

# Evaluating Positive Aesthetics

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“For in all natural things there is something marvelous”<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle

“None of nature’s landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild ”<sup>2</sup>

John Muir

## Abstract

This paper evaluates the doctrine of positive aesthetics (=PA), the idea that nature—to the extent it is not influenced by humans—is specially and predominantly beautiful. It identifies versions of PA, assesses their plausibility, and evaluates the cogency of arguments for them. Versions considered include the no negative judgment thesis, the equal beauty thesis, Eugene Hargrove’s no negative aesthetic qualities claim, Glenn Parsons’ “beauty-making” defense, Allen Carlson’s “science-is-aesthetics” argument, and Holmes Rolston’s nature aesthetic holism. The paper distinguishes between individualistic and holistic versions of PA and argues that Rolston’s holism best meets desiderata for a plausible and environmentally fruitful articulation of PA: (1) It accommodates the existence of negative aesthetics in nature; (2) It articulates a conception of nature’s beauty that does not apply to the rest of the world (including art); (3) It is an empirically grounded thesis that is dependent on the actual contingent characteristics of nature; and (4) It is a doctrine useful for conservation of nature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Positive aesthetics (=PA) is the idea that all of nature is beautiful. A more qualified version claims that nature—to the extent it is not influenced by humans—is specially and predominantly beautiful. PA especially appeals to contemporary environmentalists who want to protect wild nature from the human onslaught. If we assume (as is plausible) that human-manipulated environments and constructed objects are not specially and predominantly beautiful, then PA gives us strong aesthetic reasons for protecting nature.

Some of the most prominent figures in environmental aesthetics and ethics have defended PA. Holmes Rolston, III, was an early proponent:

The Matterhorn leaves us in awe, but so does the fall foliage on any New England

hillside, or the rhododendron on Roan Mountain. Those who linger with nature find this integrity where it is not at first suspected, in the copperhead and the alligator, in the tarantula and the morel, in the wind-stunted banner spruce and the straggly box elder, in the stormy sea and the wintry tundra. . . . This value is often . . . aesthetic and invariably so if we examine a natural entity at the proper level of observation or in terms of its ecological setting. The ordinary rock in microsection is an extraordinary crystal mosaic. The humus from a rotting log supports an exquisite hemlock. . . . Should we say that we find all life beautiful?<sup>3</sup>

Allen Carlson advocated PA in one form or another for over twenty years, before heavily qualifying it in a recent book.<sup>4</sup> His first formulation was: “The natural environment, in so far as it is untouched by humans, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is graceful, delicate, intense, unified, orderly, not dull, bland, insipid, incoherent, chaotic. All virgin nature in short is essentially aesthetically good.”<sup>5</sup>

The idea that all of nature is beautiful is initially as implausible as is the claim that all art is beautiful. As Stan Godlovitch puts it, “Just as there are rotten violinists, so there must be pathetic creeks; just as there is pulp fiction, so there must be junk species; just as there are forgettable meals, so there must be inconsequential forests.”<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising then that many environmental aestheticians have rejected the doctrine. Malcolm Budd, for example, argues that because organisms can be defective instances of their kinds, negative aesthetic qualities will be manifest in their appearance.<sup>7</sup> Emily Brady thinks it “naive and idealistic” to assume we can “always eliminate negative aesthetic value” from our experience of nature and argues that PA is an “incomplete environmental aesthetics, risking an attitude which ignores the true diversity of characteristics possessed by various natural environments and animals” and “impoverishes” our experience of them.<sup>8</sup> Marcia Eaton argues that those who claim that “nothing in nature can be ugly. . . go too far” and thinks there are “some obvious examples of

ugly natural objects” citing not only deformed animals and plants, but “ugly shells . . . left behind as shellers gather the ones they prefer.”<sup>9</sup> T.J. Diffey thinks the idea “that nature must be beautiful and cannot be ugly” is a “sentimental *a priori* thought” and claims that “there is much in nature that, in spite of a sentimental temptation to deny it, is not beautiful.”<sup>10</sup> Yuriko Saito rejects the idea that all of nature is aesthetically appreciable arguing that some natural events are too psychologically disturbing to allow for aesthetic appreciation and that moral concerns should prevent us from appreciating natural events that cause great suffering to humans.<sup>11</sup>

This paper identifies versions of PA, assesses their plausibility, and evaluates the cogency of arguments for them. I set out four desiderata for a plausible and environmentally fruitful PA:

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

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

## II. EASY BEAUTY, KNOWLEDGE AND PA

PA is useful in combating a prevalent and harmful tendency in nature appreciation toward easy beauty, a lazy type of nature appreciation that limits itself to “nature’s show pieces” (e.g.,

the Grand Canyon) and finds “the scenically-challenged” parts of nature (e.g., plains and deserts) boring.<sup>12</sup> The insistence on easy beauty is manifest in a preference for cute animals like panda bears and a dislike for superficially unattractive species like bats or snakes. Subtle natural beauty—as in a drab tundra plant or the monotonous prairie—gets ignored because it is more difficult to appreciate.

An important consideration in favor of PA is that as we learn more about nature, we find more to appreciate. According to Rolston, beauty in unscenic nature “is not so much *viewed* as *experienced* after one reaches ecologically tutored understanding. It is not so much a matter of sight as of insight into the drama of life.”<sup>13</sup> PA is thus typically allied with a cognitive focus in the aesthetics of nature whereby knowledge of nature is used to improve our appreciation of it. In the case of nature, knowledge tends to undermine negative aesthetics. It can transform the boring and the ugly into something aesthetically valuable. For example, when we learn that it is hundreds of years old and withstands eighty mile per hour winds and thirty degrees below zero temperatures, the drab tundra plant becomes a stalwart centurion. Similarly, with the right knowledge, the hideous vampire bat becomes a marvelous sonar flying machine. Knowledge of natural history—supported by imagination and emotion based on such knowledge and integrated into the aesthetic experience—allows for the aesthetic appreciation of natural items that might otherwise seem aesthetically negative or neutral.

Does knowledge about nature, supplemented by appropriate imaginative and emotional response, do away with all negative aesthetics in nature? Yuriko Saito seems to think so, suggesting that “No matter how seemingly insignificant, uninteresting, or repulsive at first sight, natural history and ecological sciences reveal the marvelous works of every part of nature. . . .

every part of nature is aesthetically positive for its storytelling power.”<sup>14</sup>

Let us distinguish between two types of counterexamples to PA in nature: the boring or uninteresting (which can be merely aesthetically neutral) and the ugly (which can be aesthetically negative). I’m inclined to accept that knowledge of nature will invariably be able to turn tedious, aesthetically neutral nature into something aesthetically positive, though I’m skeptical that the resulting value will in all cases be so positive that we would marvel at it (as Saito’s language suggests).<sup>15</sup> With ugly nature, however, the addition of an interesting scientific story integrated into the perceptual experience does not necessarily do away with (or outweigh) the negative aesthetics involved, although it can. Emily Brady uses the example of a scab: “The scab is ugly, evidence of a wound, and although part of a healing process with positive value, this doesn’t convert the scab itself into something beautiful.”<sup>16</sup> Understanding how organisms repair their wounds and that the scab is an essential part of this healing process is the kind of account that can promote a positive aesthetic response. Will this contextualization of the scab as part of the healing process convert it into something beautiful, merely lessen its ugliness, or perhaps add positive aesthetic elements that may or may not outweigh its negative aspects? It is not easy to tell which of these is taking place.

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

### III. NO NEGATIVE JUDGMENTS THESIS

PA might be understood as the idea that negative aesthetic judgments about nature are not possible. Carlson, in his first formulation of PA, claims the following: “The appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive and negative aesthetic

judgments have little or no place.”<sup>17</sup> One important class of negative aesthetic judgments is clearly ruled out when applied to nature, and perhaps this is what Carlson had in mind. As Malcolm Budd puts it, nature “is immune to all the defects to which art is liable in virtue of being the product of intelligent design.”<sup>18</sup> Nature can’t be trite, sentimental, crude, derivative, or shoddy—as can artworks or other objects of human design, because nature was not intentionally designed. In short, the argument is that because there is no intentional design in nature to critically assess, then no negative aesthetic judgments of nature are possible.

This argument problematically assumes that aesthetic evaluation must assess intentional design. Not only is this claim mistaken—clashing colors can be aesthetically evaluated without assessing design—but it also makes *positive* aesthetic evaluation of nature impossible. Some have argued that because nature is not designed, nature appreciation is not aesthetic.<sup>19</sup> We can dismiss this view not only because it flies in the face of the fact that nature appreciation is a paradigm of aesthetic appreciation, but also because it is clearly useless as support for PA for nature.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV. THE EQUAL BEAUTY THESIS

Differential judgments of the aesthetic value of natural items are commonplace and intuitively plausible. For example, the bright red male cardinal is more attractive than his drab female companion and a bloated carp in a pond can’t compare to the sleek and powerful Chinook Salmon on its thousand mile, seven-thousand feet upstream journey to its spawning ground. The equal beauty thesis rejects such comparative aesthetic ranking: All of nature is equally aesthetically valuable.

Equal beauty is not conceptually tied to PA, but is nonetheless often associated or

conflated with it. For example, in his critique of PA, Malcolm Budd often takes aim at the equal beauty thesis. He builds the equal beauty thesis into what he calls “the most ambitious version of positive aesthetics—that *each individual* natural item, *at each moment of its existence* . . . has roughly equal positive overall aes value.”<sup>21</sup> Emily Brady once tied the two: “Because I do not follow positive aesthetics, I believe that some natural and modified environments or objects will be judged to have more value than others. One waterfall is more dramatic than another.”<sup>22</sup>

However, most contemporary philosophical defenders of PA accept degrees of natural beauty. Carlson writes: “Positive aesthetics . . . holds not that all natural things have equal aesthetic value, but only that all have only positive aesthetic value.”<sup>23</sup> Rolston claims that, “Like clouds, seashores, and mountains, forests are never ugly, they are only more or less beautiful; the scale runs from zero upward with no negative domain.”<sup>24</sup>

What reasons might be given for the equal beauty thesis? One argument is that the scientific understanding required for improved aesthetic appreciation of nature will render all of nature equally aesthetically valuable. Once you understand scientifically why things in nature are the way they are and grasp their history, function, and interrelationships, everything in nature will appear equal in aesthetic value.<sup>25</sup> But scientific stories can be more or less aesthetically stimulating and that there are more or less exciting areas of science. For example, Pluto’s story is limited to physics, astronomy, and geology, while Earth’s story not only includes biology in addition, but its geology is much more fascinating. Earth’s scientific story thus has greater aesthetic value than does Pluto’s.

Another argument for equal beauty is that acceptance of degrees of natural beauty has bad consequences for environmental policy, namely, that it will undermine protection of less

beautiful nature. Areas of “outstanding natural beauty” (e.g., Devils Tower, Wyoming) will be protected, while plainer areas will be destroyed, and charismatic megafauna will be saved while the creepy crawlies are left to extinction. Godlovitch argues

If Positive Aesthetics accepts the notion of ‘degrees of beauty,’ . . . the *effect* of such discrimination is tantamount to the denial that things all have positive value . . . Because, as far as protection goes, to declare something to be the least value is tantamount to saying it is the least worth saving. Where not all can be saved—and that is the practical reality—that which is the least worth saving is indistinguishable, for all intents and purposes, from that which is not worth saving.<sup>26</sup>

But all that follows from degrees of natural beauty is that things of lower aesthetic value are not *as* worth saving (on aesthetic grounds) as things of greater aesthetic value. Natural items of lower aesthetic value may well be worth saving (on aesthetic grounds). The way to respond to the practical worry that, once we allow degrees of natural beauty, the less beautiful parts of nature will get left out of consideration is not to deny that there are differential amounts of beauty in nature, but to advocate PA and to educate people about the beauties in all natural items, including the less beautiful ones. Differential judgments of natural aesthetic value are required if aesthetics is going to play a significant role in conservation where priorities must be set.

Additionally, equal beauty in nature is also simply improbable: Budd, for example, credibly argues that given the tremendous diversity of natural items (clouds, seashells, gusts of wind, birdsongs, snake skins, etc.) and the variety of scales on which we can focus, that “it would be remarkable if everything in nature, no matter how nature is cut at the joints, were to have a roughly equal positive overall aesthetic value.”<sup>27</sup>

## V. HARGROVE’S NO NEGATIVE AESTHETIC QUALITIES

It is useful to distinguish individualist from holist versions of PA. Individualistic



versions (embraced by Eugene Hargrove, Carlson, and Glenn Parsons) claim that each natural property or each natural thing is aesthetically positive. In contrast, holistic versions (held by Rolston) claim that nature as a whole—and on the whole—is substantially aesthetically positive, while some anomalous or isolated individuals may not be.

The most comprehensive PA in the literature is Eugene Hargrove's individualistic version. Hargrove's PA denies the presence of negative aesthetic qualities in nature entirely. He writes, "According to positive aesthetics, nature, to the degree that it is natural (that is, unaffected by human beings), is beautiful and has no negative aesthetic qualities."<sup>28</sup> I believe Hargrove's PA is much too expansive. Plausible examples of ugly nature are too numerous and too diverse for all of nature to be invariably aesthetically positive in every detail. Some natural items (or dimensions of natural items) are brutal, clumsy, chaotic, dangerous, disgusting, destructive, grotesque, painful, putrid, spoiled, or terrifying. It does not seem likely that the negative aesthetics of an oozing sore on a Lion's nose could be entirely eliminated by the addition of knowledge, contextualization, or anything else. Rolston powerfully expresses the idea that seeing only beauty in animals, for example, is Pollyannaish:

The critic will complain against admirers of wildlife that they overlook as much as they see. The bison are shaggy, shedding, and dirty. That hawk has lost several flight feathers; that marmot is diseased and scarred. The elk look like the tag end of a rough winter . . . Every wild life is marred by the rips and tears of time and eventually destroyed by them.<sup>29</sup>

The implausibility of the claim that nature has no negative aesthetic qualities becomes even clearer if one believes (as I do) that nature appreciation, unlike much art appreciation, should be multi-sensory.<sup>30</sup> Brady mentions slimy textures, rotting stench, and bizarre sounds.<sup>31</sup> Or consider the pungent odor of a rotting elk carcass, or worse, its sour rubbery taste.

Perhaps strong instinctive reactions of disgust are not aesthetic because they do not allow sustained attention to the perceptual object, but then we can simply focus on somewhat less extreme sensations.<sup>32</sup> The hot, sticky, buggy August weather deep in the American south is an encounter with negative aesthetic qualities in nature.

## VI. PARSONS' ON-BALANCE INDIVIDUALISM AND THE BEAUTY-MAKING ARGUMENT

More defensible, individualist versions of PA have been embraced by Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson. These versions of PA allow for the existence of negative aesthetic qualities in nature but claim that any natural object will also have positive aesthetic qualities whose value is greater, insuring that the natural object is aesthetically positive on balance.<sup>33</sup> In an early paper defending PA, Glenn Parsons describes the view this way: "I take positive aesthetics to be, roughly, the claim that any natural object, appropriately aesthetically appreciated, is on balance aesthetically good."<sup>34</sup>

Parsons argument for this view is that *appropriate* aesthetic appreciation of natural objects maximizes their beauty. He advocates adopting a "beauty-making" criterion that has us choosing categories for appreciating natural objects that "maximize their aesthetic merit."<sup>35</sup> His main rationale for this beauty-making criterion is that it avoids the problem of possibly conflicting aesthetic qualities of natural objects resulting in indeterminacy of aesthetic value of natural items. There are multiple categories and perspectives with which to view any natural item (even if we limit these to scientifically-correct categories, as does Parsons) and the aesthetic qualities and judgments resulting from these different categorizations and perspectives may conflict. A Venus fly-trap whose jaw-like features appear grotesque (Parsons suggests) when

appreciated as a plant does not appear grotesque when we categorize and appreciate it more specifically as a carnivorous plant.<sup>36</sup> So is the Venus fly trap grotesque or not?<sup>37</sup> Parsons' beauty-making criterion solves this potential problem by stipulating that appropriate aesthetic appreciation of a natural object would have us "view the object under the scientific categories in which it truly belongs and which maximize the aesthetic appeal of the object."<sup>38</sup> Because the jaw-like features of a Venus fly trap look grotesque when conceived of as a plant, we should instead conceive it as a carnivorous plant. Thus Parsons builds PA into a theory of appropriate appreciation of nature. "The essential and universal beauty of nature" (i.e., PA), is no longer a "dubious," "shaky," and "implausible empirical hypothesis" but "part of the intuitive data that we use in constructing our theories of appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature."<sup>39</sup>

Parsons' innovative argument for PA raises a host of concerns. While beauty maximization is a frequently mentioned and sometimes used theory for art interpretation, it is a highly problematic one.<sup>40</sup> Consider a movie that has superlative special effects, but its acting and story line leave much to be desired. The beauty-making categorization would have us aesthetically appreciate and evaluate it as a "movie with excellent special effects," rather than as a "movie with poor acting and a weak story line, but some great special effects." Such an evaluation is not just partial, but inadequate. The beauty-making criterion applied to nature would similarly lead to inappropriate appreciation. Our goal for the aesthetic appreciation of nature should not just be to maximize our "aesthetic kicks" from natural objects, but to appreciate them in a rationally justified way. We should not ignore information or categorizations of natural objects simply because they lower aesthetic value. For example, our positive appreciation of wolves in Yellowstone might be diminished when we learn that their

return has decreased the coyote population by approximately fifty percent. But if our goal is appropriate appreciation of wolves, we should not refuse to categorize them as “coyote killers” and insist on thinking of them solely in positive ways. It is unreasonable to focus only on positive aesthetic characterizations rather than to attempt to integrate them with the negative.<sup>41</sup>

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

Perhaps the strongest reason for rejecting Parsons’ beauty-making defense for PA is its implications for environmental policy. By stipulating the truth of PA, Parsons undermines natural beauty’s role in conservation. County commissioners wondering about the aesthetic value of a natural area will balk at the idea that we must think of it in a way that maximizes its aesthetic value when other correct ways to appreciate it give it lower or negative value. If we are trying to decide whether or not the community should publicly fund a new art genre, it would be preposterous to suggest we conceive of it only in those ways that maximize its aesthetic merit and overlook those ways of thinking about the genre that are critical of it. It is equally implausible to suggest that in deciding whether natural areas are worth preserving appropriate assessment must choose the most positive perspective. Developers and anti-environmentalists will justifiably claim bias: Why not require that appropriate appreciation of natural areas conceive of them in ways that *minimizes* their aesthetic value (so they can be more easily

exploited)?

## VII. CARLSON'S ON-BALANCE INDIVIDUALISM AND THE SCIENCE-IS-AESTHETIC ARGUMENT

Allen Carlson has also embraced an on-balance individualistic version of PA: "Each natural thing, at many, if not almost all, levels and conditions of observation, has substantial positive aesthetic value and little, if any, negative aesthetic value."<sup>42</sup> The argument that Carlson has used for 20 years to defend PA is his "science-is-aesthetic argument." Carlson is well-known for articulating and defending scientific cognitivism, the view that appropriate appreciation of nature must be informed by science or natural history (just as appropriate appreciation of art must be informed by art history). Carlson argues that science uses aesthetic criteria: "A significant consideration in the creation and selection of scientific descriptions is whether or not they make the natural world appear aesthetically better . . . more unified, orderly, or harmonious."<sup>43</sup> "Science reads its values into nature; in describing the facts, it does so in such a way that positive aesthetic values are necessarily present."<sup>44</sup> In short, if nature is scientifically intelligible, it is positively aesthetically appreciable.

The most significant problem with this argument is that it is an a priori (or conceptual) argument that virtually guarantees the truth of PA whatever the empirical nature of our world. PA might be an a priori thesis or an empirical one. Verifying or falsifying a priori versions of PA do not require actual experience of the natural world, nor a knowledge of the particulars of natural history more generally. The empirical versions, on the other hand, depend on such experience and knowledge. Carlson's version is significantly a priori because as long as nature is such that science can render it intelligible, it will have positive aesthetic value. On Carlson's

account, the truth of PA is independent of nature's actual characteristics. The existence of sunsets, mountains, rivers, forests, flora, and fauna are not relevant to Carlson's PA. Carlson's argument would work just as well for a lifeless, colorless, and geologically inert nature.<sup>45</sup>

I contend that arguments for PA should be empirical in nature. The contingent characteristics of our world should matter to the truth of PA. Nature's substantial positive aesthetic value is special in part because it need not have been so: Nature could have been relatively boring, significantly chaotic, and generally unappealing. For example, insect/flower co-evolution could have produced putrid smells and dull colors, rather than delightful aromas and spectacular colors. Arguments for PA that ignore the impressive beauty of our world and guarantee that any intelligible world is aesthetically positive fail to do justice to the intuitions and motivations that underlie the thought that our natural world is specially and predominantly beautiful. PA is an empirical thesis to be supported inductively by descriptions and evaluations of the natural world rather than by conceptual arguments about the nature of science (as with Carlson) or theoretical considerations about the nature of aesthetic appreciation (as with Parsons).

#### VIII. PARSONS/CARLSON ON FUNCTIONAL BEAUTY AND PA

In their book on functional beauty, Parsons and Carlson explicitly reject PA applied to all pristine nature. They argue that natural beauty comes from appreciating the fitness for function of natural things, both living and nonliving. We can appreciate the selected fitness for function of a Cheetah whose thin powerful legs and narrow shoulders show that it is built for speed and also the causal role function of mud and water which make wetlands fit to function as wildlife habitat, pollution filters, and a flood buffers. But on the functional account of natural beauty,

because organic nature can malfunction, living things can be aesthetically negative: “Damaged, diseased, and malformed organisms are aesthetically displeasing in virtue of their apparent unfitness for function. Thus, ugliness in nature seems to arise when damage or some kind of insult causes an object to appear dysfunctional.”<sup>46</sup> Although they argue for functions of inorganic nature, they do not believe that inorganic nature can appear dysfunctional. For when the causal powers of an inorganic system are absent, “so is the causal role function” of the system and thus the system is not “malfunctioning” (for it no longer has a function that it is failing to perform). They argue that a rock formation that functions to divert a river is not malfunctioning when it no longer diverts the river; it simply no longer has that function. In contrast, a bird’s broken wing continues to have its function even when it can no longer carry it out. Parsons and Carlson conclude that although “the counter-examples of damaged, diseased, and malformed living things show that Positive Aesthetics does not hold as a general thesis about the natural world,” their explanations about the impossibility of malfunctioning of nonliving nature “shows that Positive Aesthetics does capture something true about the natural beauty of inorganic things.”<sup>47</sup>

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

organisms. Other examples of potentially aesthetically negative inorganic nature include, a once spectacular natural arch that has mostly crumbled, Eaton's "unattractive" shells on the beach, and Brady's example of "deformity in rocks (particularly crystals)" understood "in terms of irregularities or malformation."<sup>48</sup>

## IX. ROLSTON'S NATURE AESTHETIC HOLISM

Rolston's PA holism suggests that nature as a whole and on the whole is substantially beautiful ("a wonderland"). For some kinds of natural objects, each instance of them is aesthetically positive: "Landscapes always supply beauty, never ugliness. They should unfailingly generate in us favorable experiences if we are suitably perceptive."<sup>49</sup> Rolston explicitly contrasts this PA for nature with art: "it would seem implausible to say of human works of art that they are never badly done, yet here the positive thesis claims that virgin landscapes are always (more or less) well formed aesthetically."<sup>50</sup>

Unlike individualistic PA, Rolston's holism "does not deny that some items in nature are ugly when viewed from certain perspectives."<sup>51</sup> "Those who are not programmatic nature romantics will admit" the existence of "itemized, individual ugliness in nature."<sup>52</sup> However, when individual ugly items are appreciated contextually, as they should be, their ugliness typically diminishes. Rolston argues for nature's "systemic beauty,"<sup>53</sup> the idea that nature has a tendency toward beauty that turns ugliness into beauty. He writes:

Virgin nature is not at every concrete locus aesthetically good: consider a crippled fish that has escaped an alligator. . . . But ugliness, though present at times in particulars, is not the last word . . . nature will bring beauty out of this ugliness . . . when the point event, which is intrinsically ugly, is stretched out instrumentally in the process, the ugliness mellows—though it does not disappear—and makes its contribution to systemic beauty and to beauty in later-coming individuals. . . . There is ugliness, but even more, there are transformative forces that sweep toward beauty . . . nature is a scene of beauty ever reasserting itself in the face of



destruction.<sup>54</sup>

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

Is Rolston's empirical claim about nature's tendency toward beauty true? One supportive argument grows out of Parsons and Carlson's suggestion that ugliness in nature is due to "damaged, diseased, or malformed" living creatures, for there is a clear drive in nature against this type of ugliness. Damage to living things (e.g., a wound or broken limb) tends to be resisted, repaired, or regenerated. Organisms fight disease and sickness and strive to heal themselves. Predation, a fundamental feature of nature, also works against this type of ugliness for predators tend to cull sick and crippled prey, while the healthy, strong, and well-formed escape. More generally, natural selection works against ugliness in nature by editing out malfunctioning organisms. I also think it plausible that geologically the earth has a beauty heading. Earth builds mountains and has a water cycle which generates waterfalls, rivers, lakes, snow, and thunderstorms, and these add significantly to the beauty of the planet.

Criticism of Rolston's PA include Malcolm Budd suggestion that Rolston commits the fallacy of division: "The idea that each ecosystem (or other natural system) has a positive overall aesthetic value implies nothing about the aesthetic values of the natural items it contains considered in themselves—in particular, that these are always positive."<sup>55</sup> But this ignores that Rolston's PA is holistic and that he is not defending the positive aesthetic value of each

individual natural item. Yuriko Saito alleges that Rolston's insistence on contextualization—"Every item must be seen not in framed isolation but framed by its environment"<sup>56</sup>—results in the unappealing conclusion that "the only legitimate object for our aesthetic experience of nature is the global ecosphere."<sup>57</sup> Defending his claim that ugliness can be "transformed in ecosystemic perspective," Rolston writes:

If hikers come upon the rotting carcass of an elk, full of maggots, they find it revolting. . . . If we enlarge our scope. . . . we get further categories for interpretation. The rotting elk returns to the humus, its nutrients recycled; the maggots become flies, which become food for the birds; natural selection results in a better-adapted elk for the next generation. . . . . The momentary ugliness is only a still shot in an ongoing motion picture. . . . The clash of values, pulled into symbiosis, is not an ugly but a beautiful thing. The world is not a jolly place, not a Walt Disney world, but one of struggling, somber beauty. The dying is the shadow side of the flourishing."<sup>58</sup>

Rolston rightly insists on the importance of context in aesthetic appreciation. Just as an appropriate appreciation of a part of an artwork requires that we appreciate its role in the entire work, so too an appropriate appreciation of natural items requires that we consider them in light of their role in the system of which they are a part. Aesthetically appreciating a rotting elk carcass in a zoo is very different from appreciating it in its context in the wild. Insisting on contextualization of the aesthetic appreciation of a natural item is not the same as changing the subject of appreciation to the system that provides the context.

## X. CONCLUSION

PA is a provocative thesis worthy of serious consideration. While initially unlikely, it becomes more plausible once one pays attention to the role of knowledge in nature appreciation. A knowledge-based PA is useful in combating the insistence on the easy beauty of the scenery cult and other narrow sorts of nature appreciation. PA is a thesis that comes in a variety of

forms, including implausible claims of equal beauty in nature and that nature has no negative aesthetic qualities. That each natural thing has overall positive aesthetic value on balance is challenged by the existence of diseased, damaged, and malformed living things. Carlson's science-is-aesthetic and Parsons' beauty-making arguments for PA fail because they ignore the actual contingent beauty of our world and this makes the versions of PA they support unsuitable for conservation. Holmes Rolston's version of PA is by far the most persuasive of any developed in the literature. Better than any other, it meets the desiderata I set out for a plausible and environmentally fruitful articulation of PA for nature: (1) It accommodates the existence of negative aesthetics in nature; (2) It does not apply to the rest of the world (including art); (3) It is an empirical thesis, defended on empirical grounds, and dependent on the actual contingent characteristics of nature; and (4) It is a doctrine useful for conservation of nature. A holistic version of PA along the lines of Rolston's is the best we can do to support the idea that nature—to the extent it is not influenced by humans—is specially and predominantly beautiful.<sup>59</sup>

## Notes

1. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, trans. by James G. Lennox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 645a16-17.
2. John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), p. 4.
3. Holmes Rolston, III, *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986/1979), pp. 44-45.
4. Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
5. Allen Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 5-34, reprinted in Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), quote at p. 72. Other philosophers who have embraced PA include Bryan Norton ["When aesthetic experience is understood in its deeper dimensions, informed by ecological and evolutionary science, it is necessarily positive": See *Why Preserve Natural Variety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 113]; Eugene Hargrove ["Nature is always beautiful and never ugly": See *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), p. 184]; Janna Thompson ["The idea that all of nature, above all, wild nature, should be judged to be beautiful is extremely appealing, and not one that I want to dispute": See "Aesthetics and the Value of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995): 291-305, at p. 296]; Robert Elliot ["I endorse . . . 'positive aesthetics'; namely, the view that all natural objects have aesthetic value": See *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 61]; Glenn Parsons ["The essential and universal beauty of nature is not a dubious idea that we must argue for based on whatever our conception of appropriate aesthetic appreciation happens to be, but rather part of the intuitive data that we use in constructing our theories of appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature": See "Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): 279-95, at p. 294—though he has more recently heavily qualified his acceptance]; and John A. Fisher who has defended PA for wild animals considered as a member of the species they are: "All (Wild) Animals are Beautiful" (unpublished manuscript, 2010).
6. Stan Godlovitch, "Evaluating Nature Aesthetically," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 113-125, at p. 121. Note that Godlovitch is not endorsing this claim.
7. Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.126.
8. Emily Brady, "Ugliness and Nature," *Enrahonar* 45 (2010): 27-40, at p. 39.
9. Marcia Eaton, "Beauty and Ugliness in and out of Context," in Matthew Kieran, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 47-48.
10. T. J. Diffey, "Natural Beauty without Metaphysics," in Salim Keman and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty, and the Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 48.
11. Yuriko, Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," in A. Berleant and A. Carlson, eds., Special Issue: Environmental Aesthetics, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 102-111.
12. These phrases are from Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature."
13. Holmes Rolston, III. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 241.
14. Yuriko, Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," p. 105.

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15. I do not think an analogous case can be made for the claim that additional information will turn boring artworks or monotonous track housing into aesthetically positive human artifacts. In part this is because we will often discover that inept or morally dubious behaviors underlie the aesthetically negative products of humanity.
16. Brady, "Ugliness and Nature," p. 30.
17. Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," p. 72.
18. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, p. 98.
19. For example, Robert Elliot once argued that "an apparently integral part of aesthetic evaluation depends on viewing the aesthetic object as an intentional object, as an artifact, as something that is shaped by the purposes and designs of its author." On whether responses to nature are aesthetic, he says, "I agree that they are not." Robert Elliot, "Faking Nature" *Inquiry* 25 (1982): 81-93, reprinted in William Throop, ed., *Environmental Restoration* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, Prometheus Press, 2000), quote at p. 79.
20. The no negative aesthetic judgment thesis for nature also ignores the existence of negative comparative judgments: That impala is awkward compared to her more graceful cousins. Of course such negative comparative judgments are compatible with all the objects involved being aesthetically positive (though some are more so than others). This point depends on rejecting the equal beauty thesis, as I do below.
21. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, p. 127.
22. Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh, Great Britain: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 214.
23. Allen Carlson, "Budd and Brady on the Aesthetics of Nature," *Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2005): 107-114 at p. 112.
24. Rolston, Holmes, III., "Aesthetic Experience in Forests," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 157-166, at p. 164.
25. I thank John Fisher for this way of putting the point. In "All (Wild) Animals are Beautiful," Fisher not only defends PA for wild animals considered as a member of the species they are, but also defends the claim that they have equal aesthetic value. Fisher thinks of individual animals as performances of species which are themselves aesthetic masterpieces (so individual animals are like performances of great works of art): As to whether a "Bengal tiger is more beautiful than the saltwater crocodile" he says, "such comparative value claims are misguided for great works of art and should be equally resisted for animal species . . . Each species has its own story with its own unique and marvelous solution to the problem of ecological survival." This argument for equal beauty is limited in its scope, applying only to animals (or possibly all living individuals) regarded in a certain sort of way.
26. Stan Godlovitch, "Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998): 180-197, at p. 195).
27. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, p. 127. Some might oppose differential aesthetic ranking of natural objects because they think the aesthetic value of many of these objects is incommensurable: Aesthetically comparing the haunting call of a loon with the grace of a gazelle makes as little sense as aesthetically comparing Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony with Michelangelo's David. But especially with nature, such comparisons are sometimes practically necessary. Consider David Brower's infamous decision to go along with the Glenn Canyon dam on the Colorado River in order to prevent a dam on the Green River in Dinosaur National Monument, choosing to protect one wonder of nature for another. Wallace Stegner a writer and friend of Brower's who had floated Glenn Canyon,

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told him. "Between us, Dave, Dinosaur doesn't hold a candle to it." See <http://www.commondreams.org/views/110700-108.htm>

28. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, p. 177. Although Hargrove defends this version of PA, rather than providing a "proof" of it, he is more concerned with showing that an "argument appropriately grounded in our Western traditions can be formulated." Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, p. 200.

29. Holmes Rolston, III., "Beauty and the Beast" in Daniel J. Decker and Gary R. Goff, eds., *Valuing Wildlife: Economic and Social Perspectives* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987), p. 192.

30. Emily Brady argues forcefully for the importance of multi-sensuous aesthetic responses to nature in *Aesthetics and the Environment*, pp. 123-128. Carolyn Korsmeyer has argued that taste and smell are important aesthetic modes. See her *Making Sense of Taste: Taste, Food, and Philosophy*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). See also Frank Sibley's thorough defense of the aesthetic nature of taste and smell in "Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics," in John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox, eds., *Approaches to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics, Frank Sibley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 207-255. For an argument limiting aesthetic responses to sight and sound, because the pleasures of the other senses are not sufficiently "disembodied" to be aesthetic, see Glenn Parsons' *Aesthetics and Nature* (New York: Continuum, 2008). One problem with this view is that it rules out what I take to be a paradigm of the aesthetic appreciation of nature: The enjoyment of the wind in your face, the sun on you back, the strain in your legs while hiking in the mountains on a beautiful summer day.

31. Brady, "Ugliness and Nature."

32. Brady, "Ugliness and Nature," p. 7.

33. A PA that simply claimed that there is some aesthetic good in any natural thing, although plausible, does not make nature specially beautiful, for as Budd points out the "claim that every natural item has some aesthetically valuable quality or qualities" is "a claim that would appear to be almost as plausible for artefacts as for nature." Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, p. 98. The view is also compatible with all natural items having negative aesthetic qualities, that outweigh their positive qualities. On-balance individualism must deal with the potential problem of how to individuate the natural objects it is claiming are aesthetically positive in order to fully develop and defend its version of PA. (John Fisher calls this "the problem of scope" and asks "Should we take PA as making a claim...about ever possible part or way of describing and chopping up nature....the last two inches of a given Zebra's tail or the conjunction of a Zebra and the dirt underneath her at time t1. . . toenails and nose hairs . . . individual wrinkled elbows and patches of molt?"). One advantage of an holistic PA is that it does not require specifying such an ontology.

34. Glenn Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics," p. 288.

35. Glenn Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics," p. 295.

36. Glenn Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics," p. 288.

37. Kendall Walton solves this problem by adopting a category relative view of nature's aesthetic value: Natural objects have different aesthetic qualities depending on which way we categorize them and (unlike art objects) there is no correct way to categorize them for aesthetic purposes. Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 339-67. Parsons is not willing to accept such a special relativity for nature aesthetics and so he needs another solution.

38. Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics," p. 292.

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39. Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics," p. 294. Note that Parsons' beauty-making suggestion also provides a response to an important problem with invoking science in the aesthetic appreciation of nature: While scientific conceptualization can enhance aesthetic appreciation of nature, it can also detract from it by clouding the object in a "fog of details or abstraction" (John Fisher's language). The beauty-making criterion would rule out such (correct) scientific conceptualization as aesthetically inappropriate.
40. Kendall Walton, for example, uses beauty maximization as one of his criteria for correct categorization of art. See Walton, "Categories of Art," p. 347.
41. Compare Ronald Hepburn's suggestion that it trivializes aesthetic appreciation of nature to engage in a "falsifying selectivity, that turns away from the real work of beak, tooth, and claw" by ignoring that "I am going to be hurt and saddened when a lion tears the zebra to pieces." Hepburn, "Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 72.
42. Allen Carlson, "'We See Beauty Now Where We Could Not See it Before': Rolston's Aesthetics of Nature," in Christopher Preston and Wayne Ouderkirk, eds., *Nature, Value, Duty: Life on Earth with Holmes Rolston, III* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2007). pp. 122-23.
43. Allen Carlson, "Hargrove, Positive Aesthetics and Indifferent Creativity," *Philosophy and Geography* 5 (2002): 224 -234, at p. 229.
44. Carlson, "Rolston's Aesthetics of Nature," p. 115
45. Compare Eugene Hargrove's criticism that Carlson makes science (and scientists) the source of nature's beauty, rather than nature being the source of its beauty. "I am troubled by Carlson's claim that the creativity involved in the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects is in the human activity producing aesthetic categories, not in the activity that produced the natural objects themselves." Hargrove, "Carlson and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Philosophy and Geography* 5 (2002): 213-223, at p. 217. "Positive aesthetics should not be justified in such a way that the beauty and creativity of the natural is reduced to something that is merely attributed to nature." Hargrove, "Carlson and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," p. 223.
46. Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133.
47. Parsons and Carlson, *Functional Beauty*, p. 136.
48. Brady, "Ugliness and Nature," p. 35, fn. 24.
49. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 237. Compare Budd: "Many biotic kinds (all flowers, perhaps) undoubtedly possess a positive overall aesthetic value. There are even kinds of natural object (galaxy, star, ocean) or occurrence (exploding volcano) which are such that . . . each instance of them is sublime." Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, p. 103.
50. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 237.
51. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 237.
52. Rolston, *Environmental Ethic*, p. 240.
53. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 241.

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54. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, pp. 240-241
  55. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, p. 196.
  56. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 239.
  57. Yuriko Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," p. 104.
  58. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, p. 239.
  59. For helpful comments, I thank David Clowney, Don Maier, Glenn Parsons, and especially John Fisher.