

# Carlson's Positive Aesthetics

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**Abstract: We all know that the protection of the environment is a good thing. With global warming, these concerns are past the point of being trivial. Can there be an argument via the sciences to get more people involved? Can there be one based upon an instrumentalist view? This would be quite a feat. Canadian-born philosopher Allen Carlson tries to do just that with his view of positive aesthetics. This is the view that the environment is worth protecting because it is beautiful. More particularly, since it does have instrumental value, it is beautiful and we should protect it. In this paper, I shall endorse the idea that not all natural phenomena are beautiful. Also the argument commits the is/ought fallacy. Perhaps activists should seek more aid from the arts and sciences from philosophy itself, rather than from the cold deductive logical calculus.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Allen Carlson provides a noteworthy deductive argument for his positive aesthetics (PA). During the course of his argumentation, he invokes science. This can allegedly allow for an objective position in terms of aesthetic judgements of nature and ultimately a stance on humankind's treatment thereof. Carlson's is an instrumentalist view; there is of course a controversy here that invokes a problem of anthropocentric value. (Thompson, 1993) At first glance, his argument appears to be logically valid. He argues that the correct aesthetic judgment of nature is that it is beautiful when viewed through the lens of science (the correct category). Quite simply, he uses an outlook connected to science to reach his conclusion. There is objective ground here he maintains, to forward an ethical position that natural ecological environments ought to be protected. Colloquially stated, that is the main thrust of his argument.

In this paper, I will show that there are problems with his argument. The proposition that all pristine (unadulterated) nature is beautiful is false due to the fact that there are phenomena that human beings as a whole do not find initially appealing. Other authors have pointed this out, although they do not seem to think that these types of phenomena indicate the ultimate deathknell to Carlson's position. I do. Snakes, hurricanes, feces, etcetera, are not generally viscerally appealing. These visceral, anthropocentric phenomena compose a series of counterexamples to the notion that nature is beautiful (NIB). Carlson even cites a similar example brought up by Ronald Hepburn in one of his texts. (1981) Ultimately, NIB is a *sentiment*, not a true conclusion. NIB is meant to support environmentalism with an objective aesthetic ground. The argumentation here simply falls short. There are natural phenomena in question that incur a natural *revulsion* in human beings, at the anthropological level prior to cultural

indoctrination. We need to examine to see where the argumentation goes wrong, and that shall be the nature of our investigation.

## II. EXPLICATION OF CARLSON'S VIEW

A notable feature here is the delineation earlier writers on this topic have made between judgements concerning our appreciation of art, and judgements concerning our aesthetic appreciation of nature. Art supposedly has an antecedent ground for evaluating aesthetic judgements. This would be a cognitivist view of aesthetic judgment based upon cultural considerations. Our cognitive aesthetic judgements of nature, Carlson maintains, do not have this facet built into them. (Carlson, 1981) To fill the void that culture satisfied for the aesthetic appreciation of art, Carlson argues that *science* should play the same grounding role in our aesthetic appreciation of nature. That nature has instrumental value, as well, plays a crucial role in PA. "All nature is beautiful and deserves our appreciation and protection". (2020) Aesthetic views, according to these lines of reasoning, entail the sentiment that we have a moral duty to protect nature.

Further contextualization may deepen our appreciation of Carlson's view. Noel Carroll has a concept he calls "Being Moved by Nature" (BMBN). (2010) This is an intuitive view to a great extent. It isn't a tremendously cerebral explanation of aesthetic phenomena. PA appears contrastively highbrow in its citation of scientific concepts (Hettinger, 2020). Mr. Carroll maintains that there are natural phenomena that *directly* impact our sense modalities and affect us as human beings in a non-cognitive manner. In the literature, physical phenomena commonly cited are caves, canyons, etcetera. (Open University, 2020) Carlson himself suggests such notable structures as the Grand Tetons as having a kind of intuitive, immediate visceral appeal. (1981)

There are useful similarities and dissimilarities to be found here. BMBN, in *Nature and Aesthetic Judgment and Objectivity*, as pointed out by Noel Carroll, does put a spin on Allen Carlson's positive aesthetics. (2010) In Carlson's view the aesthetic approach to the evaluation of nature does provide us with a way of arguing for the protection and preservation of the environment. BMBN does not seek to ground environmental concerns aesthetically with a completely intellectual apparatus. Carroll believes that there is room for a subjective, humanistic thread. There is an obvious ethical strategy found in Carlson to make a link between aesthetic and ethical concerns about the environment, and Carroll argues that more of a non-cognitive appeal exists.

If ecoaesthetics are approached in a way that questions the manner in which anthropocentric views impact our judgements about the aesthetics of nature, they will be highlighted in discrepancies between Carlson and Carroll. Of important note, Carlson's view is cognitivist. According to his PA, correct views of nature only come about due to scientific understanding. The comparisons and evaluations I have made here between Carroll's and Carlson's views I hope highlight different ways in which to evaluate aesthetic judgments of natural phenomena, and I think this is an important issue to highlight in terms of anticipated responses to PA, and its attempts at objectivity.

### III. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO NIB

First of all, why is the conclusion false? It seems that there are instances wherein "beautiful" does not seem to aptly describe forms of nature that we actually encounter and experience in nature. We are starting to get at the crux of the particular argument lurking in all of this literature. "Is nature *actually* beautiful?" Is "virgin nature" *actually good*? Janaway built upon this thread when it came to criticism over Carlson's argumentation. (2020) The product of the positive aesthetic view was that all virgin nature was essentially good. This was important for his normative continuation that it should be protected. (Carlson, 1981)

Seeking a ground for his ethical treatment of nature, he held that scientific and instrumentalist views will make nature look beautiful to us. However, the handful of counterexamples that we are provided in the literature illustrate our point. Janaway contests this idea that all nature is beautiful, pointing out volcanoes and hurricanes (which aren't very good instrumentally speaking, either). (2020) Budd points out some unpleasant natural phenomena as well in *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*. (2002) Carlson's example of a beach composed of a motley of mud doesn't sound too aesthetically appealing either. (2018) When we get to feces and snakes, we find something cross-cultural: an anthropomorphic aversion to certain things found in nature. Are these objectively beautiful? Are the counterexamples cited enough to undermine Carlson's sweeping remarks about nature?

Carlson himself cites Ronald Hepburn's example of a beach when the tide is out. He describes them as "wide expanses of sand and mud", and later refers to them as "disturbing" and "upsetting" among other things in *Nature, Aesthetic Judgment and Objectivity*. (Carlson, 1981) These are terms we rarely (I would think, never) use to describe something beautiful. Thompson points out an argument on the opposite side of the coin, posing a problem for the instrumentalist scientific view. "When you go on a country walk, then, unless you know the science, there is something deficient in your appreciation of nature. Pause, and consider whether you think Carlson is right." (1995) I don't really think so, do you? In addition, yet another voice seems to corroborate our story against NIB Budd writes in his *Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (2002):

"There are natural substances (gold, water), natural species (animals, insects, trees, shrubs, plants), natural objects (icebergs, mountains, volcanoes, planets, moons), natural forces (gravity, magnetism), natural appearances (the sky, sunrise and sunset, a rainbow, shadows), natural phenomena (rivers, wind, rain snow, clouds), natural products of living things (birdsong, beaver dams, birds' nests, spiders' webs, feces, the smell of a rose, and so on." (Budd, 2002)

A citation of cultural differences here doesn't seem to support NIB. Feces revolts human beings across cultures and there are physiological reasons for this phenomenon. It attracts bacteria which are harmful to *all* human beings. Invoking culture here undermines a major tenant of Carlson's argumentative background. Nature does not stand up to cultural scrutiny, it needs an objective scientific background for our aesthetic judgements to be properly grounded according to the original argument. This last bite seems to dig against a speciest retort against our position critical of NIB. If specism is thrown out, Carlson's scientific instrumentalist view suffers. Either way PA is in jeopardy.

Emily Brady's nonscientific account of environmental aesthetics is a result of some apparent shortcomings in what she calls the "science-based" view. She writes: "[There are] drawbacks of the science-based approach. I argue that the foundation of the science-based model is flawed, and that scientific knowledge is too constraining as a guide for appreciation of nature *qua* aesthetic object. I offer an alternative, a nonscience-based approach." (Brady, 1998) This view is characteristic of a retort to Carlson, in that it is a nonscientific one. The view cites imagination in connection with our responses to nature. She holds, generally, that this catches a few shortcomings possessed in Carlson's argument. These further issues should be reserved for another paper. For now, let us turn to another major problem PA may face in connection with the counterexample issue facing NIB.

### IV. THE IS/UGHT DISTINCTION

The is/ought distinction is a big problem for PA. Wherein lies the flaw in Carlson's argumentation, since NIB has so many counterexamples working against it? Debates about the logical distinction between the ethical and factual are central to the Is/Ought problem. (Hume 1839-40) The earlier contention of Carlson's that all nature has some instrumental value might be an overgeneralization. There was an aim here at making a connection between aesthetic judgment and ethical obligation. This is where the is/ought distinction discovered by David Hume rears its head. (1839-40)

If there are no objective grounds that a reasoning philosopher can accept, then a blanket statement such as *all virgin nature is essentially aesthetically good* can't really stand as such without support. In fact, *prima facie*, it appears that the view that the "appropriate or correct aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is basically positive, and negative aesthetic judgements have little place or no place"

seems completely arbitrary. (Thompson, 1995) Judgements needed to be objective when it came to beauty, aesthetics, and nature, according to PA.

## V. CONCLUSION

The reason counterexamples to NIB pose a strong objection to PA is that not all forms of nature are beautiful. There simply isn't a purely logical reason for the conclusion to be true. There is an anthropocentric component to what we take as beautiful if Carlson is to maintain the instrumentalist angle. This is especially true if his argument is to be taken as logically valid. That is, if instrumentalism and cognitivism in connection with science are factors that have a bearing on whether or not aesthetic judgements about nature are either true or false. He must take, as Janna Thompson points out in her *Aesthetics and the Value of Nature* that there is an anthropomorphic component if we accept PA at face value. (1995) During our investigation, our inquiry took the following form, pointing out counterexamples to Carlson's claim (Open University, 2020):

1. The conclusion of [Carlson's] argument is obviously false.
2. If the conclusion is obviously false, there must be something wrong with the argument.
3. Therefore, there *is* something wrong with the argument.

At the outset, we wanted to find out where Carlson's argument went wrong. Carlson's ultimate argumentation involves the is/ought problem in two places. He antecedently loads the question thusly: "natural objects ought to be experienced in the category that will make them appear aesthetically good ". (2020, Open University) Carlson again makes the same move with his normative continuation: "the environment ought to be protected". This is supposed to stand antecedently without argumentation. To be sure, there are some sentiments here, but as far as logical argumentation goes, the attempts made by ecoaesthetic enthusiasts fall short of the mark. Instead of the stark coldness of deductive logical calculus, activists should seek support from the arts and sciences rather than philosophy itself properly speaking.

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