Aesthetic Appreciation of the Natural Environment

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The Central Problem of the Aesthetics of Nature

In his classic work, *The Sense of Beauty*, aesthetician, philosopher, and poet George Santayana characterizes the natural landscape as follows:

The natural landscape is an indeterminate object; it almost always contains enough diversity to allow... great liberty in selecting, emphasizing, and grouping its elements, and it is furthermore rich in suggestion and in vague emotional stimulus. A landscape to be seen has to be composed... then we feel that the landscape is beautiful... The promiscuous natural landscape cannot be enjoyed in any other way.1

With these few words, Santayana poses the central question of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. The natural landscape, he says, is indeterminate and promiscuous. To be appreciated, it must be composed. Yet it is so rich in diversity, suggestion, and emotional stimulus that it allows great liberty in selecting, emphasizing, and grouping. Thus the problem is what and how to select, emphasize, and group and what and how to compose for appropriate appreciation.

There is no parallel problem, however, concerning the appreciation of art. With traditional works of art, we typically know both the what and the how of appropriate aesthetic appreciation. We know what to appreciate in that we know the difference between a work and what is not it or a part of it and between its aesthetically relevant qualities and those not aesthetically relevant. We know that we should appreciate the sound of the piano in the concert hall and not the coughing that interrupts
it; we know that we should appreciate a painting's delicacy and balance but not where it happens to hang. Similarly, we know how to appreciate works of art in that we know the modes of appreciation appropriate to different kinds of works. We know that we should listen to the sound of a piano and look at the surface of a painting. Moreover, we know that we must use different approaches for different types of paintings, for instance. Philosopher Paul Ziff introduced the notion of "acts of aspection," pointing out that different acts of aspection are suitable for different types of works and therefore that "to contemplate a painting is to perform one act of aspection; to scan it is to perform another; to study, observe, survey, inspect, examine, scrutinize, are still other acts of aspection.... I survey a Tintoretto, while I scan an H. Bosch. . . . Do you drink brandy in the way you drink beer?" 2

With art, our knowledge of what and how to appreciate is grounded in the fact that works of art are our creations. We know what are and are not parts of works, which of their qualities are aesthetically relevant, and how to appreciate them, because we have made them for the purpose of aesthetic appreciation—and to fulfill that purpose, this knowledge must be accessible. In making an object, we know what we make, and thus we know its parts, its purposes, and what to do with it. In creating a painting, we know that it ends at its frame, that its colors and lines are aesthetically important, and that we are to look at it rather than listen to it. Moreover, works of different types have different kinds of boundaries and different foci of aesthetic significance and so demand different acts of aspection. Thus in knowing the classification, we know what and how to appropriately appreciate. Ziff again:

Generally speaking, a different act of aspection is performed in connection with works belonging to different schools of art, which is why the classification of style is of the essence. Venetian paintings lend themselves to an act of aspection involving attention to balanced masses; contours are of no importance. . . . The Florentine school demands attention to contours, the linear style predominates. Look for light in a Claude, for color in a Bonnard, for contoured volumes in a Signorelli. 3

Even though we create art and so know what and how to appreciate it, this does not solve the central problem of aesthetically appreciating nature. Nature is not art, and it is not our creation. Rather, it is our whole natural environment, our natural world. It surrounds us and confronts us, in Santayana's words, indeterminately and promiscuously, rich in diversity, suggestion, and stimulus. But what are we to appreciate in all this richness? What are the limits and the proper foci of appreciation? And how are we to appreciate it: what are the appropriate modes of appreciation and acts of aspection? Moreover, what are the grounds on which we can justifiably answer these questions?

Some Artistic Approaches to Appreciating Nature

In regard to art, we know how to answer the questions of what and how to appreciate, so it seems justifiable to model our aesthetic appreciation of nature on our aesthetic appreciation of works of art. Indeed, various art-based models of appreci-
Aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment have often been accepted as the basis for deciding what and how to aesthetically appreciate the natural environment.

One such approach may be called the Object Model. Consider our appreciation of a nonrepresentational sculpture, for example, a Brancusi, such as *Bird in Space* (1919). We appreciate the actual physical object; the aesthetically relevant features are the object’s sensuous and design qualities and certain abstract expressive qualities. Such a sculpture need not relate to anything outside itself; it is a self-contained aesthetic unit. The Brancusi has no direct representational ties to the rest of reality and no relational connections with its immediate surroundings. Nonetheless, it has significant aesthetic qualities: it glistens, has balance and grace, and expresses flight itself. Clearly, we can aesthetically appreciate objects of nature in accordance with the Object Model. We can appreciate a rock or a piece of driftwood in the same way we appreciate a Brancusi: we may actually or imaginatively remove the object from its surroundings and concentrate on its sensuous and possible expressive qualities. Natural objects often are appreciated in precisely this way; think of mantelpieces littered with rocks and pieces of driftwood. Moreover, the model fits the fact that natural objects, like nonrepresentational sculpture, have no representational ties to the rest of reality.

Nonetheless, in many ways the Object Model is not suitable for an aesthetic appreciation of nature. Santayana notes the natural environment’s indeterminateness, and he also observes that nature contains objects that have determinate forms. But when we direct our appreciation specifically to them, we no longer have a genuine aesthetic appreciation of nature. Santayana’s observation marks a distinction between appreciating nature and appreciating the objects of nature. In fact, one understanding of the Object Model is that when the objects of nature are appreciated in this way, they become “ready-mades” or “found art.” That is, the natural objects are granted what is called *artistic enfranchisement*, and they, like such artifacts as Marcel Duchamp’s urinal, which he enfranchised as a work called *Fountain* (1917), become works of art. In this way, the questions of what and how to aesthetically appreciate are answered, but for art rather than for nature; the appreciation of nature is lost in the shuffle. Appreciating a sculpture that once was driftwood is, therefore, no closer to appreciating nature than is appreciating a purse that once was a sow’s ear.

The Object Model does not, however, have to turn natural objects into art objects. It may examine the objects of nature simply by actually or imaginatively removing them from their surroundings. We need not appreciate the rock on our mantelpiece as a ready-made sculpture; rather we can appreciate it only as an aesthetically pleasing physical object. In this case, our appreciation focuses on the object’s sensuous qualities and a few expressive qualities: our rock has a wonderfully smooth and gracefully curved surface and expresses soli­dity. Nonetheless, the Object Model remains problematic when removing natural objects from their surroundings. That is, the model is suitable for self-contained art objects, whose environments of creation or display are not aesthetically relevant. Conversely, natural objects are a part of and have been formed in their environments of creation by natural forces at work within them. Thus, natural objects’ environments of creation are aesthetically relevant, and their environments of display are equally
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relevant, by being either the same as or different from their environments of creation.

To appreciate the extent of the Object Model’s problem, consider our rock again: on the mantelpiece, it seems gracefully curved and expressive of solidity, but in its environment of creation, it has more and different aesthetic qualities—qualities resulting from the connections between it and its environment. The rock reflects the forces that shaped and continue to shape it and displays for aesthetic appreciation its place in and its relationships to its environment. In addition, it may not express those qualities, such as solidity, that it appears to express on the mantelpiece. The problem for the Object Model is a dilemma: either we remove the object from its environment or we leave it where it is. If we remove the object, the model can answer the questions of what and how to appreciate the rock, but this will result in the appreciation of a limited set of aesthetic qualities. But if we do not remove the object, the Object Model will not be suitable for much of the appreciation that is possible. The model also will not be able to answer the what and how questions. In either case, the Object Model is a poor paradigm for an appreciation of nature.

A second art-based approach to aesthetic appreciation of nature may be called the Landscape Model. In one of its senses, landscape means a prospect—usually an imposing prospect—seen from a specific standpoint and distance. Landscape painting traditionally represents such prospects, and the Landscape Model is closely tied to this genre. In appreciating landscape painting, the focus is typically not on the actual object, the painting, or the represented object—the prospect—but on the representation of the object and its features. Thus, our appreciative emphasis is on qualities essential to representing a prospect: the visual qualities relating to line, color, and overall design. Such features are central to landscape painting and are the focus of the Landscape Model. By directing our appreciation to the artistic and scenic qualities of line, color, and design, this model encourages perceiving and appreciating nature as if it were a landscape painting, an imposing prospect to be viewed from a specific position and distance.

Historically, the Landscape Model has been significant in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. It is the direct descendant of the eighteenth-century concept of the picturesque. Picturesque literally means “picture-like” and suggests a mode of appreciation that divides the natural world into scenes, each aiming at an ideal dictated by art, especially landscape painting. The concept guided the aesthetic appreciation of early tourists as they pursued picturesque scenery with the help of the “Claude-glass.” Named for the famous landscape painter Claude Lorrain, this small, tinted, convex mirror was designed for viewing the landscape as it would appear in a landscape painting. Thomas West’s popular guidebook to the Lake District (1778) says of the glass that

where the objects are great and near, it removes them to a due distance, and shews them in the soft colours of nature, and most regular perspective the eye can perceive, art teach, or science demonstrate... to the glass is reserved the finished picture, in highest colouring, and just perspectives.

In a similar fashion, modern tourists frequently show a preference for the Landscape Model by visiting “scenic view-
points” where the actual space between tourist and prescribed “view” constitutes “a due distance” that aids the impression of “soft colours of nature, and the most regular perspective the eye can perceive.” The “regularity” of the perspective is enhanced by the position of the viewpoint itself. Modern tourists also look for “the finished picture, in highest colouring, and just perspective,” whether this is the “scene” framed and balanced in a camera viewfinder or the result in the form of a color print. Such prints and the “artistically” composed postcard and calendar reproductions of the “scene” often receive more appreciation than does what they reproduce. Geographer Ronald Rees points out that “the taste has been for a view, for scenery, not for landscape in the original . . . meaning of the term, which denotes our ordinary, everyday surroundings. The average modern sightseer . . . is interested not in natural forms and processes, but in a prospect.”

The Landscape Model’s answers to the what and how questions cause a number of thinkers some uneasiness. The model dictates appreciation of the natural environment as if it were a series of landscape paintings. It requires dividing nature into scenes, each to be viewed from a specific position by a viewer separated by an appropriate spatial (and emotional?) distance. It reduces a walk in the natural environment to something like a stroll through an art gallery. Consequently, some people, like the human ecologist Paul Shepard, find the Landscape Model so misguided that they doubt the wisdom of any aesthetic approach to nature. Others regard the model as ethically and environmentally worrisome. For example, after contending that modern tourists are interested only in prospects, Rees concludes that the picturesque “simply confirmed our anthropocentrism by suggesting that nature exists to please as well as to serve us. Our ethics . . . have lagged behind our aesthetics. It is an unfortunate lapse which allows us to abuse our local environments and venerate the Alps and the Rockies.”

The Landscape Model is questionable also on aesthetic grounds, as it construes the environment as if it were a static, essentially “two-dimensional” representation; it reduces it to a scene or a view. But the natural environment is not a scene, not a representation, not static, and not two dimensional. In short, the model requires appreciating the environment not as what it is and for the qualities it has, but as something it is not and for qualities it does not have. The model is unsuited to the actual nature of the object of appreciation. Consequently it, like the Object Model, not only unduly limits appreciation—in this case to certain artistic and scenic qualities—it also misleads it. Philosopher Ronald Hepburn puts the point in general terms:

Supposing that a person’s aesthetic education . . . instils in him the attitudes, the tactics of approach, the expectations proper to the appreciation of art works only, such a person will either pay very little aesthetic heed to natural objects or else heed them in the wrong way. He will look—and of course look in vain—for what can be found and enjoyed only in art.

Some Alternative Approaches to Appreciating Nature

If traditional art-based approaches to aesthetic appreciation of nature, like the
Object Model and the Landscape Model, either unduly limit or mislead appreciation, how should we deal with Santayana's indeterminate natural environment? How can we correctly decide what and how to appreciate aesthetically? Perhaps we can learn from the failures of the art-based approaches, which limit and mislead appreciation largely because they do not adequately acknowledge the true nature of the object of appreciation. This object is our natural environment, both natural and an environment. But in focusing on particular natural objects, the Object Model overlooks the environmental dimension, and in focusing on artistic and scenic features, the Landscape Model downplays the natural dimension. Awareness of these failures has inspired other approaches to appreciating nature that acknowledge that such an appreciation must recognize the true nature of its object and cannot simply be assimilated to an aesthetic appreciation of art.

One alternative, aware of the problems of appreciation governed by the idea of the picturesque and underwritten by the Landscape Model, is skeptical of aesthetic approaches to nature in general. Indeed, it simply denies the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation of nature. This position accepts the traditional account of aesthetic appreciation of art but emphasizes that nature is natural, not art, and not our creation. It argues that aesthetic appreciation necessarily involves aesthetic evaluation, which judges the object of appreciation as the achievement of its creator. Therefore, because nature, unlike art, is not our creation, indeed is not the product of any designing intellect, our appreciation of it is not aesthetic. One version of this position is called the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic. Environmental philosopher Robert Elliot elaborates this view, claiming that our appreciative responses to nature do not "count as aesthetic responses." He holds that a "judgemental element in aesthetic evaluation serves to differentiate it from environmental evaluation. . . . [For] . . . [e]valuating works of art involves explaining them, and judging them, in terms of their author's intentions; . . . locating them in some tradition and in some special milieu. . . . [but] . . . Nature is not a work of art."13

A second alternative to the art-based approaches to appreciating nature is more troubled by the limitations of the Object Model and concentrates on the environmental dimension of our natural environment. It argues that traditional art-based approaches, as exemplified by the Object Model and, to a lesser extent, by the Landscape Model, presuppose a dichotomy between subject and object involving an isolating, distancing, and objectifying stance, which is unsuitable for an aesthetic appreciation not only of nature but of art as well. It suggests that this stance wrongly abstracts both natural objects and appreciators from the environments in which they properly belong and are appropriately appreciated. Thus, this position proposes replacing abstraction with engagement, distance with immersion, and objectivity with subjectivity, calling for a participatory aesthetics of nature. One version of this position is termed the Aesthetics of Engagement and was developed by philosopher Arnold Berleant:

The boundlessness of the natural world does not just surround us; it assimilates us. Not only are we unable to sense absolute limits in nature; we cannot distance the natural world from ourselves. . . . [When we perceive] environments from within, as it
were, looking not at it but being in it, nature . . . is transformed into a realm in which we live as participants, not observers . . . The aesthetic mark of all such times is . . . total engagement, a sensory immersion in the natural world.  

By highlighting the natural environment's natural and environmental dimensions, the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic and the Aesthetics of Engagement address many of the shortcomings of the traditional art-based models. These two approaches, however, have problems of their own. The Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic runs counter to both the orthodox view that everything is open to aesthetic appreciation and the commonsense idea that at least some instances of appreciation of natural things, such as fiery sunsets and soaring birds, are paradigmatic cases of aesthetic appreciation.  

The Aesthetics of Engagement is problematic as well. First, because at least some of the subject/object dichotomy seems integral to the very nature of aesthetic appreciation, rejecting it entirely may necessitate rejecting the aesthetic itself, thereby reducing the Aesthetics of Engagement to a version of the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic. Second, the Aesthetics of Engagement seems to contain an unacceptable degree of subjectivity in its aesthetic appreciation of both nature and art. The main problem with both positions is that they do not adequately answer the questions of what and how to aesthetically appreciate nature. To the what question, the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic's answer is "nothing," and that of the Aesthetics of Engagement is "everything." Consequently, about the how question, the former view has nothing more to say, and the latter apparently recommends "total immersion," an answer offering less guidance than we might wish.

A Natural Environmental Model for Appreciating Nature

Despite the problems inherent in the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic and the Aesthetics of Engagement, both positions' emphases on the natural and the environmental point toward a paradigm for appreciating nature. This paradigm is exemplified in the following description by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan:

An adult must learn to be yielding and careless like a child if he were to enjoy nature polymorphously. 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: the smell of the hay and of horse dung; the warmth of the ground, its hard and soft contours; the warmth of the sun tempered by breeze; the tickling of an ant making its way up the calf of his leg; the play of shifting leaf shadows on his face; the sound of water over the pebbles and boulders, the sound of cicadas and distant traffic. Such an environment might break all the formal rules of euphony and aesthetics, substituting confusion for order, and yet be wholly satisfying.  

Tuan's characterization of how to appreciate nature accords with the Aesthetic of Engagement's answer to what to appreciate, that is, everything. This answer, of course, is not acceptable. We cannot appreciate everything; our appreciation of nature must have limits and emphases just as the appreciation of art has. Without limits and emphases, our experience...
of the natural environment would be only "a meld of physical sensations" without any meaning or significance, what philosopher William James characterizes as a "blooming buzzing confusion." Such an experience would indeed substitute "confusion for order" but, in contrast to what is claimed by both Tuan and the Aesthetics of Engagement, would be neither "wholly satisfying" nor aesthetic. It would be too far removed from aesthetic appreciation of art to merit the label aesthetic or even appreciation.

Consider again the case of art: The boundaries and foci of aesthetic significance for works of art are functions of the type of art of which they are instances: paintings end at their frames, and their lines and colors are significant. Our knowledge of such matters is based on the fact that works of art are our creations. But here we encounter the point emphasized by the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic: The natural environment is natural, not a work of art, not our creation. Consequently, it has no boundaries or foci of aesthetic significance offered by our creation, and we do not know what and how to appreciate in the natural environment owing to any involvement in its creation. Indeed, nature itself seemingly has no such boundaries or foci. Must the what and how questions therefore remain unanswered? Must nature remain indeterminate, promiscuous, and beyond aesthetic appreciation?

I suggest not. The fact that the natural environment is natural—not our creation—does not mean that we can have no knowledge of it. We can discover things about nature independent of any involvement in its creation. Even though we did not create the natural world, we may know much about it. This knowledge, essentially common sense and scientific knowledge, is a plausible candidate for playing the role in appreciating nature that our knowledge of art forms, types of works, and artistic traditions plays in appreciating art. Consider again Tuan's example: We experience a "meld of sensations"—the smell of hay and of horse dung, the feel of the ant, the sound of cicadas and of distant traffic. However, if our response is to be aesthetic appreciation rather than just raw experience, the meld cannot remain a "blooming buzzing confusion." Instead, it must become what philosopher John Dewey calls a consummatory experience: one in which knowledge and intelligence transform raw experience by making it determinate, harmonious, and meaningful. For example, we must recognize the smells of hay and horse dung and perhaps distinguish between them; we must feel the ant at least as an insect rather than as, say, a twitch. Such recognizing and distinguishing generate foci of aesthetic significance, natural foci appropriate to the particular natural environment. Likewise, knowledge of the environment may yield appropriate boundaries and limits; the sound of cicadas may be appreciated as a proper part of the environment, but the sound of distant traffic excluded, much as we ignore coughing in the concert hall.

Moreover, common sense and scientific knowledge of natural environments are relevant not only to what to appreciate but also to how to appreciate. Tuan's case may exemplify a paradigm of nature appreciation, something like a general environmental act of aspection. But because natural environments differ in type, just as works of art do, different natural environments require different acts of aspec-
tion. And as with the question of what to appreciate, a knowledge of different particular environments indicates how to appreciate, that is, the appropriate act or acts of aspection. Ziff tells us to look for contours in the Florentine school, for light in a Claude, and for color in a Bonnard and to survey a Tintoretto and to scan a Bosch. Likewise, we must survey a prairie, looking at the subtle contours of the land, feeling the wind blowing across the open space, and smelling the mix of prairie grasses and flowers. But these acts of aspection have little place in a dense forest. Here we must examine and scrutinize, inspecting the detail of the forest floor, listening carefully for the sounds of birds, and smelling carefully for the scent of spruce and pine. Similarly, in addition to characterizing environmental acts of aspection in general, Tuan’s quotation also describes the act of aspection suitable for a particular type of environment, perhaps best classified as pastoral. For an appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature, as for that of art, classification, as Ziff says, is of the essence.

The questions of what and how to aesthetically appreciate the natural environment thus may be answered in the same way as parallel questions about art are. The difference is that with natural environments, the relevant knowledge is the common sense and scientific knowledge that we have discovered about the environments in question. Such knowledge yields appropriate boundaries of appreciation, particular foci of aesthetic significance, and relevant acts of aspection. If we must have a knowledge of art forms, classifications of works, and artistic traditions in order to appreciate art appropriately and aesthetically, then we must have a knowledge of different natural environments and their different systems and elements in order to appreciate nature appropriately and aesthetically. Just as the knowledge provided by art critics and art historians enables us to aesthetically appreciate art, that provided by naturalists, ecologists, geologists, and natural historians equips us to aesthetically appreciate nature. Thus the natural and environmental sciences are central to an appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature.

A position that considers natural and environmental science to be the key to the aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment may be termed the Natural Environmental Model. Like the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic and the Aesthetics of Engagement, this model stresses that the natural environment is both natural and an environment. Unlike the Object Model and the Landscape Model, it does not assimilate natural objects to art objects or natural environments to scenery. Unlike the Human Chauvinistic Aesthetic and the Aesthetics of Engagement, the Natural Environmental Model does not reject the general and traditional structure of the aesthetic appreciation of art as a model for the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. In fact, it directly applies that structure to nature, making only those adjustments necessary for the nature of the natural environment. In doing so, it avoids the absurdity of deeming the appreciation of nature to be nonaesthetic while promoting an aesthetic appreciation of nature for what it is and the qualities it has. Thus, it encourages us not to, as Hepburn puts it, “either pay very little aesthetic heed to natural objects or else heed them in the wrong way,” not to
“look—and of course look in vain—for what can be found and enjoyed only in art.”

Further Ramifications

The Natural Environmental Model acknowledges Santayana’s assessment of the natural environment as indeterminate and promiscuous, so rich in diversity, suggestion, and vague stimulus that it must be composed in order to be appreciated. Moreover, the Natural Environmental Model suggests that to achieve appropriate aesthetic appreciation or, as Santayana says, to find nature beautiful, the composition must be in terms of common sense and scientific knowledge. In addition to answering the central problem of the aesthetics of nature, this suggestion has other ramifications.

Some of these ramifications concern what is called applied aesthetics, specifically the popular appreciation of nature as practiced not only by tourists but also by each of us in our daily pursuits. As noted, such appreciation is frequently based on art appreciation models, especially the Landscape Model. The picturesque, however, does not have a monopoly on applied aesthetic appreciation but competes with a somewhat different approach. This other mode of appreciation has grown out of the tradition of such thinkers as Henry David Thoreau and achieved its paradigmatic realization in the thought of John Muir. For Muir, everything in the natural world, all nature and especially all wild nature, is aesthetically beautiful, and ugliness exists only where nature has been despoiled by human intrusion. This conception, which may be called positive aesthetics, is closely tied to the idea of wilderness preservation and to the appreciation of nature often associated with environmentalism. The Natural Environmental Model is relevant to positive aesthetics because the model provides the theoretical underpinnings of this mode of appreciation. When nature is aesthetically appreciated in terms of a knowledge of the natural and environmental sciences, positive aesthetic appreciation is singularly appropriate. On the one hand, pristine nature—nature in its natural state—is an aesthetic ideal. On the other hand, science increasingly finds, or at least appears to find, qualities such as unity, order, and harmony in nature, and when it is appreciated in light of such knowledge, nature itself appears even more beautiful.

Other ramifications of the Natural Environmental Model are more clearly environmental and ethical. As noted, the traditional art-based models and, by implication, other aesthetic approaches, are frequently condemned as totally anthropocentric, as not only antinatural but also arrogantly disdainful of environments not conforming to artistic ideals. The source of these environmental and ethical concerns is that art-based approaches do not encourage an appreciation of nature for what it is and the qualities it has. Conversely, the Natural Environmental Model bases aesthetic appreciation on a scientific view of what nature is and the qualities it has. The Natural Environmental Model thereby gives the aesthetic appreciation of nature a degree of objectivity that helps refute environmental and moral criticisms, such as that of anthropocentrism. Moreover, the possibility of an objective basis for an aesthetic appreciation of nature also holds out the promise of some direct practical relevance in a world increasingly en-
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gaged in environmental assessment. Those people making such assessments, although typically not worried about anthropocentrism, are frequently reluctant to acknowledge the relevance and importance of aesthetic considerations, regarding them, at worst, as subjective whims or, at best, as relativistic, transient, and soft-headed cultural and artistic ideals. Recognizing that an aesthetic appreciation of nature has scientific underpinnings helps dispel such doubts.

Another consequence concerns the discipline of aesthetics itself. In rejecting artistic models in favor of a dependence on a common sense and scientific knowledge of nature, the Natural Environmental Model provides a blueprint for aesthetic appreciation in general. This model suggests that an aesthetic appreciation of anything, be it people or pets, farmyards or neighborhoods, shoes or shopping malls, must be centered on and driven by the object of appreciation itself. In all such cases, what is appropriate is not an imposition of artistic ideals but, rather, appreciation that is dependent on and guided by knowledge, scientific or otherwise, that is relevant to the thing in question. This turn away from artistic preconceptions and toward the true nature of objects of appreciation points the way to a general aesthetics, an aesthetics that expands the traditional conception of the discipline, which narrowly identifies aesthetics with the philosophy of art. Instead of simply an aesthetics of art, the result is a more universal aesthetics—an aesthetics frequently termed environmental aesthetics.

Finally, by initiating a more universal and object-centered aesthetics, the Natural Environmental Model helps align aesthetics with other areas of philosophy, such as ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind, which are increasingly rejecting archaic, inappropriate models in favor of a dependence on knowledge relevant to the particular phenomena in question. For example, environmental aesthetics parallels environmental ethics in the latter’s rejection of anthropocentric models for the moral assessment of the natural world and the replacement of such models with paradigms drawn from the environmental and natural sciences.

In light of these various ramifications, it becomes clear that the challenge implicit in Santayana’s remarks—that we confront a natural world that allows great liberty in selecting, emphasizing, and grouping and that we must therefore compose it in order to appropriately aesthetically experience it—holds out an invitation not simply to find the natural world beautiful but also to appreciate its true nature.

NOTES

This essay is a substantially modified version of “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 37 (1979):267–76.


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17. Tuan, Topophilia, p. 96.


19. This point suggests further problems for the Landscape Model insofar as that model encourages formalistic aesthetic appreciation. If boundaries and foci do not exist in nature itself, it is difficult to see how it can have significant formal aesthetic properties. I pursue this idea in "Formal Qualities and the Natural Environment," Journal of Aesthetic Education 13 (1979):99–114.


25. I consider positive aesthetics and its relationship to the rise of science in "Nature and Positive Aesthetics" (editors' note: for a full discussion of positive aesthetics, see part 3 of this volume).

