

On Conservationist and Preservationist Environmental Ethics and Aesthetics

FRED ERDMAN

The ethical conflict within the environmentalist movement was—and is—between the preservationist ethic and the conservationist ethic. The crucial difference is that while the preservationist ethic seeks to set aside and preserve as much of pristine nature as possible, the conservationist ethic seeks to maintain nature for the sake of human use. Both approaches try to ground environmentalism in an environmental aesthetic. Generally, we wish to preserve what we find beautiful. Most work in environmental philosophy favors a preservationist ethic. One reason for this is that it seems that the conservationist ethic is indifferent to questions of preserving natural beauty; on the face of it, the conservationist ethic is purely utilitarian. Allan Carlson's positive-cognitive natural aesthetics and Stan Godlovitch's acentric natural aesthetics ground a preservationist ethic; but Carlson's and Godlovitch's natural aesthetics do not provide sufficient criteria for making difficult choices with regard to environmental challenges. Aldo Leopold's land ethic, however, offers both a natural aesthetic and an environmental

FRED ERDMAN recently completed his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Dallas. The title of his dissertation is "The Good according to Mind: On Plato's Philebus." He has an MA in philosophy from Duquesne University and a BA from St. John's College, Annapolis. His areas of interest include Plato's political thought, ancient philosophy in general, and the history of ideas, esp. early modern thought.

ethic that is a blend of the preservationist and conservationist environmental ethics. His synthesis allows for both a rigorous environmentalism as well as the recognition that human beings are a part of nature and must transform the natural environment in order to live on the earth.

I. CARLSON AND GODLOVITCH: NATURAL AESTHETICS AND THE PRESERVATIONIST ETHIC

In grounding their environmental ethic in natural aesthetics, environmental philosophers like Carlson and Godlovitch make the implicit claim that we ought to preserve nature because it is beautiful.¹ However, not all of nature seems beautiful to us. Some parts of nature seem to be terrible or fearful or dangerous, and additionally, not all human beings will find the same things beautiful. Thus, an environmental aesthetic must set the standard for what is or can be aesthetically appreciated in nature.

Allen Carlson argues for a positive aesthetics, the position that “all of nature is beautiful insofar as it is untouched by man All virgin nature, in short, is essentially aesthetically good.”² This is due to the fact that we can understand the truth of nature through science: “the natural world must appear aesthetically good when it is perceived in its correct categories, those given and informed by natural science” (Carlson, 229). Scientific categories ensure the aesthetic value of nature insofar as those categories are correct (230). One might wonder if Carlson is justified in identifying the true in the scientific sense with the pleasant in the aesthetic sense: does greater scientific knowledge of the natural world always enhance our aesthetic appreciation of nature? In some cases it may, but surely not in all cases. For example, the knowledge that tree rings indicate the age as well as the environmental conditions of the land during the tree’s lifespan may enable one to view that particular stump as an aesthetic object rather than just another minor feature of the landscape. On the other hand, the knowledge of photosynthesis will

¹ Other possible grounds of environmentalism are 1) God, who creates and sustains nature and makes human beings stewards of nature; 2) mere utilitarianism could ground environmentalism, that is, an argument that it is in our rational self-interest to preserve the environment for our sake and for future generations. Rather than look at all three possible grounds for environmentalism, here I will only look at natural aesthetics.

² Allen Carlson, “Nature and Positive Aesthetics,” 211.

(probably) not enhance any particular aesthetic experience of nature because that process is ubiquitous; photosynthesis will not make the leaves on one tree any more aesthetically striking than the leaves on any other tree because the process is the same in both.

While scientific knowledge does not necessarily enhance the aesthetic appreciation of nature, there are more fundamental objections to Carlson's position. First, in ordinary human experience we often find nature ugly and displeasing, even if we possess relevant scientific knowledge. Second, Carlson's assumption that the true is the same as that which is verifiable scientifically is questionable. Alternatively to Carlson's positive-cognitive aesthetics, Stan Godlovitch regards science as just so much text written by the human imagination. While there are affinities between Carlson and Godlovitch, the two regard nature very differently: the former sees nature as intelligible according the categories of science while the latter sees nature as fundamentally unintelligible.

Godlovitch distinguishes between centric and acentric natural aesthetics. A centric view is one in which there is some ruling perspective of the whole: a biocentric ethic views inanimate nature as existing for the sake of animate nature; an anthropocentric ethic views non-human nature as existing for the sake of human beings.³ By contrast, for the acentrist Godlovitch all things are equally things, and there is no privileged perspective (human, biological, etc.) upon which to base preferential judgments. Acentrism does not distinguish between living and non-living, or any other dualism that a centric perspective creates. The acentric view is perhaps rather bleak from a human point of view because (at least with regard to environmental issues) human beings are just as ethically important as flies.⁴

Then why is the acentric view desirable? "Only acentric environmentalism takes into account nature as a whole; if we wish to adopt an acentric environmentalism, then we require a corresponding acentric natural aesthetic to ground it" (Godlovitch, 134). First, Godlovitch claims the acentric aesthetic is desirable because it can

³ Stan Godlovitch, "Icebreakers: Environmental and Natural Aesthetics," 134.

⁴ It is interesting, however, that the acentric view is still a perspective; its perspective is that there is no perspective. Thus acentrism is paradoxical in the same way the statement "All things are relative" is paradoxical; what the relativist means is that all things are relative except for that statement. The statement "There is no truth" is also paradoxical in the same way.

appreciate the whole of nature in a way that anthropocentrism or biocentrism cannot. Certainly anthropocentrism or biocentrism privileges some part of nature over the rest of nature. Acentric environmentalism claims that any ranking of nature, or dichotomizing of nature, in effect de-values one side of the dichotomy, namely that which is “lower” in rank. Second, acentrism is desirable because it can appreciate nature in a way that cognitive-positive aesthetics cannot. Godlovitch correctly notes that science may get things wrong: “suppose your appreciation of nature rested upon what turned out to be a false scientific theory” (141). Further, science may not be the way to get to the truth of nature, or human beings may not have access to truth: “science . . . offers us only a gallery of our own articulated images” (142).

For Godlovitch, the appropriate aesthetic for appreciating nature is the sense of mystery, seeing nature as a vast puzzle with no solution: “To grasp the state of mystery one must apprehend the need for a freedom from perspective, sensorial and categorical” (145). Aloofness is the key. Since we cannot avoid perspective (centrism) because we are beings that perceive—that have a perspective—the only way to conceivably attain an acentric view of the whole would be in death, the dissolution of the individual perspective. Godlovitch admits that acentrism is “impossible, paradoxical”: “it leaves room only for mysteries without solution” (148). The acentric position is undoubtedly an extreme view because it has no reference whatsoever to what is good for human beings. Acentrism values only aloofness and disinterest in the face of the mystery of nature. Godlovitch’s acentrism also rejects Carlson’s cognitive aesthetics because, for Godlovitch, science is finally an imaginative way of conceiving of nature; nature is not a text written in mathematics or any other language: “Nature is both text-free and sign-free because in itself it is entirely devoid of meaning and hence not subject *qua natural* to interpretation.”⁵

However, surely disinterest and aloofness and detachment-before-the-mystery are not how human beings react to what they think has aesthetic value. Or if detachment is an appropriate response to some forms of natural beauty, that is only true for some cases; elation, appreciation, reverential awe, and the like, would be more typical human responses to natural beauty, and Godlovitch’s acentric aesthetic

⁵ Stan Godlovitch, “Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics,” 269.

dismisses these reactions as unimportant or incidental or even inappropriate.

One might argue that an acentrist natural aesthetic could ground a preservationist environmentalism, although one could still object that acentrism does not provide any very compelling reason for preserving nature; why preserve or fight for that which one is aloof from and indifferent to? Positive-cognitive aesthetics could also ground a preservationist environmentalism, insofar as one seeks to preserve that which is beautiful—which is all of nature in this view. But, as Godlovitch rightly points out, a positive natural aesthetic is irrelevant in conservation decisions where one has to establish concrete criteria for which sites or habitats to preserve, and other thorny questions that deal with particular environmental conservation decisions (279).

II. ALDO LEOPOLD'S NATURAL AESTHETIC AND THE CONSERVATIONIST LAND ETHIC

Both Carlson's cognitive-positive aesthetic and Godlovitch's acentric aesthetic are impractical as the grounds for an environmental ethic. They cannot establish criteria for making hard decisions in environmental policy. By contrast, Aldo Leopold's natural aesthetic takes into account various degrees of knowledge and various aesthetic preferences among human beings in a way that Carlson and Godlovitch's aesthetics cannot. Carlson's cognitive aesthetic evidently requires a degree of scientific knowledge that few human beings will ever acquire in order that they might find all of nature equally beautiful or aesthetically pleasing. While Godlovitch rejects cognitive aesthetics because he sees science as an imaginative interpretation of nature, he dismisses nearly all human aesthetic responses to nature as inappropriate because they do not constitute aloof indifference before the mystery. For Leopold, on the other hand, a deep aesthetic appreciation of nature requires some ecological knowledge, a sense of perception that is developed through much time spent "in" nature, and a sense of "husbandry," the feeling of being a caretaker of nature.⁶

The kernel of truth at the core of cognitive aesthetics is that a modicum of ecological knowledge is required to see nature in all of its

⁶ Aldo Leopold, "A Taste for Country: Country, Natural History, and the Conservation Esthetic," 95.

complexity. Leopold argues that ecological knowledge alone, however, is not enough for aesthetic appreciation of nature: “The taste for country displays the same diversity in aesthetic competence among individuals as the taste for opera, or oils” (87). Most everyone can appreciate scenic beauty—snow-capped mountains, a colorful sunset, seaside cliffs—but not everyone can appreciate the Kansas plains. In order to develop a taste for the Kansas plains it is necessary to refocus one’s aesthetic attention and see not drab cornfields but “the heave and the grunt of ox teams breaking the prairie” (87). The cultivation of aesthetic taste requires “living in and with” nature because it requires not only seeing the beauty of particulars but seeing the story of the land—the natural processes and sequences—unlocked by even drab views (87).

Leopold’s natural aesthetic grounds his conservationist environmentalism. His “land ethic” advocates for not simply a wise-use policy toward nature but the recognition and encouraging of a communal relation between the natural environment and human beings.⁷ Ethics concerns the relations of individuals to each other, the relation of the individual to society, and, Leopold argues, ought to also include the relation of human beings and society to the land (Leopold, 203). “Land” denotes not just territory, but it is a comprehensive term that encompasses a whole ecological system. This ecological system should not be understood as something that is outside of human society, “in the wilderness;” instead, the boundaries of human communities should be mentally expanded to include the land, the ecological system on which human communities depend (204). Leopold pushes against the nature-civilization dichotomy. If the land ethic extends the boundaries of the human community to include nature, then what are the results? “A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these ‘resources’ [water, plants, animals, trees, etc.], but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state” (204). The land ethic goes beyond the view that human beings are fundamentally conquerors of nature, the view that land is a treasure trove of natural resources and nothing more. The land ethic is a synthesis of a limited preservationist ethic together with a conservationist ethic that sees human beings as “plain member[s] and citizens of [the land-community]” (204).

⁷ Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” 201–227.

Perhaps the aspect of Leopold's environmentalism that most recommends it over the positions of Carlson or Godlovitch is that it is not utopian. Leopold does not expect that it is possible to have perfect solutions to the inevitable conflicts between the integrity of nature and the human need for habitation, livelihood, and the rest; human beings cannot exist apart from nature and human beings must inevitably infringe on nature.

We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations the important thing is not to achieve, but to strive When we say "striving," we admit at the outset that the thing we need must grow from within. No striving for an idea was ever injected wholly from without. The problem, then, is how to bring about a striving for harmony with land among a people many of whom have forgotten there is any such thing as land, among whom education and culture have become almost synonymous with landlessness. This is the problem of "conservation education."⁸

To sum up, Carlson's cognitive-positive aesthetic grounds an environmentalism that regards human beings as essentially the enemies of nature. Similarly, Godlovitch's acentric natural aesthetic grounds an environmentalism that regards human beings as entirely alien to nature. For both Carlson and Godlovitch, the more choice worthy environmental policies will be preservationist in character. By contrast, Aldo Leopold's land ethic provides the basis for an environmentalism that avoids the excesses of both preservationism and conservationism.

⁸ Aldo Leopold, "A Taste for Country," 90.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carlson, Allen. "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," in *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*. Edited by Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 211–237.

Godlovitch, Stan. "Icebreakers: Environmental and Natural Aesthetics," in *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*. Edited by Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 133–150.

— — —. "Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics" in *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*. Edited by Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 268–285.

Leopold, Aldo. "A Taste for Country: Country, Natural History, and the Conservation Esthetic" in *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*. Edited by Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 86–98.

— — —. "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 201–227.