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The Danger of Beauty Alone: The limitations of Beauty in Environmental Decision-Making

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Abstract: The protection of non-human nature is often grounded with an appeal to beauty. Focusing on the beauty or aesthetic value of nature means basing the decision of whether to preserve an environment on whether or not it is beautiful. In this paper, I will argue that basing environmental protections solely upon aesthetic value is not only insufficient in providing an adequately robust foundation for protecting the environment but potentially deleterious to this aim. I will demonstrate the need to problematise our understanding of beauty and its role in motivating environmental preservations. In justifying this, I will appeal to the subjectivity of beauty standards and the tendency for human conceptions of beauty to mask crucial issues of environmental relevance, which can lead to shallow and inappropriate decision-making. Cases of environmentally harmful beauty and potentially beneficial ugliness are particularly at risk of being overlooked if beauty is used as the primary justification for environmental protectionism. I will argue that the notion of aesthetic disinterest is a useful tool in helping to background our most obvious self-interested motivations and preconceptions about both nature and beauty. However, it is only with a robust cognitive component that this approach would be able to provide an epistemologically sound strategy for reliably grounding the protection of non-human nature.

Key words: aesthetic value, beauty, disinterest, environmental ethics, aesthetics, cognitivism, protectionism.

Positive aesthetic experiences are an important part of life, and the natural environment is a primary source of such experiences. These positive aesthetic encounters contribute to the happiness and well-being of individuals and can promote social cohesion and economic prosperity within a community. The foundation of positive aesthetic responses relies upon the perception of beauty, this much is uncontroversial, but I want to posit that one's perception of beauty should not be the sole basis for justifying environmental protections.[1] This point may seem self-evident to many environmentalists, but the overwhelming evidence suggests that beauty is still given precedence when it comes to persuading people of the need to make certain changes in order to protect nature.[2] Negotiating environmental disputes and justifying certain

1] The way in which the perception of beauty works and how this feeds into the making of a positive aesthetic judgment are the subject of much discussion, but it is not my intention to discuss them here. See Guyer 1979, Allison 2001 and Ameriks 2003 for broad overviews of a Kantian approach to the issue.

2] In the context of climate change, the most obvious reason for protecting the environment is having an interest in humanity's continued survival. I do not wish to deny this; I would only claim that the 'final persuasion' of a call to action most often lies in an appeal to beauty – a tool used to convince even those sceptical of the climate crisis. However, the focus of this paper does not concern how to correctly justify taking action on climate change – at this point, the subjective reasons for why people take action are less important than the action-taking itself. My discussion here is focused on understanding how we come to distinguish between the various parts of nature and how this leads us to decisions about which parts

natural protections through the lens of beauty leads to the protection of things we find aesthetically valuable and the dismissal or avoidance of things which we do not. This approach poses significant problems for eco-aesthetics[3], and yet it has a long historical precedent in environmentalism and politics.

Throughout history, the human preference for a certain kind of beauty, i.e. unspoiled natural landscapes, has been a primary factor behind environmental protectionism, as well as the avoidance or disregard of ugliness. We can observe this in advertisements, parliamentary policy documents, political speeches, charity appeals, literature, television and the like. For instance, the Sierra Club was designed to promote wilderness, The National Trust was set up to protect places of natural beauty, and Greenpeace and the WWF regularly make emotional appeals based on the destruction of beautiful scenery/creatures (National Geographic 2019; The National Trust 2017; Harvey 2011, respectively). Additionally, so-called 'beautiful legislation' is passed in Papua New Guinea, The Ocean Foundation claims that development must be slowed down to preserve natural beauty, and even businesses pay lip service to an obligation to pass on the beautiful environments to future generations (Woods 2019; Harvey cited in Whittaker 2019; Pacific Engineering Corporation, n.d. again respectively). The U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973, does not cite intrinsic worth or instrumental value as reasons for protecting the environment, but instead explicitly recognises that endangered and threatened species are of "[...] [a]esthetic [...] value to the Nation and its people" (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1973).

It is not merely the appreciation and preservation of existing natural beauty which organisations like The National Trust are advocating; it is also the creation of an even more beautiful environment (The National Trust 2017). Humanity's infatuation with beauty extends to the categorisation and classification of natural beauties, to the point of creating specific checklists to denote the requirements of natural beauty, which are 'deserving' of protection.[4] Under this model ugliness is either an irrelevance or something to be avoided at all costs, in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson gave a special message to Congress on the subject of conservation and the restoration of natural beauty; he went so far as to say, "Ugliness can demean the people who live among it. What a citizen sees every day is his America [...] If it is ugly, it can degrade his existence." (Johnson 1965). Aside from the patriotic overtones, if what was meant here, is that living in environments made up of

to protect and which parts to destroy. I take it for granted that parts of nature will always be destroyed to accommodate new buildings etc., and used to advance aesthetic ideals, in this light it becomes necessary to rely on something other than beauty (for reasons which will be elaborated).

3] I have not come across this term in the literature, but it is a straightforward way of describing the attempt to combine aesthetics and environmentalism.

4] Good examples of this are the AONB and UNESCO: at the moment nearly 1/5th of the landmass of the UK has been designated as outstandingly beautiful, and a total of 46 Areas of Outstanding Beauty (AONB) are protected by legislation (The National Association Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, 2017). Additionally, in order to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an area of nature must meet specific criteria, one of which is that it " [...] contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance." (UNESCO 2017).

only human-made buildings and objects *may* reduce a person's quality of life, then I am in agreement. However, the interpretation of this message hangs upon the definition of ugliness, and it is only through understanding what is meant by beauty (and non-beauty) that we can begin to unravel this complex relationship.[5]

Promoting beauty and minimising ugliness is the central aim of a governmentally established independent organisation (up until recently chaired by the former UCL professor, philosopher and aesthetician Roger Scruton) called the 'Building Better, Building Beautiful' Commission. The Commission is tasked with acting "[...] as champions and advocates for the Government's commitment to beauty in the built environment." (GOV. UK 2018). Interestingly, the document gives some real insight into the government's motivations for commissioning such an initiative in the first place. On one (perhaps cynical) reading, the commission appears as no more than an attempt to discover how to mitigate public disagreement about state-funded building developments. The UK government likely has little interest or desire in making council estates beautiful, but it certainly does have an interest in minimising public backlash to changes that they wish to make. The 'Terms of Reference' state that the Commission is tasked with discovering what would deliver greater community/popular consent about decisions concerning land which is "brought up for development" (2018, 1). Of course, the assumption here is that there is a consensus to be discovered in the first place and that one only needs to go out and pluck from the minds of the British. If the aim is to learn what the majority of people think beauty is à la Hume, then a survey would probably be less costly and provide more conclusive results than a group of architects and academics. Even so, what would happen should (as is likely) there be no consensus? What if 52% of the population prefer post-modern designs while 48% have more brutalist leanings? Ultimately someone (government, land developers, architects, i.e. those with the money) would be left to decide which option is better based upon arbitrary or financial criteria combined with their aesthetic sensibilities. This approach also assumes that if a consensus were to be established, then this would be an epistemologically sound methodological approach to the making of decisions which affect our natural and non-natural surroundings alike.

Aesthetic value plays an essential role in many people's emotional attachment to nature and thus their justification for wanting to protect it, but this does not mean that it can provide an adequate framework through which we can decide why some nature deserves to be protected, and other parts do not. Founding environmental policy on natural beauty, tends to imply that we all have the same idea about what constitutes 'beauty', which is very far from the truth – even when we are discussing beauty within

5] The philosophical discussion of ugliness is multi-faceted and wide-ranging; I cannot hope to do it justice in the space I have here. Instead, I refer to ugliness in order to highlight the insufficiency of non-cognitive aesthetic approaches to nature, but it should be noted that the dismissal of ugliness and/or its conflation with evil/harmfulness etc. is deeply problematic for both ecoaesthetics and nature in general. I will elaborate upon this, but only with the limited intention as expressed above, to highlight the limits of beauty and the need for a cognitive account of environmental aesthetics.

nature. In this context, one's conception of beauty, defines the ethical parameters by which we operate, but if no single account of beauty exists, how can we be confident that environmental policy, resting on such aesthetic consideration, will stand the test of time, or even last into the middle of next week? It is well-known that when the economy suffers, so too does the environmental movement (Gallup News 2015). Basing an environmental ethic on beauty alone does not necessarily provide the moral impetus to do much about it, especially when times are tough, or other self-interests override aesthetic considerations.

One's conception of beauty is undoubtedly influenced by one's upbringing; an economically disadvantaged person, for instance, is less likely to have experienced beauty in the natural environment, or in as wide of a variety of settings (i.e. music, film, theatre, opera, art) than those who are college-educated (Ipsos MORI 2010, 19). A study conducted by Ipsos Mori in Sheffield, England, discovered that 65% of people had experienced beauty in the natural environment, which increased to 82% amongst the more socially advantaged members of the study.[6] Beauty is invariably connected to the environment, in fact, the two words most commonly associated with beauty (amongst the 1043 respondents) were 'natural' and 'clean' (2010, 19-22). The socially and economically advantaged are significantly more likely to favour beauty over either affordability, sustainability or functionality in their local environment. However, on average, when it comes to deciding what type of new buildings are built, more people are likely to agree that affordability, sustainability and functionality should be prioritised over beauty (2010, 49) suggesting that aesthetic considerations are less central to people's decision-making process than economic necessities, and feelings of ethical obligation towards the environment. For instance, in areas which rely on environmental destruction for employment, such as Oregon State, USA (where the logging/timber industry is essential to the local economy) people are more likely to be supportive of anthropogenic policies which favour traditional forest management, over biocentric/preservationist policies, favoured on a more nationwide scale (Steel et al. 1994, 150).

Differing conceptions of natural beauty, vary not only according to economic and social status, but also geographical location and ethnic identity. North American and European emphasis on wilderness, as the optimum form of the natural environment, is not necessarily shared by the rest of the world. Studies have shown that race is a far stronger predictor of the type of natural landscape people prefer than either age, class or gender. A study, conducted in 2009, explored the differences between native-Dutch persons and immigrants from Islamic countries and found significant differences between their versions of the image of nature and subsequently, their landscape preferences (Buijis, et al. 2009). It was found that among the predominantly white native-Dutch population, a more ecocentric, wilderness image of nature made them more likely to favour natural

6] Amongst the more socially and economically disadvantaged group the figure was 55%. The more socially advantaged group were also more likely to have experienced beauty in a larger variety of settings (Ipsos MORI 2010, 9-10).

models of landscaping. Whereas, the non-Dutch natives expressed a more functional and anthropogenic view of nature, and preferred more managed landscapes (2009, 221) over wild and unmanaged landscapes, like marshes and dunes[7]. This result replicated earlier studies conducted in North America and Europe, which found that Anglo-Americans tend to prefer a more wild, natural environment, whereas African Americans and Latin-Americans prefer a more developed and managed setting (Virden and Walker 1999; Kaplan and Talbot 1988). Different preferences in landscape management, probably stemming from varying images over 'ideal nature' have been linked to research showing that African Americans and immigrants are less likely to visit nature reserves than Caucasian American people (Johnson et al. 2004).[8]

The often-implicit assumption running through much of eco-aesthetic discourse is that 'naturalness' is the primary tool by which we can assess beauty, but this seems only true when it is viewed through a particular social and cultural framework. Living in a multicultural and diverse social landscape means that environmental policy based on preserving natural beauty, often culminating in projects of conservation, risks alienating those who do not adopt the same narrowly defined conception of beauty. It also means that the outcomes of projects like the 'Building Better, Building Beautiful' Commission will ultimately come to reflect the views of those holding the purse strings.[9] Of course, it may be possible to find a middle ground between polarised views or enact a first-past-the-post system to decide which aesthetic idea 'wins', but the problem of the relativism of aesthetic standards still stands, likely meaning that everyone ends up only 'half-way happy'. Class, ethnicity, location, upbringing, nationality etc. all influence how a person conceives of beauty and what level of importance they attach to aesthetic considerations. Certainly, our beliefs and interests are formed through a combination of genetic and environmental factors; this is not a problem in and of itself (it is hard to imagine it being any other way), but it becomes an issue when we are making interest-influenced decisions which affect other humans, animals, as well as non-human nature.

A potential solution in overcoming the relativism of beauty standards or at least the parts influenced by self-interested desires is through the application of aesthetic

7] In this study, immigrants also expressed less interest in non-urban landscapes, as well the 'wilderness image' of nature. A finding which is reflective of the use of nature in urbanized areas in the Netherlands, and the rural-agrarian cultures, which many of the surveyed immigrants (from Turkey and Morocco) had lived in (Buijis et al. 2009, 115).

8] This probably has more to do with economic circumstances and geographical distance than with the aesthetic preferences of people with African heritage living in the USA. Applying the aesthetic preferences from relatively small sample groups to whole sections of society categorised by their racial or ethnic heritage is problematic, but the above examples do successfully highlight the complexity of the issues involved and the risks involved with their oversimplification.

9] There is also the issue of framing to consider i.e. are decisions being made on an individual, local, national or international level? It becomes even more challenging to overcome the differences and reach a middle ground the higher up you go and the more people it affects. This often leads to prevarication, inaction and stagnation in the taking of positive action.

disinterestedness. Aesthetic disinterest is not a new concept; it has existed in various guises for centuries, but mostly with reference to the traditional arts. Aesthetic disinterest has formed a major part of the philosophy of art and aesthetics since the mid-to-late eighteenth century.[10] Aesthetic disinterest has featured in the works of Schopenhauer, Mendelssohn and Nietzsche, but it is Immanuel Kant's version of disinterested judgment which has dominated Western aesthetics since its publication, and his definition of disinterest is the most commonly referenced:

> [...] only the liking for taste in the beautiful is disinterested and free; since we are not compelled to give our approval by an interest, whether of sense or reason. (Part 1, §5, 210) [...] Taste is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it [...] devoid of all interest. (Part 1, §5, 211).

The role of interest distinguishes aesthetic judgment from judgments of other kinds. To be clear, disinterest does not necessarily denote a 'lack of interest' in the object of contemplation; rather it requires the 'backgrounding' of one's subjective desires and interests. Contemplating an object of art requires a different approach than the one we take in contemplating the contents of our refrigerator. The specific phenomenological experience of aesthetic contemplation has been associated with a certain level of disinterestedness in the perceived object. We look at the contents of our refrigerator because we are hungry (or bored) and, after carefully considering the potential utility of each item of food, we choose which foodstuff would most satisfy our given level of hunger and boredom. The theory suggests that viewing a piece of artwork, or listening to a recorded symphony, with the same self-interested tendency ought not to be a feature of aesthetic judgment. In fact, under some interpretations, the experience would only be branded as 'aesthetic', if it meets the condition of being disinterested, i.e. the judgment is not dependent upon the artwork's ability to satisfy one or more of a person's interests.

There are compelling reasons for thinking that aesthetic disinterest can (and should) be applied to human approaches to the environment. In an age which will be defined by our relationship with non-human nature, its potential import to the field of environmental philosophy and eco-aesthetics has meant an increased amount of research in the area. Far from being a trivial or frivolous way of exploring our relationship with non-human nature, environmental aesthetics offers a possible method of grounding an ethics of the environment, without relying on an abstraction of moral duty. Environmental aesthetics and in particular, the concept of disinterested judgment could have deep normative implications when applied to issues of environmental preservation. The prevalence of self-interested environmental decision-making is the primary reason for the

10] Aesthetic disinterest was influenced by the works of Dennis, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Addison, Alison and Hutcheson, and although these thinkers may not have used the term explicitly, they certainly influenced those who did. Miles Rind offers an interesting critique about the traditional account of disinterest's genealogy (Rind 2002) noting that these thinkers were not using 'disinterest' as it is currently used in aesthetics, namely as a mode of perceptual awareness (2002, 67).

continued increase in the rate of environmental damage to our planet (Jones 2015). As the world falls behind on pledges to decrease CO^2 emissions and governments back out of sustainable energy solutions, the need for a non-instrumentalised and non-self-interested view of nature becomes increasingly important if we are to meet targets designed to prevent further environmental degradation.[11] Aesthetic disinterest requires the removal of one's self-interested desire, in order that we do not predicate properties onto natural phenomena, especially ones which are motivated by the amenity value of nature. When I speak of being disinterested in nature, I do not mean that I do not care for it, but rather that, when contemplating nature, I refrain from imposing my own desires upon it or viewing it in terms of its potential utility. Applying the notion of disinterest to nature would theoretically make judgments about the beauty of nature more objective and allow for more consensus and agreement in making decisions about the environment.

The successful application of disinterest to the aesthetic judgment of nature is limited by the degree to which one is able to set aside personal interests and desires. Some biases are so deeply concealed in our subconscious that we could not (at least without great difficulty) become aware of them in order to 'set them aside' in the first place. This is a familiar criticism to proponents of aesthetic disinterest, but it stems from a misunderstanding concerning the level of disinterest required in making an aesthetic judgment, i.e. it rests on the assumption that the bar is set unrealistically high. However, disinterest does not require a complete eradication of desire or an instantiation of willlessness in order to be useful to eco-aesthetics.[12] The value of disinterest lies in the 'simple' task of checking one's motivations and desires when it comes to engaging with nature and artwork. My aim is not to offer a defence of disinterest, but to illustrate one of the central inadequacies of an aesthetic approach to the environment which cannot be solved through an appeal to disinterest, and to offer the beginnings of an alternative. If, for the sake of the argument, we assume that it is possible to background selfish desires in order to make aesthetic judgments and that, by doing so, a greater consensus about what constitutes beauty can be reached, then where does this leave nature?

Disinterest has a negative role in the making of aesthetic judgments, i.e. it theoretically maintains the purity of the judgment but adds nothing to it.[13] It is a self-checking mechanism, through which a person can come to realise whether their judgment

11] Canada is likely to miss the 2020 Copenhagen target, whilst Australia falls behind on the Paris agreement. In October 2017 Pruitt confirmed that the Trump administration will roll-back Obama's clean power plan in the USA. (Friedman & Plumer 2017).

12] This stems from a misunderstanding of disinterest as the blank cow-like stare. See Emily Brady's work for more discussion of this and other common misconceptions surrounding disinterest (1998).

13] Some commentators attach more of a positive dimension to the notion of disinterest. For instance, Jerome Stolnitz regards it not only as involving a 'backgrounding' of egoistic desire but also an ability to approach the aesthetic art object or nature with a kind of sympathetic attention by meeting it on its own terms. Although I am sympathetic to this interpretation, I am wary of the metaphysical implications of statements of this sort and the epistemological dilemma which an attempt to justify this link creates.

is being clouded by self-interested desires, e.g. interest in the potential utility value of the object of contemplation. When applied to the realm of eco-aesthetics, disinterest serves as a useful, but ultimately limited tool, especially as a solution to understanding and tackling environmental degradation. The role of beauty is still central to disinterested aesthetic judgments of the natural environment. Disinterest helps to reduce the amount of subjectivity in these aesthetic responses, meaning that natural beauty is more easily recognised, and it is easier to draw a consensus in environmental decision-making. However, without understanding the scientific, social and historical factors related to a particular natural phenomenon, we cannot hope to have adequate epistemological grounding for reaching decisions relating to the environment. Deprived of such knowledge, many necessary environmental protections will not be implemented, and actions which damage nature will be overlooked. This is why in order for eco-aesthetics to be a viable tool in motivating environmental protections, another element is required.

A knowledge-based approach to aesthetics, reinforced by a healthy dose of disinterestedness, works to illuminate the impact of human behaviour on beautiful phenomena (whether natural or human-made), by promoting awareness of potentially harmful human actions. Without an understanding of the damage which noise pollution from aircraft, causes in the Grand Canyon, regulations would still not reflect this issue.[14] Ever-increasing numbers of tourists are drawn to the beauty of the Canyons, but a lack of knowledge about potential degradation means that this area of outstanding beauty, may not be around for future generations to appreciate. The effects of seemingly innocuous actions are left to go unchecked and even measures taken to curtail noticeable degradation may ultimately be misguided.

Roger Clark of the Grand Canyon Trust states that "Our greatest challenge is making people understand just how truly vulnerable this place actually is." (Fedarko, 2016). The scale and grandeur of the National Park lull visitors into thinking that it is somehow invulnerable to damage, yet the consequences of constant tourism mean that it has been subject to noise, water and air pollution. Native flora and fauna compete against non-native plants, uranium mining erodes the landscape and contaminates drinking water, nearby power-stations drift air pollution into the Canyon, and a 22 mile stretch of land with unlimited air traffic, known locally as Helicopter Alley, shatters the peaceful solitude of the area. Although much has been done over the past thirty years to reduce the effects of tourism, increased economic pressure and an inability to comprehend the potentially devastating damage which seemingly harmless activities have on the landscape, mean that environmental damage has become the rule rather than the exception.

14] Although recent changes in regulation mean that more aircraft will be allowed to fly in the Grand Canyon, incentives are being given to 'quiet' planes/helicopters (Dungan 2017). The original regulations, and no-fly zones, were also influenced by several plane crashes in the area.

Taking a 30-minute helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon, to further appreciate the natural beauty of the reserve, may seem inoffensive, especially if the ride takes place in a new 'quiet' type of aircraft. However, the consequences amount not only to a contribution towards noise and air pollution, but also to an increase in the demand for such services to be continued, whilst also supporting the expanding tourist industry in the area.[15] Our need to appreciate this beauty (from a distance that is) may become a case of loving something to death, as investors and developers cash-in on this supposedly harmless desire.

The need for using a cognitive component in aesthetic judgment is also present in more traditional settings. On a visit to the Vatican, these were the words of a sign: 'Silencio. No photo. No video.'[16] The whispers of a confused tourist make it clear that they do not understand why they have been stopped from taking a photo inside of the Sistine Chapel, especially since there are no rules about photography throughout the rest of the Vatican. Despite signs and security officers, making it clear that photography is not allowed in the chapel, many people still attempt either surreptitiously or blatantly to take a photo. Lack of knowledge concerning the potential damage caused by hundreds of flashbulbs going off daily means that ignorance will continue to inspire stupidity. Even if it can be proven that flash-photography does not damage paintings, knowledge concerning one's environment and even one's fellow visitors must be factored into the decision-making process.[17] In this instance, not taking photographs [...] in a chapel, which could potentially disturb the aesthetic experience of others, combined with the knowledge that damage could be caused to Michelangelo's work, would result in fewer people attempting to take photographs, both in order to preserve the work for future generations, and out of respect for ourselves and others – to help to enrich the aesthetic experience.

The insufficiencies of a beauty-only account of eco-aesthetics (even if supplemented by disinterest) are further highlighted when we consider instances of 'harmful' beauty

15] Including plans for hotel resorts, tramways, more cafés, restaurants at the top of the tramline, holiday complexes etc. This is in addition to the increased tourism resulting from the 2007 opening of the Skywalk at Eagle Point (Dungan 2017).

16] The term 'cognitive' of course refers to the role of the rational self in applying instances of knowledge to a given judgment, but it should also be seen in the context of Kant's strict non-conceptual requirement for pure aesthetic judgments. For Kant, allowing a cognitive component to be involved in making a judgment of beauty, would destroy any claim to universal (but subjective) validity. However, there may be a certain amount of compatibility between these two positions, it is technically possible for the initial aesthetic judgment/response to be pure in a Kantian sense, but become impure (not necessarily bad) in a second phase which applies an aesthetic component to knowledge about a given object. The initial response requires no 'outside information' and can still be democratic but we must concede to impurity in the second phase – at least if we want to remain Kantian.

17] Although recent evidence suggests that damage caused by flash photography has been grossly overestimated (Evans 2013). In the case of Sistine Chapel, there have been other reasons, namely Nippon TV's photography exclusivity – but the copyright has long since elapsed.

and 'helpful' ugliness. From childhood we are taught not to judge a book by its cover; we are told that the real value of the book lies within and it is only through reading the words on the page that we will be in a position to properly judge it. This should also apply to how we make environmental decisions, but if we let beauty be our sole guide, then many things which are extremely harmful to the environment will be left to proliferate unchecked, and those things which are enormously beneficial will be unknowingly destroyed.

The degradation of nature can sometimes be beautiful or have effects which are considered as beautiful; the most obvious example of finding beauty in a degraded environment is in so-called pollution-sunsets. Sunsets are often made redder by aerosol gases, which are released into the atmosphere (Ballantyne 2007). Some aerosols occur naturally (forest fires, volcanic eruptions, sandstorms, dust) but in big cities, human use of aerosols vastly outnumber the impact of aerosol gases from natural sources. The beauty of a crimson sunset is directly related to the degradation of the environment, yet without understanding the scientific nature of light refraction, sunsets, and aerosols, and applying this information to our experience of a sunset, we would remain none-the-wiser about the damage it results from. Knowing that our beautifully watered, manicured lawns, are not as harmless as they first appear, and then changing the way we behave accordingly, relies on our application of scientific facts. Our perfect lawns, not only waste water (which becomes a bigger problem in areas prone to drought) but also release a huge amount of C02 into the atmosphere, whilst pesticides disturb local ecosystems, and fertiliser run-off enters the water table, contributing to eutrophication and hypoxia.[18]

As important as it is to consider that beauty itself may be the result or the cause of environmental degradation, it is not only beautiful environments whose disturbing, and often damaging, causes are overlooked by beauty-alone approaches to nature but ugly, disgusting and non-beautiful phenomena. Not only can knowledge help to illuminate why certain things we don't think are bad for the environment actually are, but also that things which do not appeal to our own subjective sense of beauty can be interesting, important and essential to maintaining an ecosystem (and perhaps beautiful in their own way). The late botanist and ecologist, Sir Harry Godwin, said: "Any fool can appreciate mountain scenery. It takes a man of discernment to appreciate the Fens." (Coles & Coles 1989, 58). Whilst it doesn't necessarily take a fool to appreciate the beauty of a mountain-scape, it does (more often than not) take an informed mind to appreciate the beauty in something which is not typically beautiful. Just as a romantic attraction is not necessarily dependent upon a person's physical attributes, aesthetic appreciation need not be completely dependent upon whether or not we find something physically appealing. By itself, beauty cannot provide a stable environmental ethic, and neither can an imagination or emotion-based account, but the combination of these, plus scientific knowledge, can help open us up to the plurality of aesthetic responses. In popular culture, swamps and marshes are

18] Every year the Gulf of Mexico hypoxic zone, in part resulting from excess nutrients from fertilisers entering the Gulf (Environmental Protection Agency 2017).

often portrayed negatively, whether it is *Labyrinth's* Bog of Eternal Stench, or the 'Dead Marshes' in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: swamps are the place of monsters, demons, and the dead. Holmes Rolston III saw the main challenge for environmental aesthetics did not have to provide good reasons to protect the naturally beautiful (which it seemed to do without much effort on our part), but to use it to motivate the protection of things we don't find aesthetically beautiful (Rolston III 2000). Rolston claimed that with "[...] increased ecological sensitivity, the system takes on the qualities of a kaleidoscope [...]" (Rolston III 1987, 260). The same can be said for any natural phenomena (including humankind) which do not meet the 'criteria' of beauty; this includes that which is non-beautiful, ugly, disgusting, dull and uninteresting. Swamps and marshes are hives of ecological activity, with a wide array of biodiversity on display (due to increased levels of nutrients) yet they are at best dismissed and at worst destroyed.

The aesthetic appreciation of traditional art objects can help to illustrate how knowledge can be applied when making an aesthetic judgment. For instance, we are capable of looking at 'ugly' art and appreciating it, perhaps because of our emotional response to it, or because of the meaning behind it. Having more knowledge about a particular piece of art or natural object has only ever enhanced my experience of art and nature, especially where I would otherwise have dismissed it out of hand. On a visit to the Tate Modern, I was fortunate enough to see Sheela Gowda's 2009 installation *Behold*; I must admit that on the first inspection, I found it underwhelming. Most likely, a combination of sore feet, hunger, and worry over what time I needed to get my train contributed to an 'interested' approach to the artwork. It certainly is not a 'beautiful' piece by traditional standards, and admittedly I still do not regard it as a particular favourite, but there is no doubt that learning more about the installation (as well as backgrounding my own self-interested concerns) helped me to appreciate the artwork on a level which I would not have done, had I not taken the time to gain more knowledge about the piece, and the artist who created it. It would have been easy to disregard *Behold,* as an underwhelming piece of modern art, and walked through the installation to find something more appealing, or easier to grasp. However, knowing that the installation was inspired by Gowda's life in Bengaluru, where talismans of human hair are regularly knotted around car bumpers to supposedly ward off bad luck (Tate Modern 2017), appreciating the intense effort involved in its creation (4000 metres of hair were hand-woven) and the social and political observations behind it, enriched my aesthetic experience immensely.[19] Knowing more about an art object often enhances our appreciation of it, and the same should also be true for our aesthetic experience of the natural world, especially as it pertains to making decisions which affect the environment.

19] The hair comes from local temples, where it is cut off as a sacrificial offering when pilgrims fulfil sacred vows. "The fragile hair supports the stronger, heavier metal, just as it is believed to protect the technologically advanced machine [...] the [...] process-driven approach highlights the precarious state of manual labour and human effort in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world." (Tate Modern 2017).

Only a (disinterested) cognitive model of the aesthetic appreciation of nature can overcome the issues which focusing on the beauty of the natural environment can lead to, i.e. relativism and decisions based upon inappropriate or shallow interpretations of aesthetic response. Allen Carlson is perhaps the best-known proponent of the cognitive model of the aesthetic appreciation of nature; he states that "[t]o aesthetically appreciate nature, we must know the different environments of nature and the systems and elements within those environments." (Carlson 1979, 273). And although I agree that cognition is an important part of aesthetic appreciation of nature, I disagree that it is a necessary condition for making an aesthetic judgment; there are many ways to appreciate nature aesthetically, a lack of knowledge does not invalidate them. There are several compelling non-cognitive approaches to the environment, including those which focus on the roles of emotional arousal (Carroll 1993) and the imagination (Brady 1998). These approaches are helpful to the making of aesthetic judgments generally, but their usefulness is limited when it comes to environmental decision-making. They also highlight the importance of taking a disinterested perspective, without which, utility-driven judgments will continue to instrumentalise nature, leading to further degradation. However, a solely imagination- or emotion-based approach to environmental aesthetics cannot capture the full 'picture' of nature, and it is certainly not sufficient if we are to utilise aesthetic response to help conserve natural landscapes and prevent further degradation.

I will briefly consider two potential objections to the cognitive account of eco-aesthetics, which I have argued should be preferred over a beauty-based model of environmental appreciation. The first objection relates to the age-old concern that understanding precisely how a piece of art was created, the materials used, the methods enacted etc. could devalue the aesthetic experience, by demystifying the artistic process. This potential demystification ought not to decrease the potential pleasure or appreciation involved in making an aesthetic judgment. At least no more so, than understanding how the refraction of light effects the formation of a rainbow – has a negative impact on one's aesthetic response to a rainbow. Yet, some would still hold that understanding the process or the creative vision of the artist is detrimental to the aesthetic experience, in the same way, that scientific explanations of natural phenomena detract from their beauty, e.g. the formation of rainbows.[20] My own aesthetic experiences have only ever been enhanced by learning about the science and/or background of the object I am responding to, e.g. learning about the complexity of the honeybee waggle dance only adds to my aesthetic admiration for bees and their hives. Knowledge adds a new layer to our collective and individual appreciation, which in 'ordinary' aesthetics is valuable, but when applied to eco-aesthetics, is invaluable. The ability to differentiate between harmful beauty, helpful

20] Keats famously wrote: "Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, / Empty the haunted air, and gnomèd mine—/ Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made." (Keats 1884). This is a commonly held view throughout historical writing; William Blake is also known to have commented that "[...] art is the tree of life. Science is the tree of death." (Blake 2014). For a 'beautiful' reply to this criticism of 'cold philosophy' see Richard Dawkins' *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Dawkins 1998).

ugliness and everything in between – is essential to utilising aesthetics for environmental aims. Without this, serious questions about the viability of eco-aesthetics would be raised, with no satisfactory answer.

A second and related objection, concerning the over-intellectualisation of aesthetic judgment, holds far more weight than fear about the potential for knowledge to impoverish the aesthetic experience. Any cognitive, aesthetic account is subject to the same criticism: the idea that taking something which taps into a deeply personal part of our emotional life and making it cold and clinical by applying logic and science to it is somehow doing a disservice to what it means to have an aesthetic response, i.e. it removes some of the 'magic'. This leads to the problem of elitism within aesthetics.[21] One of the primary advantages of disinterestedness in aesthetic judgment (and Kant's brand of non-cognitivism) is that it has an enormous democratising effect on the making of aesthetic judgments. Each person has the same ability to recognise beauty, as it is not reliant on having knowledge of the object in question. If we require knowledge to inform the aesthetic judgment, the fear is that this could lead to a kind of class system of responses: resulting in an elite group of aestheticians whose responses are deemed correct and all those which are in disagreement merely incorrect for not having the right kind of knowledge and being able to apply it in the right kind of way. This is not a problem to take lightly, and I agree that if the above were true, then it would be problematic. But this is not the kind of account I am advancing. The initial aesthetic response does not actually have to conflict with a secondary level of response informed by knowledge. It is possible that a person's immediate response to a piece of art (or natural object) would be left intact and unaffected, but is afterwards supplemented with the addition of knowledge aiming at the further appreciation of the object. This supplement is not a necessary criterion of making a judgment about an aesthetic object; one can certainly make a judgement without it, but it is available to the subject as a way of making a more informed judgment. I make no claim as to the 'need' for a cognitive component to be present at each and every instance of aesthetic response, only that within eco-aesthetic discourse (which has the aim of motivating environmental protections) knowledge should be used alongside our initial intuitive responses to better inform them, enrich our aesthetic experiences and ultimately protect the environment by informing our decision-making process.

In this paper, I have argued for the need to go beyond beauty in eco-aesthetics and beyond the inability of a disinterested approach, in order to overcome the issues presented by a beauty-alone account (which nevertheless can somewhat help to surmount the problems caused by the relativism of beauty standards). Whilst the results of misunderstanding or misjudging a piece of artwork are minimal (a disagreement with a friend perhaps) the consequences of underestimating certain natural phenomena are potentially profound. Appeals to beauty cloud the stark and often damaging realities of

21] See Eaton (1998) for more about her defence and development of Carlson's cognitive/science-based approach (Carlson 1993).

human action (and inaction) on the natural world and lead to overlooking potentially important phenomena. The subjectivity or beauty standards and the tendency for a focus on beauty to mask crucial instances of harm mean that a more complex eco-aesthetic approach must be invoked. The aesthetic appreciation of the environment requires us to approach nature without the baggage of our desires, i.e. disinterestedly. However, making this adjustment is not sufficient, and we must also look beyond beauty if we hope to make use of aesthetics in motivating environmental protections and prevent further degradation to the human and non-human world alike. I have argued that going beyond beauty in eco-aesthetics requires a cognitive component. Otherwise, it is impossible to make sense of instances of harmful beauty, helpful ugliness and the vast amount of non-human nature which fits somewhere in between.

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