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Aesthetics and Environmental Argument

The human-centred notion of the “instrumental value of nature” and the eco-centred notion of the “intrinsic value of nature” both fail to provide satisfactory grounds for the preservation of wild nature. This paper seeks to identify some reasons for that failure and to suggest that the structure - though not the content - of the “aesthetic value” approach is the most promising alternative, though the notion of “the aesthetic value of nature”, as usually employed, also fails to capture the real motivation for such preservation. I argue that these problems arise because humans are, for good reasons, deeply ambivalent about their relation to nature. This ambivalence is explained in a Nietzschean context and I argue that an understanding of this ambivalence can be used to develop and illustrate a fuller and richer understanding of what we mean by “the value of nature” which does provide grounds for the preservation of wild nature.

1. Introduction

An inquisitive and intelligent alien visitor sent to investigate the earth, having discerned that *Homo sapiens* is the dominant species on the planet (or at least that it behaves as if it were) might reasonably expect to find that humans, having a common evolutionary origin, common survival needs and common springs of happiness, would also have a common attitude to the biological system from which they sprang and which supports them. He would not of course have any *a priori* means of knowing what that attitude would be: for all he would know before investigating the matter, humans might revere nature, might be contemptuous of it, or might be indifferent to it. But he would, I think, reasonably expect to find a common attitude, based on a shared relationship with nature.

He would of course be wrong. He would soon notice that humans are a culturally diverse species and that one of the chief things which marks the differences between cultures is precisely their conception of their relationship to, and their treatment of, wild nature.

Visiting the wilds of northern Australia, he would discover that the indigenous people of that region do not have the concept of “wilderness”; rather they conceive of themselves as part of a unified whole, a view that entails a deeply reverential attitude to their biological and geographical surroundings. Their social structures, their kinship arrangements, the very meaning of life are all, for them, so intimately tied to their natural surroundings that to be made an outcast from the group means that the sacred elements of nature have also withdrawn their favour and protection from the outcast. Our Alien would find this relation to wild nature repeated in various societies around the planet.

But it is not universal. He would soon discover at the other extreme cultures whose behaviour indicated a very different conception of their relation to nature. He would find a very vigorous culture that broadly identifies itself as “western”, or “modern” and defines itself against what it calls those other “traditional”, “less civilised” and other question-begging epithets. He would find that

they make a fairly clear distinction between the human and the natural parts of the world and that distinction has allowed them to use nature to increase enormously their economic productivity, their wealth and their population and has also enabled them to dominate, and marginalize those other non-western cultures.

As well as a cultural cleavage *between* different cultures, he would also find a curious cleavage of opinion and behaviour *within* the western industrialised countries. He would soon discover that while most western humans, when questioned, profess to have a certain, perhaps theoretical, fondness for that part of the world they call “wilderness”, their behaviour revealed deep differences. Some people care very deeply that wilderness areas should be preserved in as near a pristine state as possible, while others would prefer to exploit the economic benefit derivable from them, even at the expense of degrading their wild character.

Being of a pipe-smoking, philosophical bent (he is my alien, and I will give him whatever qualities I see fit) he might wonder how this state of affairs arose. Finding that this cleavage occurs within class or gender groups as well as across them, he might seek an explanation in the philosophical literature on this subject. He would find in that literature the same curious cleavage of opinion about the precise value of wilderness, even among those who call themselves preservationists.

2. Environmental Ethics: The Story So Far...

The nature of this cleavage can be brought out by posing a question:

If someone genuinely prefers to drain the Okefenokee Swamp, clearfell the forests of the north-west or the Amazon and construct a housing project on the site, with freeways, parking-lots and fast-food restaurants, how are we to argue with him or her? What sort of argument is most likely to persuade the majority of people that it is better to preserve wilderness than to develop it?

That sort of question sums up the central problem that has bedevilled environmental ethics as so far practised. The implication of the question is that in disputes between those who would destroy or change wilderness areas and those who would protect them we are in the end confronted by an irresolvable clash of fundamental values. In such a clash we are often assumed to be in the position of two people who disagree about the relative value of the music of Beethoven and Mozart. At the end of all the argumentation, all that can be said is “I prefer development”, or “wilderness is better” and we can only agree to disagree.

Despite this, in disagreements over environmental matters, the burden of proof most often has been on the preservationist to show why a particular development should **not** take place. This is because the values underlying development are often crystal clear and beyond dispute. They can be easily articulated in terms of the value of jobs, of profit, of export income, the right of individuals to prosper from the exploitation of their property, and so on. All these are things of real value that undeniably contribute to human well-being and cannot lightly be dismissed.

Faced with this barrage of indisputable values, the preservationist commonly is forced onto the defensive: he or she must attempt to articulate the value of preserving wilderness in ways that are far less clear, less compelling, and far less easy to articulate than the values that underlie

development. The environmentalist has been forced into the unenviable position of trying to answer questions of the sort: “what is the value of wilderness?”

In practice, protagonists on the preservationist side of the debate have for the most part fallen into two camps: On one hand there are the ‘anthropocentrists’ or ‘human chauvinists’ who commonly attempt to argue that the only rational way to speak about the value of wilderness is in terms of its value for human survival or well-being. For the extreme human chauvinist, the value of wilderness reduces to various kinds of instrumental value.¹ On the other hand their opponents, the ecocentrists, commonly claim that the value of wilderness is intrinsic to the thing itself.

So our inquisitive alien would find the same ambivalent attitude to wilderness in the philosophical literature that he found in the population at large.

How did this situation arise? I will argue that it arose because human beings are indeed, for a very good reason, deeply ambivalent about the value of wilderness, that that ambivalence rests on and reflects a deeper, and genuine ambiguity in the way that humans - or at least western humans - conceive of their fundamental relationship to nature. We can begin to see this ambivalence if we consider a common kind of argument for the preservation of wilderness.

3 Aesthetic Arguments

One of the most common arguments offered for wanting to preserve wilderness is the aesthetic argument. The usual form of aesthetic argument can be spelled out very briefly. We could say that most people find natural items beautiful, their beauty gives pleasure, and no individual or group has the right to deprive people of their pleasures.

Unfortunately, this argument fails to identify the quality that people actually value in nature. For that reason, it is open to several well-known objections. First, the developer might well agree that the wetland or forest in question is beautiful, and that beauty is valuable. But he can say that jobs, profit and individual rights are still more valuable, and he can again put the burden of proof back onto the environmentalist to say why beauty is more valuable than jobs and profit.

Second, there is the famous “plastic trees” objection. Again, the developer can agree that the item in question is beautiful, and offer to replace it with a cleverly-contrived copy that faithfully reproduces every sensory quality of the original. If such a copy does not satisfy us (as it certainly would not), he can say, it can only be because we value something **other** than the beauty of the natural item, so the aesthetic argument fails.

I think these objections are perfectly sound against the usual kind of aesthetic argument. They are sound so long as we take the term “natural beauty” to refer to the **appearance** or the **sensory experience** gained from contemplation of natural objects, or to things like the harmony of their proportions, the smell of clean air, the sound of birdsong or something of the kind. But what the “plastic trees” argument actually shows is that when we claim that we want wilderness preserved because it is beautiful, it is not its mere appearance or its proportions that we have in mind, but some other, much more elusive quality.

In fact I think the term “aesthetic value” is an attempt to articulate some quality, for which “natural

beauty” has so far been an inadequate token. Certainly we value the appearance of a forest or a wetland, but as the “plastic trees” argument shows, there is something more to the notion of “natural beauty” than a copy, no matter how faithful, fails to reproduce.

We need to recognise that it will fail until we can articulate what quality of nature we actually mean to pick out by the term “natural beauty”. So instead of asking “What is the value of nature?” we need to ask: What quality of nature is the **object** of our evaluation? In fact, two questions need to be answered here: what **is** this elusive other quality? and: why has it proved to be so elusive? I am going to suggest an answer to those questions. But if we are to be able to answer those questions, we need first to be clear about how western societies have come to conceive of the relation between humans and nature.

4. Nietzsche, Nature and Culture.

So what **is** that relation? In the western tradition there are three main sources of reflection on this issue: the religious, the scientific and the philosophical.

For the major religious traditions of the west, the Judaic and the Christian, (as well as the Islamic) the Genesis story is central. We read in Genesis that, while all other creatures are created “after their own kind”, humans alone are created “in God’s image”. From the time of Moses to the debate over Darwin’s theory of evolution in the late nineteenth century, the common wisdom of the western world was that there is not merely a difference in bodily form or complexity between humans and nature, there is a difference **in kind**. That tradition still influences our self-conception, and it tends to make us conceive of ourselves as entirely distinct from nature.

In the scientific tradition, Darwin’s evolutionary paradigm showed us that we evolved from small chimpanzee-like creatures somewhere in east Africa four million years ago, give or take a million years. That tradition shows us unequivocally that we just **are** animals. The scientific tradition tends to make us conceive of ourselves not as distinct from, but as a part of nature. Taken together, the religious and the scientific traditions have bequeathed to us an ambiguous conception of our relation to nature.

The philosophical tradition is replete with competing conceptions of human nature. But we can discern a thread common to many accounts. From Plato’s image of humanity as a man strapped between two horses pulling in opposite directions, to Descartes’ dualism of mind and body, from Aristotle’s notion of humans as the “rational animal”, to Kant’s sharp distinction between reason and inclination, there is the common theme that humans have a **dual** nature and a dual relation to nature. Common to all these accounts is the idea that we share some qualities with nature and yet differ from nature in some crucial respect. But each of these accounts singles out just one or two qualities to distinguish us from nature.

The richest and fullest conception of this duality, it seems to me, can be found in a key work for modern aesthetic theory, the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s first book *The Birth of Tragedy*², which was first published in 1872. That work remains central to modern aesthetic theory mainly because of the distinction Nietzsche draws between two competing conceptions of what it is to be human, or two dimensions of human nature which he calls the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

I have argued before that we could - and should - distinguish ourselves from the rest of nature insofar as we are moral agents and nature is not. But morality is not the only aspect of humans that distinguishes us from nature. The great virtue of Nietzsche's account of the human relation to nature is that it captures all those dualisms of the tradition and supplies a way of conceiving of all the aspects that we share with nature, and all respects in which we differ, in two simple concepts.

We can think of Nietzsche's notion of the Apollonian as referring to all those aspects of human nature that make us differ from the rest of nature, things like self-restraint, control, language, civilisation, art, technology, morality and law: all those things that we could sum up as human culture; the order and harmony of classical architecture, and the control over nature that such things demonstrate, might stand as a suitable symbol. We can think of the Dionysian as referring to all those aspects of humans that we share with nature: things like instinct, wildness, lack of restraint, intoxication, lust, unbridled competition and cruelty: the image of the wine-soaked, amoral, sexually insatiable satyr - half man, half goat - is often used to represent the Dionysian conception of humans.

If we think in those terms, it is obvious that we live in a world that is increasingly Apollonian - increasingly tamed, controlled, civilised and ordered by technology. But this is only one aspect of what it is to be human. To pretend that civilised life is life as such, or that politeness, restraint, good manners and care for others are all there is to being human is to deny an essential element of what human beings are, just as it would be to deny an essential part of what we are if we claimed to be nothing more than wild animals.

We cannot conceive of human life without these cultural achievements: we are, beyond question, creatures of culture. But we are not just that. Partly because of our cultural achievements, we are also the most successful, daring predator animals on the planet, with undeniably strong impulses still toward cruelty, intoxication, lust, fierce competition, and the thrill of the hunt. Freud recognised that we purchase the advantages of the Apollonian style of civilised life by repressing our instinctual animal aspects. The price of alienation from the fundamental Dionysian part of our nature, he thought, is neurosis. We can think of our real relation to nature not as one of complete distinctness nor one of complete immersion: we are both natural **and** non-natural creatures and both aspects are fundamental and necessary elements of human life. Human nature - as that phrase itself suggests - is inherently ambiguous, and so is our relation to the rest of nature.

5. Ambivalence and Evaluation.

The historical development of human culture is, from this point of view, the story of the creation of an ever greater distance between our Apollonian civilised selves and our Dionysian animal nature. The existence of our cultural selves depends on the creation of this distance: we are civilised creatures just to the degree that we differ from nature. When, at the end of thirty centuries or more of cultural development, we are confronted with wildness in action, things like the bloody spectacle of a shark attacking a seal, or the corpse of a deer being devoured by maggots, our ambiguous relation to nature starkly confronts us with these two aspects of ourselves and brings out in us two contradictory impulses.

We have the ancient, strong and culturally-ingrained Apollonian impulse toward controlling nature,

toward restraining our amoral impulses and imposing moral rules on ourselves, towards transforming nature into a cultural artefact. From that point of view we experience a certain disgust with nature's unrestrained wildness, exuberance and amorality and we have an impulse both to control wild nature, and more importantly, to deny our intimate relationship with it.

But we have an equally strong and ancient impulse toward throwing off our civilised restraints and participating in the intoxicating, guilt-free, non-moral Dionysian world of wild nature; from that point of view we experience a certain delight in, and kinship with, nature's bloody spectacles of unrestrained wildness. So we have another impulse urging us to identify with and to acknowledge that we really do belong to that world. Confrontation with wild nature shows us both what we are and what we are not.

Our response of simultaneous delight and disgust with nature indicates what is the **object** of our evaluation, and explains why we are ambivalent about it. Nature is wholly Dionysian: it is amoral, guilt-free, unrestrained and intoxicating, and these are the very qualities in nature that we respond to.

The object of our evaluation in nature is elusive to consciousness and hard to articulate precisely because our relationship to nature is ambiguous. We respond to the amoral, unrestrained character of nature from two points of view. For our Dionysian selves, these qualities are wholly positive. Our Dionysian selves do not morally evaluate nature because our Dionysian selves are themselves non-moral and non-judgemental. Our animal response is an instinctive affirmation of these qualities: they are what we are.

The response of our Apollonian selves is more complex because it is itself ambivalent, for good reasons. On one hand, for the Apollonian element these qualities are negative qualities. The Apollonian element is necessarily repelled by the amorality of nature, because the very existence of the Apollonian point of view depends essentially on an implicit contrast between its moral self and non-moral nature. For the Apollonian aspect of the human self to judge that nature has moral qualities or moral value is to undermine the conditions of its own existence, and the grounds of its own value. From the point of view of an Apollonian individual, a complete lack of moral qualities is the very thing that defines nature and defines by contrast what is distinctive, and distinctively valuable, about himself.

But on the other hand, in the very act of being repelled by nature's amorality, the Apollonian side of our nature cannot help but acknowledge that its very existence depends on the very thing that repels it. Wild nature, in other words, is a **condition** of civilised existence, and in several ways. At the conceptual level, the concepts of nature and culture are a conceptual pair: each gets its meaning in contrast with the other. This means that in order to understand what culture is, that is, to understand what is distinctively human, it is necessary to understand what distinguishes us from nature. In other words, human self-knowledge depends on the existence of the conceptual boundary represented by the existence of wild nature.

From a physical point of view, of course, culture cannot exist without the physical, animal foundation.

From a psychological point of view, I don't think anyone would deny that we need to acknowledge

both our animal and our cultural nature. It is no doubt a little uncomfortable, in the midst of our ordered world of architecture, town-planning and technology, our music recitals, plays and academic conferences, to be reminded that we are not just cooperative, cultured, restrained, polite moral agents. We are also, and just as essentially, animal predators who will draw blood if provoked. But in an increasingly Apollonian world, where the prey that we used to kill with our own hands now comes pre-killed and pre-packaged, and where even our basic sexual drives, and our desire for unrestrained intoxication are not allowed free rein but are forced into the restraints of culture and morality, we need to be reminded that we are animals still. The price of forgetting that basic fact is deep alienation from our own nature.

And as Freud saw, recognition of our instinctive animal drives is essential to our emotional well-being. So conceptually, physically, psychologically and emotionally, we cannot help but recognise that wild nature is an essential element of human nature.

All this explains as well why the qualities that we evaluate in nature are so difficult to articulate. Language, too, is Apollonian. Chaotic, disordered speech is not speech but growling. When we speak we **necessarily** speak in Apollonian terms. So when we want to speak of chaotic, wild Dionysian qualities, we are forced to speak in terms that impose a restraint on our thoughts and words that is foreign to the subject. And that, I think, is why, when we speak in our civilised, Apollonian way about the “beauty of nature”, that phrase is an inadequate Apollonian token for what we would really like to say if only our Dionysian animal natures could speak clearly.

We are, then, deeply ambivalent about the value of nature because our relation to it is itself deeply ambiguous. As Dionysian selves, we instinctively affirm our identity as part of the wildness and amorality of nature. As Apollonian selves, we must both affirm and deny that identity.

When we say that wild nature is aesthetically valuable, then, there are three things that we do **not** mean. We do not mean that wild nature is a useful instrument. We do not mean that it is pretty to look at. Least of all do we mean that wild nature is a moral entity. What we value about nature is precisely that it is **not** moral. We mean that one aspect of us values wild nature as its negative but necessary conceptual counterpart. And we mean that another part of us responds with delight and joy at the unrestrained, warlike, guilt-free existence of nature, a kind of existence that is not just “out there” but is also an integral part of us. And that part of us - and wild nature itself - is under constant threat from our own Apollonian impulses. These things - this joy in unrestrained existence, and these conditions of our self-knowledge - are things of fundamental importance to each of us that nothing but the experience of wild nature can provide.

6. Conclusions

Now to return to earth and to my original question. I hope you remember that I began by asking:

If someone prefers to drain the Okefenokee Swamp or clearfell the forests of the north-west and construct a housing project on the site, with freeways, parking-lots and restaurants, how are we to argue with him or her? What sort of argument is most likely to persuade the majority of people that it is better to preserve wilderness than to develop it?

I have claimed that aesthetic arguments have failed because they do not accurately identify what we

mean by natural beauty. I have claimed that our real relation to nature is not one of complete distinctness nor one of complete immersion: our real relation to nature is itself deeply ambiguous and our attitude to it deeply ambivalent. Finally, I have claimed that the quality that we actually value in wilderness is the quality of being non-moral, uncivilised, unrestrained and so on. I will conclude by asking: does this way of seeing the issue give us an argument that will convince most people that it is better to preserve wilderness than to develop it?

Obviously we might have a little trouble at the negotiating table if we start telling financiers from New York banks that they should respect their Dionysian selves. We are likely to be laughed out of the negotiations. But if we take a wider and longer-term view, I think we might have some success in arguing in the following way. We can say: at least since Plato said that the condition of the good life was to “Know Thyself”, people have recognised that human well-being depends in part on self-knowledge, on knowing what kind of creatures we are. If we are to know that, we must keep before our minds a lively sense of how we differ from nature, what we share with it, and what it is in nature to which we most fundamentally respond. Experience of wilderness areas is the only thing in existence that can do that, so unless there is some very powerful overriding reason to develop wild areas in particular cases, they ought to be preserved. This way of arguing is likely to be more effective than either instrumental or intrinsic accounts precisely because it gives content to aesthetic arguments that is otherwise lacking.*

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Notes:

1. For the anthropocentric view see: H.J. McCloskey, *Environmental Ethics and Politics*, Totowa, N.J. 1986, and Bernard E. Rollin, “Intrinsic Value for Nature” An Incoherent Basis for Environmental Concern”, in *Free Inquiry* Vol. 13 Pt.2 1993, or any of Bryan Norton’s works. For the intrinsic view, see any of the many papers by Holmes Rolston and J. Baird Callicott.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* in Kaufmann, W., (Ed.) *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

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