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A brief philosophical review of the aesthetic value of nature in environmental ethics

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Abstract

This discussion paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution and historical development of aesthetic value among the various natural values recognized in environmental ethics. Over time, environmental philosophers and ethicists have highlighted multiple ways in which humans relate to nature, including ecological, scientific, utilitarian, and aesthetic perspectives. Among these, the aesthetic dimension emphasizes the capacity of natural environments to evoke feelings of beauty, wonder, and inspiration. Understanding this aesthetic value is crucial not only for environmental appreciation but also for formulating ethical frameworks that support the preservation and conservation of nature.

Aesthetic value in environmental ethics is closely linked with the concept of intrinsic value, which refers to the worth of nature independent of its utility for human purposes. Philosophers have long debated the extent to which natural entities—such as landscapes, forests, rivers, and wildlife—possess value in themselves, rather than merely serving human needs or desires. From the early romantic naturalists to contemporary environmental ethicists, the idea of intrinsic value often intersects with aesthetic appreciation. For instance, thinkers like Henry David Thoreau emphasized the spiritual and aesthetic experience of nature as essential to human well-being, suggesting that natural beauty itself merits ethical consideration. Similarly, John Muir and other conservationists argued that forests and wilderness areas should be preserved not solely for their economic or ecological functions, but also for their capacity to inspire awe and nurture the human spirit through their aesthetic qualities.

Different philosophical traditions provide varied interpretations of aesthetic value in nature. Some, influenced by classical aesthetics, focus on the harmony, proportion, and sensory appeal of natural objects. Others, particularly in modern environmental thought, emphasize the experiential and relational aspects of aesthetics the ways in which human perception and engagement with nature foster emotional, cognitive, and moral growth. This dual understanding of aesthetics, as both a property of nature and a human-centric experience, underscores the complex relationship between ethical obligations and aesthetic appreciation. By highlighting the interplay between human perception and environmental value, philosophers demonstrate that aesthetic engagement can motivate conservation and promote environmental stewardship.

Moreover, the aesthetic dimension of nature has significant implications for artistic philosophy. Literature, visual arts, and other creative expressions often draw upon natural landscapes and phenomena to explore themes of beauty, harmony, and interconnectedness. Environmental aesthetics thus serves as a bridge between ethical theory and artistic practice, illustrating how philosophical reflections on nature's beauty can enrich cultural and artistic understanding. In this context, recognizing and cultivating the aesthetic value of the environment becomes a critical component of both ethical reflection and artistic inspiration.

In conclusion, the aesthetic value of nature occupies a central place in environmental ethics, bridging the intrinsic worth of natural entities with human experiences of beauty and inspiration. By examining the perspectives of various philosophers and linking aesthetic perception to artistic philosophy, this paper highlights the enduring importance of aesthetics in shaping ethical attitudes toward the natural world. Understanding these dimensions not only deepens our appreciation of nature but also reinforces the ethical imperatives for its protection and preservation.

Keywords: Environment, ethics, art, aesthetic awareness, interest, objective observation

Introduction

Environmental ethics represents a recent addition to normative philosophy. Normative philosophy is that branch of philosophy which is an ideal, inquiry-based science concerning the nature and foundation of morality. It is an ideal science that examines human behavior in society, analyzing and evaluating actions in terms of moral standards and rules, determining what is good or bad, just or unjust, right or wrong, proper, or improper, and assessing duties and responsibilities.

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, we are witnessing significant changes and revolutions within this field. Since the 1970s, the extensive expansion and diversification of applied ethics and its various branches, particularly the emergence of environmental ethics, have brought about major transformations in the domain of philosophy. Thus, although normative philosophy traditionally focused on human behavior, the evaluation of human conduct is no longer its sole concern. Today, normative philosophy also addresses the moral consideration of all members of both the biotic and abiotic world animals, plants, land, climate, mountains, rivers, and other natural entities.

Environmental ethics examines the causes of environmental crises and ways to address them, innovations for making the environment more habitable, who bears the responsibility for such actions, how to maintain environmental health in the future, and the impact of new technologies on human welfare and the environment.

There are two main aspects of normative philosophy ^[1]

1. Theoretical ethics

2. Applied ethics

Environmental ethics is a new addition to applied ethics. It is a branch that investigates moral responsibilities and obligations concerning the environment. It explores human duties toward various high- and low-order species in nature, identifies causes of environmental pollution, and suggests remedies. It also considers the impact of the environment on humans and issues related to the freedom and rights of living beings.

Environmental ethics is especially important in the present age. We need to become more aware of the environment. However, the role of environmental ethics is not merely to raise awareness; it also seeks to enhance our sense of responsibility toward the environment. Its core principle is that safeguarding the interests of humankind is a moral duty and obligation. Humans are the most significant beings in the environment. As individuals, humans possess autonomous moral judgment and inherent value, along with the right and responsibility to act accordingly. We must make the environment suitable for human habitation and life. Considering the interests of future generations is also a moral duty and obligation.

If the task of environmental ethics is to provide a moral evaluation of human relationships with the environment, then it must also be acknowledged that the environment possesses intrinsic value. Humans will become genuinely aware of the environment only when they recognize its intrinsic worth. One of the main discussions in environmental ethics concerns whether the environment has intrinsic value. As with other philosophical questions, there are differing opinions on this matter: some argue that the environment possesses intrinsic value, while others maintain that it does not.

Intrinsic value of the environment and its aesthetic perception

Naturally, a question arises: what does "intrinsic value" mean? Intrinsic value of an object does not depend on what it can be used for. The usefulness of an object does not determine its value. Rather, the value of an object depends on the object itself. Thus, when we speak of the intrinsic value of the environment, it does not mean evaluating it based on what humans can derive from it.

Paul Taylor views the concept of intrinsic value as part of the broader idea of respect for the environment. Analyzing the attitude of respect that Taylor describes reveals three components: first, what is meant by respect; second, the adoption of a life-centered perspective toward the environment; and third, the discussion of moral standards for the use of the environment grounded in this respect ^[2].

Traditional ethicists often do not recognize the value of nature or the environment, arguing that nature has no material value and that it is impossible for it to possess any. In contrast, the philosopher Rolston asserts that nature indeed holds value. Nature is replete with an infinite reservoir of value, which humans continuously reorganize and utilize in their own actions. Humans make the most use of nature. While wild animals use nature in their own ways, humans apply scientific techniques and technology to shape nature according to their needs, tastes, and purposes.

Environmental realists argue that the value present in nature is genuine and true. This natural value plays a leading role in promoting human welfare. Rolston acknowledges fourteen types of value in nature, including life-sustaining value, economic value, aesthetic value, multidimensional reproductive value, and historical value. The entirety of nature's resources possesses intrinsic value. Humans themselves are unique creations of nature, and the mind's growth and intellectual vigor are nourished by nature's elements. If nature were valueless, how could it be capable of containing such value?

Environment and Its Aesthetic Sense – Humans are the worshippers of beauty. Living beings, plants, rivers, lakes, birds of all sizes, trees, mountains, deserts, forests, jungles, waterfalls, and other elements of nature possess extraordinary diversity and aesthetic richness ^[3]. Natural beauty across the world captivates and amazes humanity. This biodiversity carries immense aesthetic and natural value, inspiring countless artists, poets, and writers. The aesthetic value of nature is undeniable.

The inherent beauty and natural resources of the environment captivate the human mind and stir human emotions. Among the elements that most influence modern human environmental perception are nature-centered literature and landscape art. John Passmore identifies three levels of aesthetic consciousness regarding nature:

1. Formal (geometrical) aesthetic perception in gardens: Here, plants are trimmed and arranged into specific geometric shapes, creating a formalized aesthetic.
2. Informal (natural) aesthetic perception in gardens: In this approach, gardeners draw inspiration from nature itself, respecting the plants and trees without imposing rigid patterns. While they may arrange the garden, no artificial designs are imposed for decoration.
3. Untouched, unadorned forests: Here, the gardener has no role. Environmentalists feel a sense of unity with such untouched natural areas.

Among these three types, Passmore supports the second informal, nature-centered aesthetic perception. Environmentalists do not see humans as separate from nature; rather, they experience a kind of oneness with the pristine forested environment.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a distinction emerged between natural history and physical sciences. Physical sciences focused on the essential properties of objects, such as size, shape, and motion. Natural history, in contrast, had close ties to poetry and visual arts. This

relationship gradually blurred the distinction between “what is” and “what ought to be.” The closer environmental science and aesthetic perception of the environment become, the narrower the gap between “is” and “ought”^[4].

In the early nineteenth century, a new concept entered the discourse on environmental aesthetics: interest. Although its exact meaning was initially uncertain, it began to be used as a separate aesthetic concept. At first, it was considered subordinate to the concept of beauty, but later it gained independence. During this period, the idea of beauty was so broadly applied that there was no place for ugliness; nothing in the world was considered ugly, and nothing in nature was deemed unattractive. Two concepts of beauty were used: one presented and the other exalted. These were associated with the idea of the world as God’s creation, leaving no room for ugliness. Humans began to appreciate the aesthetic essence of natural objects, experiencing nature’s inherent aesthetic pleasure.

Thus, the tradition of exalting nature began in the early nineteenth century. The concept of interest, despite initial ambiguity, came to be recognized as a distinct aesthetic notion. Modern environmentalists often use the concepts of beauty or interest to justify conservation. For instance, when declaring certain forests as national parks, arguments based on the idea of interest are frequently employed^[5].

Interest, aesthetic perception, and human-nature relationship in environmental ethics

At times, arguments for forest conservation have been presented based on geographical reasoning, at other times on aesthetic grounds, and sometimes using botanical interest. Here, the concept of interest is employed in a broad sense, encompassing both scientific and aesthetic interest.

According to American idealists, the environment should not be understood merely through human perspectives; it must be comprehended on its own terms. Many philosophers, however, have emphasized a mystical connection between humans and nature. Numerous philosophers have discussed the unity of humans and nature,^[4] while others describe the human-nature relationship as transcendental and mysterious. The philosopher William James regards nature and its forests as sacred and reminds us that it is our duty to protect this heritage. Humans should cultivate a respectful attitude toward natural beauty.

After reviewing the history of aesthetic discourse in environmental philosophy, we have touched upon the poetic traditions associated with aesthetic perception. This forms the basis for discussing environment-centered aesthetics.

When discussing aesthetic perception, one immediately thinks of Immanuel Kant, who in his Critique of Judgment analyzed the nature of aesthetic perception. Although Kant primarily focused on art-related aesthetics, he began his discussion using examples of nature. For Kant, the central problem was how aesthetic perception is possible. He explained the nature of aesthetic perception, established its foundation, and defended it. Through this discussion, Kant presented his own theory of aesthetics. According to him, aesthetic perception is subjective yet universal.

Kant argues that:

1. Aesthetic perception arises from a special faculty of the subject.
2. Beauty is not an inherent property of objects.

Kant demonstrated that although aesthetic perception relies on the subject’s experience, it carries a sense of universality.

Evaluation: To establish an ideal theory of aesthetic perception regarding nature, we must first understand our aesthetic relationship with nature and whether it is comparable to our aesthetic relationship with artworks. Some argue that aesthetic experience of art gives rise to aesthetic perception of nature. Others contend that there is a fundamental difference between nature and artworks; therefore, aesthetic experiences of art cannot fully explain aesthetic experience of nature. While there are many similarities and differences between aesthetic experiences of nature and artworks, one fact is indisputable: nature is the source of human aesthetic sensibility. Humans seek and find inspiration for beauty in nature.

The distinction between art and nature lies in their material constraints: artworks are physically bounded, whereas the objects within nature are not. Any painting or sculpture is confined within a frame, whereas natural elements are unlimited. There is no doubt that nature possesses intrinsic aesthetic value, which has been, and will continue to be, of central importance in environmental ethics.

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