pollution. So the sunsets we typically appreciate most are caused by air pollution. With this knowledge in hand, does our experience of sunsets change, and would this change justify altering our judgment of their beauty?

In the cases we are looking at, there are two distinct but noteworthy reactions among observers with the newly acquired knowledge of the effects of purple loosestrife and the causes of sunsets. One reaction is to cease to find these beautiful. Another reaction is to continue to find beauty in these things but to deplore them on ethical grounds. There just is not a uniform change in experience across observers sensitive to environmental issues. Given these different reactions, it is just not clear what, beyond the reactions themselves, should guide us in making a judgment of beauty about loosestrife and sunsets.

Earlier we discussed two different bases for knowledge being relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. One basis was that the knowledge changes the way we perceive. Since the change varies from person to person in the case at hand, it is an unreliable basis here (unless one could argue for the superiority of one way of perceiving over the other). The other basis was immersion in nature. If knowledge enhances the degree of immersion, it is relevant to appreciation and to judgments of natural beauty. We usually think of "enhancement" as something positive, but perhaps it has a negative correlate. As we immerse ourselves in the natural world, we might experience the loosestrife flowers and the sunsets with a more negative attitude in recognition of the effects of the former and the causes of the latter.

However, is this negative attitude aesthetic? The information about these items that we have been pondering has its natural home in environmental ethics. Loosestrife is purportedly bad for the environment, and those who care about the preservation of wetlands possibly ought to be in favor of their eradication. (See note 7 to understand the reason for the qualifications "purportedly" and "possibly" in this sentence.) Air pollution is bad for the environment, and those who believe that it is important that we have cleaner air ought to be willing to sacrifice colorful sunsets. However, there

is nothing inconsistent in believing that such steps are necessary while also believing that something is really being sacrificed, namely, beautiful sights. This claim may seem paradoxical because we have a tendency to believe that it is ugly things, not beautiful ones, that harm the environment and that pollution makes the world uglier, not more beautiful. Unfortunately, this tendency may not uniformly guide us to the truth.

In this section, we have considered an objection to the claim that there is enormous leeway in the knowledge we must bring to nature in order to properly appreciate its beauty. We have tentatively rejected the objection, concluding that the considerations it brings forward are relevant more to environmental ethics and policy than to judgments of natural beauty. Those who would defend the objection would have to argue for a tighter connection between ethics and aesthetics than we have been able to establish in this context.⁸

When Is Nature Appreciation Aesthetic?

In the previous section, an issue that was under the surface for much of this chapter began to emerge more explicitly: when is the appreciation of nature aesthetic appreciation? Let us conclude this chapter by addressing this issue.

As we noted in chapter 1, the concept of aesthetic appreciation is complicated by at least two different factors. First, it is intimately related to a number of other "aesthetic" concepts: those of aesthetic experience, aesthetic property, and aesthetic value. What one takes aesthetic appreciation to be depends on one's understanding of these other concepts and on which of these concepts one most emphasizes. Second, there are multiple conceptions of the aesthetic, and, among these, there is no uniquely correct one.

One theory of aesthetic appreciation has it that its proper objects are aesthetic properties. These include such things as general-value properties such as beauty and ugliness; formal features such as balance or diversity; expressive properties such as sadness; evocative features such as power or being awe inspiring; behavioral features such as stillness, fragility, or grace; and second-order perceptual features such as being vivid or gaudy. Some of these, such as being graceful and being gaudy, are also value properties but are of a more specific variety because they contain more descriptive content than general-value properties such as beauty. Others, such as being sad, seem to be purely descriptive. Further, the theory claims that the recognition of the most general-value properties (such as beauty) is based on perceiving the other properties (formal, expressive, evocative, behavioral, and second-order perceptual) on our list. These properties, in turn, are taken in by perceiving nonaesthetic perceptual properties, such as color and shape (Goldman 1995, 17).

What is of immediate importance here is that, while we readily talk of beauty in nature, so much of our experience of nature that we regard as aesthetic appreciation does not seem to involve the less general aesthetic properties but rather judgments of beauty either based directly on first-order perceptual properties or on second-order properties of a nonaesthetic character. For example, my appreciation of trillium is bound up mainly in the delight in their color and shape closely observed. Even when an aesthetic property may appear to be the source of appreciation, this may not really be so. Imagine looking, on a windless morning, at a lake the surface of which is perfectly still and as a result reflects sky and shoreline with a mirror-like quality. Part of what we appreciate here is the lake's stillness, but it is not clear that we are referring to an aesthetic property of stillness but to a first-order perception of complete lack of movement or lack of surface disturbance that is there for anyone to see. No "taste" or sensitivity is required.⁹ Next consider the "order appreciation" endorsed by the environmental model. If I see a stone as molded by forces of erosion, my appreciation consists, in part, in noting what is at best a second-order perceptual property, the stone's malleability. This is a second-order perceptual property because seeing it requires seeing something else—the stone's smoothness—in terms of information about natural forces one brings to the viewing. But malleability is not an aesthetic property.

This is not to deny that sometimes our appreciation of nature involves aesthetic properties. We enjoy the *vivid* colors of a New England hillside in autumn, the *graceful* movements of deer, and the *grotesque* appearance of bare apple trees. It is just that recognition of such aesthetic properties seems optional in the sense that other experiences of nature engage our aesthetic appreciation without the noting of the descriptively "thicker" aesthetic properties. This leaves the boundaries of such appreciation uncertain at least until an alternative conception, not limited to engagement with aesthetic properties, is proposed.

A more useful model of aesthetic appreciation of nature might be found in a conception of aesthetic experience. One conception that we will examine in chapter 3 proposes that aesthetic experience is experience resulting from attention to formal, sensuous, and meaning properties of an object valued for its own sake. "Object" is used very broadly, so it is not confined to the items emphasized by the object model of nature appreciation discussed previously. It would include whatever any of the acceptable models select as what should be appreciated: from views to environments. Some items have formal properties (in some sense of the term: individual flowers have arrangements of parts, repetitions of shapes that can be looked on as formal properties.) Some items have natural meanings in the sense of causal connections of human significance (as in blossoms indicating fruit). They also may have cultural meanings or significance as cherry blossoms and autumnal maples have in Japanese culture.¹⁰ In addition to the three

sorts of properties mentioned so far, we can add structural or etiological properties emphasized by order appreciation. This conception of aesthetic experience accounts for the various features of the aesthetic appreciation of nature noted previously: the importance of close observation and knowledge of observable properties, the possibility of appreciation being enhanced by additional knowledge, and the optionality or variable importance of aesthetic properties.

An alternative conception of nature appreciation is modeled not so much on aesthetic experience as on art appreciation. The claim is not that we should appreciate nature as or as if it were an artwork (as the artwork model considered earlier claims) but that there is a useful analogy between the two kinds of appreciation. Many people think we have to bring certain categories to art,¹¹ those of intention, convention, style, period, genre, or context, to properly identify even many aesthetic features of artworks. Further, artistic value is not confined to aesthetic value. That is, the value proper to good art includes aesthetic value but also includes such things as cognitive value, art-historical value, and so on. (We will elaborate on this in chapter 10.) If the model of the appreciation of art is brought to the appreciation of nature, then we have to find analogues of these features of the former for the latter. This will require a more complex set of criteria of proper appreciation for nature. The result might be a more constrained conception of appropriate aesthetic experience for nature. However, we have found no good justification for such constraints in the body of this chapter if we focus strictly on aesthetic appreciation. Alternatively, the model of art appreciation might suggest that the appreciation of nature is a more complex practice than simply deriving aesthetic value from observing and interacting with nature. Like art, ethical, cognitive, and other considerations have to be thrown into the mix to get a proper conception of the appreciation of nature. This way of looking at the appreciation of nature might provide a rationale for some of the points of view we considered earlier: the environmental model as *the* correct model of nature appreciation or the importance of ethical consideration in such appreciation. However, what the proponent of such a view would have to argue at this point is that to properly appreciate nature, we *have to* bring this specific mix of considerations to it, and I am skeptical that this could be done successfully. A weaker claim, more in keeping with the main message of this chapter, is that this hybrid form of appreciation based on several factors is yet one more option we have in appreciatively taking in the natural world.

Summary

In this chapter, we have examined a number of models of the aesthetic appreciation of nature that pick out different objects of appreciation. We have

concluded that most of these models identify legitimate ways of appreciating nature aesthetically and that the best way to approach them is to regard them all as providing *a* way but not *the* way to bring about such appreciation. The hope to find the one correct model is doomed to fail because the objects that can be appreciated in nature are so many and various, and unlike the case of art, there are no guiding intentions or conventions to narrow our focus. The legitimate models include but are not necessarily confined to the impressionist model, the object model, the landscape model, and the environmental model. If there is one approach that is suspect, it is the artwork model, just because it requires us to either imagine patent falsehoods about natural objects or make highly speculative assumptions about them.

In the latter parts of this chapter, we confronted some additional issues concerning the role of knowledge in nature appreciation, the norms of such appreciation, and the features that make such appreciation aesthetic. We attempted not to definitively resolve these issues but rather to come to some partial, tentative conclusions. We recognized that knowledge of nature, both of the scientific and of the commonsense varieties, could enhance or change our appreciative experience for the better. However, we are not required to bring a great deal of scientific knowledge to nature to properly appreciate it, and even a good deal of false (though faultless) scientific belief is consistent with proper appreciation. Some knowledge of nature is required for such appreciation, but this is confined to that part of scientific theory that has become common knowledge and to observational knowledge. Close or careful observation of first-order perceptual features of natural things as features of those things is of special importance even if it is not completely independent of one's theoretical beliefs. This sums up the norms of appreciation with regard to the knowledge we must bring to nature. We also tentatively concluded that the aesthetic appreciation of nature seems to be more bound up with the observation of first-order perceptual properties than with the apprehension of so-called aesthetic properties, though they have a role too. Finally, we distinguished between aesthetic appreciation on the one hand and attitudes based on the conclusions of environmental ethics on the other. We tentatively concluded that items that are pernicious to an environment and hence that are condemned from the point of view of environmental ethics could still be beautiful or have beautiful effects.

We now turn to a more theoretical examination of the notions of aesthetic experience, aesthetic properties, and aesthetic value.

Further Reading

Berleant, Arnold. 1992. *Aesthetics of the Environment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Defends the immersion model.

- Budd, Malcom. 2002. *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Collects all of Budd's writing on the aesthetics of nature.
- Carlson, Allen. 2000. *Aesthetics and the Environment*. New York: Routledge. A collection of essays by the most influential figure to defend the environmental model.
- Hepburn, Ronald. 1996. "Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination." *Environmental Values* 5: 191–204. Defends a pluralistic approach to the appreciation of nature.
- Matthews, Patricia. 2002. "Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60: 37–48. Attempts to identify the scientific knowledge needed to fully appreciate nature.

Notes

1. Like many plausible claims, this one is for the most part true but probably has exceptions. Consider ballads like "Sir Patrick Spens," folk songs like "John Henry," or popular songs like "Yesterday" or "I Shot the Sheriff." The same ballad or song has a number of variations or versions. Is the work the ballad or song or the individual variation? Whichever answer one gives, there is an object of appreciation that is not a work but something else related to the work but different from it or a performance of it. Literary cases are interestingly set out in Howell (2002a). Similar issues regarding rock music are discussed by Gracyk (1996). Lydia Goehr (1992) makes a more radical but less plausible claim that one does not find true musical works until the beginning of the nineteenth century. For a critique of Goehr and further discussion of this issue for music, see Stephen Davies (2001).

2. Why is this idea mistaken? There are many reasons. First, the relation between art and beauty is rather tenuous because there is plenty of nonbeautiful art, either because its aim requires that it be other than beautiful or because it is just bad art. Second, even among human artifacts, there are beautiful ones that are not art—beautiful cars, utensils, mathematical proofs. Beautiful nature lacks one essential feature of all art, that it is made or at least put forward by someone or some group, unless one has a theological conception of nature. However, even if one thinks of nature as the creation of an intelligent being and as beautiful, it doesn't follow that it is art. See the section later in this chapter titled "Is Nature an Art-work?"

3. The most forceful proponent of the distortion objection is Allen Carlson. He presents this objection to the object and landscape models in Carlson (1979).

4. Malcom Budd (1996) argues that to properly appreciate nature one has to appreciate it "as nature," and to do this one has to conceive of the object of appreciation as some natural thing (such as a snowfield). Allen Carlson's post-1979 discussions of the distortion objection emphasize the two ways of developing the objection proposed here. See Carlson (1981, 1993), both reprinted in Carlson (2000).

5. Carlson is the chief proponent of the environmental model. His numerous essays setting out and defending this model are collected in Carlson (2000).

6. The immersion model, though not foreign to views like Carlson's, is most closely associated with Arnold Berleant's (1992) "aesthetics of engagement."

7. Actually, it is not so clear that purple loosestrife does damage wetlands in the way just described. Apparently, it makes them somewhat drier, but I have heard different opinions about whether any wetland has been destroyed by this plant. It also crowds out native species, but whether that in itself constitutes a harm to the environment is debatable.

8. It seems plausible to me that policies that preserve the natural environment and reduce threats to it like the ones we have been talking about will also make the environment more beautiful in the long run. This claim, however, should not be confused with and does not resolve the issue discussed in the main body of this section, namely, whether the causes or effects of environmental deterioration can themselves be beautiful things.

9. Frank Sibley (1959) suggested that aesthetic properties are marked by the fact that taste or sensitivity is needed for their recognition.

10. Carlson (2001, 431–32) mentions the significance of the cultural meaning of natural phenomena.

11. The locus classicus of the view that we have to bring such categories to artworks in order to properly appreciate them is Walton (1970). The idea that we need to find analogous categories to understand in what proper aesthetic appreciation of nature consists is due to Carlson (1979), and it is this thought that motivates the development of the environmental model.