

THE AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF NATURE:
A “HUMANIZING” APPROACH

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The task of aesthetically appreciating natural environments typically tugs contemporary theorists in two directions: the desire to enhance our sensual experience of nature is tempered by the ethical impulse to establish a sense of respect for the planet we inhabit. One philosopher, Yuriko Saito, argues that these drives can be reconciled by imbuing our aesthetic theories with an explicitly moral component, which would affirm the intrinsic value of nature by recognizing its autonomous existence independent of our “humanizing” concepts.¹ But while this is a commendable sentiment, I worry that its fixation on a moral principle, which in itself can be challenged, also runs the risk of restricting further potentialities for meaningful connection with nature. Thus, my critique consists in two claims, namely, that 1) our “humanization” of nature cannot be so easily transcended as Saito believes, and that 2) by embracing certain of the humanizing tendencies inherent in our theories we can still rival, if not exceed, the “moral” impact of Saito’s approach and at the same time strengthen our encounters with nature. The justification of these claims rests in the ability of humans to regard the natural environment not, as Saito intends, as a distinct moral entity, but as something with which they themselves *identify* in a sense. As this paper proceeds, it should become clear what is meant by such identification, what it entails, and why it is ethically and aesthetically significant.

The basis of my disagreement with Saito, as I hinted at above, is her preoccupation with a conception of morality that I find lacking. Drawing from the ideas of Yi-Fu Tuan, Saito suggests that the essence of morality is a capacity to overcome one’s perspective and, in so doing, to listen to and discern the perspective of another being. Applying this dynamic to nature, she arrives at the following conclusion (reiterated throughout her paper in a variety of ways): “The appropriate

¹ Yuriko Saito, “Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms,” in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (New York: Broadview Press, 2004).

aesthetic appreciation of nature...must embody a moral capacity for recognizing and respecting nature as having its own reality apart from our presence, with its own story to tell.”² This “story” metaphor is echoed especially frequently; earlier in her paper, for example, Saito says that her vision “would involve listening to nature’s own story and appreciating it on its own terms, instead of imposing *our* story upon it.”³ And of course “imposing *our* story” (in some sense or other) on nature is also exactly what Saito means by her many disapproving references to our “humanization” of nature. But again, precisely this assumption—that nature has a “story” to tell apart from that which we give it—is what I object to.

Helpfully, Saito anticipates a couple of my surface-level objections. The first is that her preferred exemplars of a sympathetic understanding of nature—science, folklore, mythology—are themselves human constructions and mere *interpretations* of nature. This is obvious enough with, say, folk narratives; but even science, Saito willingly concedes, necessarily “humanizes” nature inasmuch as scientific concepts, categories, and methods are products of our distinctively human minds. Her rebuttal, of course, is that this is all a lot of nitpicking, and that what separates scientific “stories” from mere historical or cultural associations is that, whereas the latter retain their value for us only so long as the meanings of natural objects are attached to human events and customs, the former aim to appreciate nature for “what it is” and only incidentally, and thus inconsequentially, enable human qualities to permeate our knowledge.⁴

But if my objection is a lot of nitpicking, Saito’s reply seems to me a lot of hand-waving. Indeed, I believe that she greatly downplays the degree to which our human starting-point guides

² Saito, 151.

³ Saito, 142.

⁴ For her full argument, see Saito, 147.

our understanding of, and interactions with, nature. Even supposing that Saito's defense of the impartiality of science were convincing, there remains the fact that this entire discussion has been organized from the beginning within a distinctly human framework—simply to suggest that nature has a story to tell is to *personify* nature, and the same goes for any attempt to conceive of nature as an autonomous, independent, moral subject (after all, morality is just about the most “human” thing about humans). Moreover, one might call into question whether it's even possible to talk about a natural world existing independent of human influence in this globalist, industrial, technocratic 21st century. All the evidence points toward a world that is profoundly, inextricably interconnected.

In fact my position goes further: implicit in a person's aesthetic appreciation of nature is that person's experience of, not merely relating to nature, but *identifying* with nature. This is an insight that can, I think, be intuited by a close analysis of various personal reflections on nature, a few of which I will review in a moment. But first, it may be advantageous to consider why this perspective of identifying with nature is worth adopting—in other words, why it's more than some idiosyncrasy from the ivory tower. The best answer I can give right now derives from the work of another contemporary philosopher, Stan Godlovitch, who justifies his own discussion of the aesthetics of nature with two principles: “*appreciative expansiveness and magnanimity*” and “*experiential richness*,” the former being the claim that, all else being equal, it is preferable to admire and enjoy more things than less, the latter being the sentiment that it is desirable to live a life full of varied experiences.⁵ Both principles are clearly relevant to my purposes, but the second in particular supplies a useful starting point: if I can convincingly demonstrate that the

⁵ Stan Godlovitch, “Creativity in Nature,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999): 25-26. JSTOR.

mindset of identifying with nature leads to richer and more varied experiences, then my perspective is worth taking seriously.

Again, I believe this can be demonstrated by a number of personal reflections on nature, four of which I will provide now. “[We] contemplate Nature’s methods of landscape creation,” writes John Muir, who establishes a connection between the creative forces of nature and those of human agency, “and read the records she has carved on the rocks.”⁶ “An adult must learn to be yielding and careless like a child if he were to enjoy nature polymorphously,” advises Yi-Fu Tuan, who evidently finds a sense of freshness in nature as in his childlike disposition and his nostalgia for simpler times, “He needs to slip into old clothes so that he could feel free to stretch out on the hay beside the brook and bathe in a meld of physical sensations.”⁷ Contemporary philosopher Emily Brady shares a particularly compelling experience, as she projects onto a seemingly fragile flower the human qualities of resilience and hidden beauty: “...to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of an alpine flower, I might somatically imagine what it is like to live and grow under harsh conditions. Without imagining such conditions I would be unable to appreciate the remarkable strength hidden so beautifully in the delicate quality of the flower.”⁸ Finally, even Immanuel Kant, who, much like Saito (though for very different reasons), insists on a stringent division between people and nature, may simply be misinterpreting his own feelings. Perhaps the aesthetic value of nature lies not, as Kant believes, in our ability to fear its awesomeness while simultaneously elevating ourselves mentally, with the aid of reason, above it (this experience is

⁶ Quoted in Saito, 149.

⁷ Quoted in Allen Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 3 (Spring, 1979): 272. JSTOR.

⁸ Emily Brady, “Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (Spring, 1998): 143. JSTOR.

what Kant calls the “sublime”), but in our realization that we, too, are part of this awesome and frightful world, and are equally capable, for better or worse, of performing powerful acts:

...consider bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind...we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul’s fortitude above its middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for Nature’s seeming omnipotence...⁹

In laying out all these quotes I hope to have pointed the reader toward my main idea, which is, in general terms, that one reason why humans are able to appreciate nature aesthetically is that it identifies them emotionally with a colorful array of primal, visceral, sometimes merely peaceful qualities that are accessible to everyone but often go untapped in ordinary life.

By now, however, Saito would likely be shaking her head in frustration. How, she might ask, is this serving to reorient ourselves toward nature in a more moral way? Isn’t this view of our relation to the environment simply feeding into humanity’s egocentric, self-centered tendencies? On the contrary, I believe that my perspective is actually morally (if we must use that word) superior to Saito’s in that it would encourage us to take better care of both ourselves and the environment, for the simple reason that people are, in fact, a little egocentric—not in any morally repugnant sense, but in the sense that we generally take good care of things that are personal to us, and we are concerned with maintaining the health of our bodies. To literally

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 (1790)), 120.

identify one's body with the environment, then, would certainly be a powerful incentive for one to respect nature. Moreover, inasmuch as other humans also identify with the environment, one would thereby be respecting one's neighbors. So, though this may not be the most *intentionally* moral approach, it would have a very moral outcome.

As I have tried to illustrate

Th, our understanding of nature, whatever form it may take, simply cannot be stripped of its "humanizing" qualities. This does not, however, entail an unresolvable conflict with any rigid moral principles. Rather, it reveals to us the superfluity of such principles, and assures us that we find reason enough in our common humanity to be respectful of ourselves and others, including the environment, which, as an object of our aesthetic appreciation, has the capacity to arouse dramatic emotions. The fulfillment of this capacity is attainable, not by forcing a distinction between people and the environment, but by embracing the intermingled identities of each.

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