

NATURE, AESTHETICS, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The aim of this paper is to examine relationality between ‘nature’ and ‘consciousness’, the aesthetic value of consciousness as it pertains to aesthetic judgements of natural environments, and to investigate their role in the cultivation of environmental virtue aesthetics.

The urgency of environmental problems calls upon us to carefully consider an appreciative model of natural environments that is respectful of natural entities without delegitimizing natural aesthetic value, in its positive and negative manifestations, as one of the great goods of human experience, consciousness, and existence.

I begin by providing some conceptual clarifications, for example, of ‘value’, ‘nature’, ‘environment’, and ‘ecology’. I follow with a brief discussion of recent approaches, particularly those that argue (i) for positive aesthetics (Carlson and Parsons) and (ii) for nature’s intrinsic value (Callicott). In this presentation, I will focus on (iii) arguments against an idealized concept of ‘nature’ (Descola and Latour).

Contra these positions, which I argue minimize natural aesthetic value and its role in human consciousness (and therefore human intentionality and action), I maintain that conscious experience is aesthetically valuable insofar as conscious aesthetic experience and appreciation of nature is emmeshed with moral and epistemic considerations.

These considerations pertain to (a) the natural entities experienced (including natural environments that span the globe and skies in all their diversity, rather than primarily focusing on ‘pristine’, ‘othered’, or ‘wild’ nature) and (b) the human consciousness experiencing it (making space for all manner of cultural, imaginative, rich, and creative approaches, not just scientific ones).

The aesthetic value of consciousness lies in this experiential propensity of diversity and cultural richness, but also its cognitive capacity for weighing up epistemic and moral value that draws on both culture and science through the cultivation of aesthetic virtues.