

Sven Arntzen  
*Natural Beauty, Ethics and Conceptions of Nature*

The question I will address is: To what extent, and in what sense, can natural beauty help establish ethical constraints on our treatment of the natural environment? I will assume for my discussion that natural beauty is something real or objective.<sup>1</sup> A question central to my discussion, but whose answer I will largely take for granted, concerns the marks of natural beauty, the characteristics that a natural region must possess in order to be beautiful. It seems to me that one such characteristic is complex order. This implies that the candidate for natural beauty must be a whole of integrated parts. The beauty of a natural region must require natural biological diversity, although the degree of such diversity, and of complexity, will vary with location and climate. As these remarks suggest, the focus of my discussion will be the beauty of nature or a natural region, not that of individual things. Accordingly, the ethic based on natural beauty as I will discuss it will be concerned with the treatment of nature or a natural region as a whole.

*I. Natural Beauty and Preservation of Nature*

It is not unusual in literature on environmental ethics to maintain that the aesthetic appreciation of nature can help establish ethical constraints on human actions affecting nature. Aldo Leopold sees natural beauty as one criterion of ethics when he formulates the principle of his land ethic as »A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.«<sup>2</sup> Eugene Hargrove thinks that the failure among ancient Greek philosophers to locate beauty in the natural environment helps explain their lack of concern for that environment.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this issue and its relevance to environmental ethics, see for example Eugene C. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.:Prentice Hall, 1988), Ch. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac. And Sketches Here and There* (New York:Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 224-25.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene C. Hargrove, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-29.

According to him, an argument establishing an ethical requirement concerning the preservation of nature or some part of it can be based on its beauty in much the same way in which one can argue from the beauty of a work of art to the necessity of its preservation.<sup>4</sup> To the extent a work of art is beautiful and recognized as such, it is thought to possess a value which is independent of its being useful to obtain some extraneous goal. For example, the appreciation of a painting as beautiful does not involve a consideration of the economic benefits one might derive from owning it and then selling it. The beauty of the painting is considered an intrinsic value, a value that ought to be preserved for its own sake. The beauty of a work of art requires that the object be preserved in its current state and that, in case of damage, it be restored to its original state. Hargrove and others use similar considerations to argue that we have a duty to preserve the natural environment or parts of it.<sup>5</sup> Natural beauty is a non-instrumental, intrinsic value which is lost in the case of drastic change. Furthermore, if, as positive aesthetics claims,<sup>6</sup> beauty is something original to a natural region and nature unaffected by humans has no negative aesthetic characteristics, then the beauty of a natural region makes it a candidate for preservation in a condition in which it is unaffected by humans. With the additional premise that natural beauty is superior to the beauty of art,<sup>7</sup> the argument is that we ought to preserve a natural region in its original condition because it is beautiful in that condition, and this beauty is a value which somehow exceeds the beauty of objects made by humans.

This argument, the so-called »preservation argument«, calls for the exclusion of all human activity from the natural environment, with the possible exception of low-impact recreational activities. Underlying the argument is a dualistic view of man and nature: man and nature are essentially distinct; all or most human activity is detrimental to the natural environment and its beauty. Hargrove makes this supposition explicit: »In defending natural beauty and biodiversity, it is essential that the argument be developed in terms of a human-nature relationship in which humans are not part of nature, in which nature is viewed as an other.«<sup>8</sup> Western approaches to

<sup>4</sup> Eugene C. Hargrove, »The Paradox of Humanity: Two views of biodiversity and landscapes«, in KeChung Kim & Robert D. Weaver (eds.), *Biodiversity and Landscapes: A Paradox of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 173-185. See also his *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, Ch. 6, esp. pp. 191-98.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Robin Attfield, *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), pp. 183-202, esp. pp. 197-201.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of positive aesthetics, see Allen Carlson, »Nature and Positive Aesthetics«, *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984), pp. 5-34.

<sup>7</sup> See Hargrove, op. cit., pp. 185-191.

<sup>8</sup> Hargrove, *ibid.*, p 183.

nature traditionally fall into either of two extremes, both of which presuppose a duality of man and nature. One is the drastic transformation of nature, which has resulted in to-day's environmental crisis. Man obviously regards himself as essentially distinct from that which he destroys or drastically alters. The other is the protection and preservation of natural areas to the exclusion of all activity designed to meet the needs of human life. The preservation argument is, then, an attempt to justify the latter. It seeks to establish an ethical requirement that one refrain from using undisturbed natural regions or ecosystems and that one restore some areas that have been taken out of their pristine condition through human activity. Understood in this manner, the argument is indifferent to what humans do or how humans live outside natural areas, provided their activities do not adversely affect such areas, e.g. through the use of fossil fuels with the resulting pollution and climate change. In other words, the argument is not so much concerned with human lifestyles as with the confinement of human life and activity to certain locations or regions. The ethic that this argument is designed to support does not call for the integration of human life and activity with the natural environment.

The approach to nature supported by the preservation argument differs from what can be loosely characterized as sustainable uses of nature, an approach to the natural environment that takes a middle course somewhere between the two traditional extremes. According to Arne Næss, ecological sustainability in what he calls the »wide sense« ensures the richness and diversity of life forms on Earth.<sup>9</sup> In accordance with this conception of sustainability, sustainable uses of nature can be understood as practices and activities that help meet the needs of human life, yet are consistent with nature's own requirements for its continued existence as an intricate web of diverse, interdependent things. Here, one might think of humans as somehow living and acting *in* nature, in conformity with nature's own conditions. Can considerations of natural beauty support this middle course and help establish an ethic requiring sustainable uses of the natural environment?

The preservation argument is weakened by the fact that there is an essential difference between art and nature, which in turn affects the conditions under which each is beautiful. A work of art is in and of itself static.

---

<sup>9</sup> Arne Næss, »Deep Ecology for the Twenty-second Century«, in George Sessions (ed.), *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* (Boston & London:Shambhala, 1995), p. 464. Contrasted with sustainability in the wide sense is »narrow«, or perhaps »shallow«, ecological sustainability, which for Næss consists of »the existence of short- and long-range policies that most researchers agree will make ecological *catastrophes* affecting narrow *human* interests unlikely.«

The goal of its preservation is to make its beauty permanent, to protect its beauty from externally caused change. Nature, on the other hand, is dynamic; ecologists and geologists have emphasized the fundamentally dynamic character of natural processes.<sup>10</sup> If positive aesthetics is assumed, this means that natural beauty is not adverse to change, but must itself be considered dynamic. Natural change, for example the gradual draining and eventual elimination of a beautiful lake or the natural destruction of a beautiful forest, is compatible with natural beauty. Natural beauty cannot be made permanent in the manner in which the beauty of a work of art is made permanent through restoration and protection. In a recent article, Keekok Lee discusses the measures of the National Trust in England's Lake District to restore and protect Yew Tree Tarn from destruction caused by geological processes, in order to make its beauty permanent.<sup>11</sup> However, such a measure amounts to the sort of interference with nature which the proponents of the preservation argument want to reject.

Given its dynamic character, natural beauty cannot support natural preservation in the sense of maintaining a natural region in its present state. Rather, as a foundation for environmental ethics, natural beauty would dictate that natural processes be allowed to run their course, on nature's own terms. Does this preclude all uses of nature for productive purposes to meet the needs of human life? Leopold distinguishes between evolutionary, natural change, and the sort of change humans are capable of affecting by means of advanced technology. Natural change is usually slow or local; anthropogenic change, using advanced technology, can be swift and global.<sup>12</sup> Using the distinction, one can perhaps say that acting and living in a manner consistent with natural beauty involves maintaining the human impact on nature at the level or scale of nature's own changes and processes, slow or local. Natural beauty allows for human uses of nature insofar as those uses are no more than forms of participation in nature's own dynamic processes.

---

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of recent ecology's view of the dynamic character of natural processes, see J. Baird Callicott, »Do Deconstructive Ecology and Sociobiology Undermine Leopold's Land Ethic?«, *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996), pp. 353-372; Donald Worster, »The Ecology of Order and Chaos«, in Worster, *The Wealth of Nature* (New York:Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 157-170.

<sup>11</sup> Keekok Lee, »Beauty for Ever?«, *Environmental Values* 4 (1995), pp. 213-225.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217; cf. Callicott, *op.cit.*, pp. 369-372. Callicott expresses the distinction in terms of the ecological concept of scale, a concept which is both temporal and spatial.

## *II. Conceptions of Nature*

Some ecologists and environmental philosophers view nature or an ecosystem either as an organism or as a community.<sup>13</sup> In either case, nature is regarded as a complex orderly whole, being in some sense self-determining. It was suggested earlier that nature or a natural region is not beautiful unless it is a complex orderly whole. However, the normative implications of natural beauty and the status that humans are regarded as having with respect to nature will vary, depending on whether nature is viewed as an organism or as a community, respectively.

It follows from the view of nature as an organism that the whole of nature or of an ecosystem is regarded as having primacy in relation to natural individuals and species. Since the parts, like the organs, are considered significant or valuable only as they contribute to the whole or its well-being, the parts of nature, such as its species and individual organisms, do not have independent status or value apart from the whole. The beauty of nature viewed as an organism seems unproblematic. An individual organism can be considered beautiful and can be said to retain its beauty through the course of its development. On the other hand, the organism view has implications which may be unacceptable, or at least problematic. Since any value of the part of an organism depends on its function within the whole, it is difficult to say of a natural individual that it is beautiful in its own right, independently of its contribution to the natural whole. Yet, many nature lovers seem to find beauty in individual plants and animals as such. Another implication concerns the status of humans with respect to the natural whole. If one holds a monist view of man and nature, considering man as part of nature, then the human individual and the human species cannot be regarded as having a status or value independently of their being part of the whole. Thus, one cannot make sense of the worth or dignity of the human individual or of humanity.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, one cannot claim autonomy or moral responsibility for human persons or groups of persons, for every human action is considered part of the organic process. In other words, viewing the human being as part of nature conceived as an organism is incompatible with the status of the human person as a moral agent. Here, a monist

---

<sup>13</sup> Leopold and Næss tend to view nature or ecosystems according to a community conception. Lovelock's »Gaia hypothesis« is a version of the organism view. For a discussion of these as two alternative, competing holistic models of nature, see Eric Katz, »Organism, Community, and the 'Substitution Problem'«, in Katz, *Nature as Subject* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), pp. 33-52.

<sup>14</sup> In my view, the idea of human dignity or worth is too fundamental to ethical and legal thinking to be summarily dismissed.

view of man and nature, in undermining the idea of morality altogether, rules out natural beauty as a foundation for moral obligation with respect to the natural environment.

The alternative, given the organism view, is to maintain a dualistic view of man and nature. If the human being is not part of the natural whole, viewed as an organism, it is possible to maintain that the human being has independent status and value, and that he has moral responsibility and so, as a moral agent, is subject to moral obligation. And it makes sense to consider human activity as something distinct from and capable of being contrary to natural processes and to pass ethical judgment on human actions accordingly. Environmental ethics based on natural beauty, where nature is conceived as an organism, supposes that the human being is essentially distinct and separate from nature. In that case, natural beauty imposes on humans the obligation to refrain from interfering with that from which they are essentially distinct. This is in agreement with the preservation argument.

An alternative to the organism view is the view of nature or an ecosystem as a community. For characteristics of community, one often looks to human communities: the association of people under some political authority, religious communities, communities based on some core activity or business such as a fishing community, and so on. Since nature or an ecosystem is not characterized by the kind of cooperation and mutual obligation that one finds in human communities, it must be considered sufficient for a natural community that its members interact and influence one another and that they share in the same fundamental conditions of existence and life.<sup>15</sup> Even if the members of one species prey on those of another, this is necessary for the thriving of the animals that survive, and they do so under related conditions. The community view of nature supposes that natural things in their great diversity are somehow connected. However, a community is a looser association of things than an organism. A community member may have a significant function with respect to the whole and yet have independent status or value. When contrasting the community view of nature with the organism view, Eric Katz uses a university as an example of community to make this point.<sup>16</sup> Students, faculty and staff who are essential to the university community also have lives and activities apart from it.

---

<sup>15</sup> John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (New York: Scribner, 1974), p. 116, objects to the community view of nature on the grounds that it is a necessary condition for there being a community that those who count as its members recognize mutual obligations. As Callicott points out in his *In Defense of the Land Ethic. Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 71, a community view of nature must reject Passmore's condition.

<sup>16</sup> Katz, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

If these characterizations of community and community members are correct, then this view of nature does not have the problematic implications of the organism view. It allows for the individual thing in nature to be considered beautiful in its own right, and not only in terms of its function within the whole. This view also allows for a monist view of the relationship of man and nature, according to which humans are members of the natural community, without relinquishing the view of the human person as valuable and as morally responsible. Leopold regards human membership in the natural community as a presupposition of his land ethic. He construes the evolution of ethics as a gradual development from its concern with the relation of one individual to another, through a concern with the relation of the individual to society to a concern with humans' relation to the land and the things living on it, i.e., the land ethic.<sup>17</sup> According to him, the last stage will be a reality when humans, as moral agents, view land as a community to which they belong, together with all other living things.<sup>18</sup> For Leopold, the human person is not prepared to follow an ethic based on natural beauty unless he realizes that he is a member of a natural community.

### *III. Natural Beauty, Place and Landscape*

One problem with the community view and the idea of natural beauty is that a community is not the sort of thing that is considered beautiful. Whereas it makes sense to speak of nature as a »beautiful organism«, it is not so obvious that it makes sense to characterize nature as a »beautiful community.« If natural beauty can justify an ethic concerning humans' relationship to the natural environment, the question is how this is so, when the community view of nature is presupposed. One reason why a community is not the sort of thing that is considered beautiful is that it is not a mere aggregate of its members. A community also involves the complex relationships of its members and the conditions of their coexistence. Such relationships and conditions are grasped intellectually; they are not directly perceived but inferred from what is perceived. Writers on natural aesthetics generally agree that perceptual qualities of natural phenomena are relevant to their being beautiful or objects of aesthetic appreciation.<sup>19</sup> If a commu-

---

<sup>17</sup> Leopold, op. cit., pp. 202-203.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>19</sup> I make this claim on the basis of writings by people of diverse orientations on natural aesthetics: Arnold Berleant, »The Aesthetics of Art and Nature«, in Salim Kelam & Ivan Gaskell (eds.), *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge

nity is, at least in part, an intellectually grasped entity, natural beauty must pertain to perceptual aspects, i.e., what can be seen, heard, felt, etc., of the natural community.

As objects of perception, it is typically uniquely identifiable particulars that are considered beautiful: individual animals, particular places and landscapes. Perhaps one can also say that the beauty of a particular natural phenomenon is as unique as the particular itself. If positive aesthetics is true, two natural landscapes, similar or dissimilar, are both beautiful and therefore of equal aesthetic value. Yet, each is beautiful in its particular manner, by virtue of its unique character, so that the beauty of one is not exchangeable for the beauty of the other. The elimination of one landscape would then be an absolute, irreplaceable, loss. A place, landscape or natural region is dependent for its beauty on the kinds of plants and animals and types of soil and rocks that are natural to it. Callicott, with reference to Leopold, suggests that certain species of plants and animals might be more central to the beauty of a region than others, such as the ruffed grouse in the north woods of Wisconsin and the alligator in the Louisiana swamps. He calls these »aesthetic indicator species«. <sup>20</sup> Since, as ecology tells us, an ecosystem is an intricate web of interdependent things, the aesthetic indicator species require their supporting species and phenomena. The unique beauty and character of a natural area requires the presence of all the species of plants and animals and all the soil and rock types that are natural or original to it.

Human communities were originally attached to specific places or regions, whose conditions were central to the determination of the individual character of the community. A small fishing village at a particular coastal location has its character to a great extent determined by the conditions of that particular location: the presence of certain species of fish, prevailing weather conditions, soil conditions, the surrounding landscape such as the presence or absence of forests nearby, the proximity to other villages, the topography, and so on. And for its survival, the community has organized its activities so as to be in agreement with the natural conditions of its location. A natural community is similar in that it too is attached to a certain place and region, whose peculiar conditions and characteristics help determine its unique character, including the diversity and relationships of its mem-

---

University Press, 1993), pp. 228-243; Emily Brady, »Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature«, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998), pp. 139-147; J. Baird Callicott, »The Land Aesthetic«, in Callicott (ed.), *Companion to 'A Sand County Almanac'. Interpretive and Critical Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 157-171.

<sup>20</sup> Callicott, »The Land Aesthetic«, pp. 166-167; cf. Leopold, *op.cit.*, pp.137-138.



bers. A particular place, landscape or region possesses diverse perceptual qualities, and it is a complex orderly whole. Thus, a place, landscape or region satisfies at least some of the conditions for possessing natural beauty. It is reasonable to think, then that if nature is viewed as a community, natural beauty pertains to the place, landscape or region in which the community is located.

According to dynamic ecology, a place in nature or a natural landscape has a history which accounts for its unique character. As such, every place or region embodies its distinctive narrative, a story of its developmental stages and their significance. The story is about the reciprocal influence of resident species and the places and regions in which they are located. Humans can relate to such a narrative in either of two ways. They have the capacity to disrupt the narrative so as to discontinue it, or they can, through their actions, continue the narrative. Neither Næss' deep ecology nor Leopold's land ethic prohibits human habitation in and interaction with nature. According to Næss, human activities or human habitation need not be incompatible with wilderness; only certain lifestyles are, especially those of Western industrial people.<sup>21</sup> And according to Leopold, the land ethic does not oppose human activity in the natural environment, only the destruction of this environment.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, a truly holistic ethic of nature, which seeks to integrate humans in the natural whole, cannot prohibit human uses of nature, provided these uses are sustainable in the relevant sense and are confined in scope so as to be in conformity with nature's original processes. The idea of natural beauty can help support these ethical constraints on human activity in nature.

If, as positive aesthetics holds, a place or landscape is naturally or originally beautiful, and, as dynamic ecology holds, it is subject to continuous processes or evolutionary changes, the results of which are also beautiful, then natural beauty requires of humans that they conduct their lives in a manner which is consistent with nature's own processes. In other words, anthropogenic changes, which are inevitable, given the presence of humans on Earth, must be such that they do not upset nature's own course. Human activity must be governed by a concern for the particular place or landscape where the natural community is located. For example, forestry practices must be determined according to the character of the place, such as its topography, soil conditions, living conditions of resident species, and so on. A road built in hilly country must be narrow and winding. Farming practices must

---

<sup>21</sup> Næss, »The Third World, Wilderness, and Deep Ecology«, in George Sessions (ed.), *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*, p. 398.

<sup>22</sup> Leopold, *op.cit.*, p. 204.

leave habitat for resident species, although the manner in which this is done will depend on climatic and soil conditions, on what the resident species are, and so on. Since a place or a landscape is like no other, its beauty requires of humans that their activities maintain its uniqueness. Rather than excluding humans from the natural environment, an ethic based on natural beauty in this manner imposes requirements on humans' lifestyles, that human lives and activities be determined by the character of the place or landscape, rather than the other way around.

According to some proponents of positive aesthetics, the aesthetic appreciation of nature requires scientific knowledge, the knowledge of a region's or landscape's natural history.<sup>23</sup> Such a requirement seems counterintuitive and unreasonable, for it would imply that persons without the prerequisite knowledge of a certain region are incapable of aesthetic appreciation of that region.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, such knowledge is useful, and may even be necessary, for conforming to the requirements imposed by natural beauty. The requirement that human activity be in conformity with nature's own dynamic processes is a requirement that human activity be part of and a continuation of a narrative which is already present as embodied in the natural environment. Knowledge of the history of a place or landscape is relevant to determining what is involved in complying with the ethical requirement.

The place or landscape in which a particular natural community is located is not any place, determinable by means of abstract coordinates alone. Rather, it holds a special significance to that community and its members. Thus, there is a sense in which the place or landscape of a natural community is home to that community and its members. As Edward Casey has pointed out, the idea of home signifies an intimate relationship that a person or group of persons has to a particular place.<sup>25</sup> Home is that particular place to which one belongs. It is part of one's identity, and the distinctive character of the home itself comes from one's living in it. Thus conceived, a home is something very different from a house. Whereas one's home is one's dwelling in a fundamental sense, a house is a construction, a distinct other to which one has a merely external relationship. The relation to a place as one's home in this sense is a basis for one's caring for it, making sure it persists in its distinctive existence and significance. Similarly, if the idea of home is applied to the place or region of a natural community, which in-

---

<sup>23</sup> See for example Allen Carlson, *op.cit.* Callicott attributes a similar view to Leopold, cf. Callicott, »The Land Aesthetic«, pp. 161-166.

<sup>24</sup> For an extensive criticism of this view, see for example Emily Brady, *op.cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), e.g. pp. 121, 175-77.

cludes humans among its members, it makes sense to extend the same considerations of care to this place or region. The word »ecology« is derived from the ancient Greek words »oikos«, often translated as »home«, and »logos«.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, ecology is the study of the natural home, including the things inhabiting it and the relationships of their interdependence. The natural home has its beauty from all the things that naturally live in it and belong to it. As an intrinsic value, natural beauty requires of the morally capable members of the natural community that they care for the home of all the community's members, that they act so as to enable it to continue to exist with its distinctive character.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

In opposition to the preservation argument, I do not think that natural beauty prohibits human uses of nature altogether, when nature or a natural region is viewed as a community of which humans are members. It does not follow, however, that there is no obligation to preserve wilderness areas in various parts of the world. Some of the considerations I have presented can also be used in support of wilderness preservation. Although natural communities or ecosystems are distinguishable entities, they must still be connected. The distinct communities and their respective members must somehow interact or relate to one another across community boundaries, for they all exist in one inescapable world, Earth. Insofar as one can speak of a global natural community, the beauty of nature thus conceived is the beauty of Earth. If positive aesthetics is assumed, then Earth with its original biological diversity is beautiful. If natural beauty is a foundation of an ethic of nature, then such beauty on a global scale implies that humans should not, through drastic interference with natural processes, upset the conditions of Earth's original biological diversity. Failure to preserve various kinds of wilderness would diminish this diversity. Thus, the appeal to natural beauty can support an ethic of nature at the global level as well as at the local or regional level.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> For an account of the origin of the word »ecology«, see for example J. Donald Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Otto M. Christensen for conversations about issues of aesthetics.