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Aesthetics Matter

In the paper “The Beauty That Requires Health”, Marcia Muelder Eaton connects contextual aesthetics and conservation. She’s interested in how aesthetics affect one’s care and concern for the well-being of the natural world. The connection between ethics and nature aesthetics is significant because sometimes what looks aesthetically best is not what is ecologically best for an environment. From a moral position, we should base our aesthetics off of what is ecologically best for an area or object, and also grow our idea of what those aesthetic standards look like. I believe it is our responsibility as a community to make informed choices regarding how we manage the environment. For example, in some suburban areas, it is a social standard to keep a neat, mowed lawn. However, the damages created from mowing a lawn add up. Modern mowers are wasting gasoline just to cut grass. What if our social standards were also beneficial to the environment? An overgrown lawn with colorful weeds growing throughout it can also be considered a standard of beauty. A yard may look “messy” to someone who is unaware of the biological health being displayed, but someone who understands the natural processes across different types of backyards would acknowledge the beauty in life going on there. Once we gain more knowledge about an area, we can appreciate the beauty in its health.

Eaton’s contextual aesthetic framework for the appreciation of natural objects is cognitive. The cognitive contexts may be historically, economically, politically, emotionally and culturally driven. Eaton diverges from Allen Carlson’s scientific cognitivist model to guide what

we should attend to and what we can disregard. She believes the scientific community can guide where we should attend to in nature, because ecologists know signs of land health, and through their contextual knowledge they can decipher what we should look at.

Eaton claims aesthetic value is a matter of that which “sustains” attention. However, her use of sustain goes on to actually describe stimulated attention. Through an analogy to art, Eaton suggests attentively observing landscapes and environments so our attention is directed and our experience can be evaluated in a holistic way. Once we adjust to the colors, shapes, and composition of a painting, we can allow our senses to understand what’s being observed instead of leaving our experience at the first aesthetic sensation. When applied to environmental aesthetics, relevant knowledge redirects attention to an object, causing one to focus on it, and then Eaton says this attention motivates a desire to know more about the object. Since, aesthetic sensations can be short-lived in the natural world, additional knowledge about what’s being observed can help bridge the gap to help stimulate attention. In the art case, we protect works that deserve repeated attention, and we normally want to learn more about them. The same argument can be made for the conservation of landscapes. We can direct attention towards aesthetic properties in a landscape when we have information about ecosystems, which ecologists can provide. Once we come to understand a system, we can perceive elements of the system and their relationships (Eaton, 342). Eaton connects aesthetic to ethics through the prioritization of education about environments.

However, emotional reactions are rational ways to evaluate the things we encounter in the natural world. Noël Carroll explores the validity of being emotionally aroused by nature in the paper “On Being Moved by Nature”. These responses involve attention to scale. If I were

exhilarated by the grandeur of a waterfall, then I'm responding to the criteria of scale appropriateness, because the waterfall is expansive (Carroll, 175). Therefore, my reaction of exhilaration is an appropriate response to something being grand. Eaton also recognizes the role of pleasure, emotion, and imagination as cognitive experiences of a nature. Some people are overwhelmed by nature's complexity, amazed or struck in awe, take delight in its patterns, or find love, endearment, and belonging. Who's to say one response is more valid than another? Ned Hettinger would elaborate that objective emotions are those that are appropriate to their objects and whose underlying beliefs are reasonable for others to share (Hettinger, 428). I find fear or appreciation are valid responses, depending on the situation. Someone can be terrified of a snake slithering around or they could be excited because they're intrigued by its beauty. Just because something can create a "negative" reaction, like fear, doesn't mean it only possesses negative value. Eaton would say the emotional responses created should be evaluated as a whole before one were to classify their connection to aesthetic value.

Eaton acknowledges that personal reactions in nature cause people to become interested in it, but the appreciator should then learn more about what they're viewing or experiencing. We should acquire knowledge about the object as a whole to then know how to represent its positive aesthetics. Then, conservation efforts should account for particular aesthetic experiences, and show aesthetically valuable and ecologically sound properties. Eaton's nexus between aesthetics and ethics further depends on temporal and spatial scales. The categories we attribute to landscapes or natural objects help us take into account their intrinsic properties and both their natural and cultural history. Eaton recognizes certain values are specific to particular locations.

For example, the intrinsic properties valued in a wetland are not the same type of intrinsic values expected on a mountaintop even though they are both landscapes.

The contextual aesthetics and conservation model also strives to account for extrinsic features that are usually inconspicuous or invisible, but still they are factors in environments. Such as, wetlands provide a drainage system that removes toxins from runoff before it reaches other bodies of water. This drainage is not directly perceivable. Hence, knowledge about this process contributes to the aesthetic appreciation of wetlands. Extrinsic features may seem aesthetically irrelevant if we were to classify experiencing nature only through the aesthetic properties: colors, shapes, composition. When one directly perceives a natural environment, through sight or sound or touch, they are having an aesthetic experience. Since unperceivable qualities are difficult to observe, planning and thinking in terms of spatial and temporal scales are relevant. Non perceivables affect the beauty of an object or environment even if they're not originally apparent.

Conservation also takes human influences into account. Human effects on the environment include the presence of human made structures, which make up parts of civilization at one time or another, and bear the things we use for survival. In "An Overview of Environmental Ethics" Clare Palmer expands on human-centered environmental ethics. Anthropogenic approaches do not strictly propose reckless exploitation of the environment. Humans also use natural resources in a careful manner. The people that make decisions about the aesthetic appearance of natural environments are likely to be affected by cultural expectations if not through education. Growing up my father always made sure we had perfectly cut grass, and made sure the yard and the plants throughout it were watered. His explanation for his style of

upkeep was rooted in the traditional expectations of how a front yard looks in the United States. I recognize that this is not the only way you can care for the area around a house. The attributes that make a yard beautiful vary. They don't have to look artificial and only be based around what humans want the aesthetics to be. The aesthetic value of a yard can also coincide with the ecological health as well. Philosophers, like Eaton, relate aesthetics to the moral judgments we make about environmental conservation. Communities will benefit from the desire to take care of the environment in a well informed manner: for the ecological benefit and for the new forms of beauty they may observe.