

BOOK REVIEWS

Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, eds. *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. 312 pages.

This collection has both timely and lasting value. For the past decade or so aestheticians and environmental philosophers have held a fascinating conversation about how best to understand the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. Carlson and Berleant's anthology arrives as the discussion has reached maturity, allowing them to bring together works of well-developed thought. Teachers who have been wishing to cover the issues discussed in depth in a graduate or advanced undergraduate seminar now have their text. It is also clear that this conversation will be important for the future of both aesthetics and environmental philosophy. Carlson and Berleant's book should remain in print for a long time and play a role in canonizing some of these essays as crucial works in the field.

The essays collected here focus on developing models for what happens when we enter a natural place and appreciate the beauty, sublimity, and other positive aesthetic qualities of what we find. Like all conceptual analysis, these models are to varying degrees both normative and descriptive. They seek to capture the essence of a familiar practice and to advise how best to pursue that practice in the future. In some cases, a plurality of approaches to nature is explicitly advocated; in others, the author is narrower about what the "right" way to experience nature is. The focus on modeling the aesthetic experience of nature means a number of other important issues in natural and environmental aesthetics are set aside. The book does not touch the line of empirical, evolutionary work that starts with Jay Appleton and includes Steve and Rachel Kaplan, Roger Ulrich, and E. O. Wilson. Applications of aesthetic theory to landscape architecture similarly do not play a role here; nor does the debate over positive aesthetics (the belief that natural things have only or primarily positive aesthetic qualities simply because they are natural). The book does not contain examples of nature writing in the tradition founded by Muir and Thoreau, although one essay does discuss the role of such literature in modeling the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. The editors were right, of course, to set all these topics aside. Although they relate to the conversation at hand, they are not directly a part of it. For those who are interested, the introductory essay, adapted from two encyclopedia entries by Carlson and Berleant, has extensive citations to the relevant literature.

After the introductory review, Carlson and Berleant's collection gives us the essay that kicked off renewed interest in natural aesthetics in general, Ronald Hepburn's "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," which originally appeared in 1966. Prior to Hepburn's essay, twentieth-century



philosophical aesthetics had focused exclusively on the art world, to the extent that their theories simply couldn't be applied to nature. Hepburn succeeded in reviving the eighteenth-century philosophical tradition of natural aesthetics. Hepburn's early essay is not the star of the show, however. Although he sparked interest in the topic, the terms of the debate were set in the following decade by Allen Carlson's "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," the second essay reprinted here. Every subsequent essay in this volume save one cites "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," the larger sequence of papers it belongs to, or the book Carlson assembled from these essays. In these works, Carlson argues that the proper appreciation of nature must draw on biology and ecology. Just as the appreciation of art requires an understanding of art history, appreciation of nature requires understanding natural history. Carlson's proposal established the fundamental cleavage in the essays that follow. This split is variously labeled "cognitive vs. noncognitive," "conceptual vs. nonconceptual," or, most intriguingly, "narrative vs. ambient." On the one side are thinkers who claim that nature must be appreciated in the context of some kind of conceptual apparatus. In Carlson's original proposal, the conceptual apparatus came from the natural sciences. Later versions, such as Yuriko Saito's essay in this volume (chap. 7), expand the conceptual apparatus to include other ideas, such as local folklore. *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* includes further defenses and elaborations of the cognitivist framework by Marcia Eaton (chap. 9) and Holmes Rolston, III (chap. 10). Thomas Heyd's essay (chap. 15) probably belongs to the cognitivist camp, for although he believes science can actually detract from our aesthetic appreciation of nature, he still admits the need for some story or cognitive framework for appreciating nature. In chapter fourteen, Donald Crawford offers a rather reactionary version of the cognitivist picture, arguing that the appropriate conceptual framework for viewing nature comes from the old categories of landscape painting.

Opposed to the cognitivist camp are noncognitivists such as Berleant, Stan Godlovitch, Emily Brady, and John Andrew Fisher, represented here in chapters three, five, eight, and thirteen. The noncognitivists emphasize features of our aesthetic experience such as immersion, imagination, and ambience. The important fact about nature, as opposed to art, is that it is "frame-free," and we should not undermine it by imposing a conceptual framework on it. A softer version of noncognitivism is pushed by Noël Carroll, Cheryl Foster, and Ronald Moore (chaps. 4, 11, and 12), who argue for a pluralist or syncretic view, under which cognitive appreciation can exist alongside some kind of noncognitive appreciation. A second essay by Hepburn (chap. 6) also rejects Carlson's view and emphasizes the role of the imagination, but probably shouldn't be classified as noncognitivist. Hepburn highlights the opportunity to exercise our "metaphysical imagination," that experiences of nature provide us by seeing our surroundings as embodying a metaphysical idea or proposition. A walk in the woods might give us a visceral sense, for instance, of our



unity with nature. Although the exercise of the metaphysical imagination clearly takes us beyond the realm of Carlson's science-based appreciation, it does not leave the realm of the cognitive because the metaphysical schemes one experiences still admit of truth or falsity. Thus, Hepburn emphasizes that the metaphysic one is experiencing may not hold up to rational scrutiny, in which case what you thought was a metaphysical imagination turns out to be "mere fancy."

Part of what is at stake in the debate between cognitivists and noncognitivists is the role of aesthetics in environmental ethics. Carlson's initial motivation for the science-based account was the desire to make aesthetic judgments of nature objective. Later cognitivist writers spin this into a more flatly ethical imperative. Saito, inspired by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, suggests that we have an ethical duty to see nature as it really is. Eaton emphasizes the need for objective judgments in order to link aesthetics to sustainable practices. Noncognitivists, for their part, typically emphasize that their view does allow for some form of aesthetic objectivity and, indeed, may reveal truths that cognitivist aesthetics misses, although it is sometimes hard to see how they can maintain this and still be noncognitivists. Foster, for instance, claims that the ambient dimension of the experience of nature reveals a value that simply cannot be articulated using narrative tools. Brady emphasizes that the noncognitivist model allows for nonexperts to enter into debates over aesthetic value and preservation. Godlovitch, perhaps the most radical of the noncognitivists, specifically claims that an "acentric" aesthetic is necessary to support an acentric or holist ethic.

The Carlson and Berleant volume has a number of other pleasing features. For one thing, it is always nice to read essays on aesthetics that are themselves aesthetically pleasing. Rolston's "The Aesthetic Experience of Forests" operates simultaneously as an ode to the forest and an argument for the cognitive model of appreciation. It is a powerful piece of writing. Godlovitch's description of the breakup of ice sheets in a river in Alberta is thoroughly charming. The introductory essay I mentioned earlier is also quite useful. It provides a historical introduction to the conversation captured by this collection, describing the role of nature in eighteenth century aesthetics, the reasons natural aesthetics dropped from the scene, and the reasons it reappeared. It also, as I mentioned before, situates the current conversation relative to other important conversations in natural aesthetics. Extensive citations are provided all around.

It is possible with any collection to complain about selection. The book is not so long that it needed to exclude important essays by T. J. Diffey, J. Baird Callicott, and Mark Sagoff, all of whom are a part of this conversation. Key essays in this volume by Carroll, Berleant, and Hepburn draw on T. J. Diffey's "Natural Beauty without Metaphysics." It would have been good to see that essay here. Callicott's "The Land Aesthetic" would have provided a richer link between this conversation and the major conversation about moral status in



environmental ethics, as would the inclusion of work by Sagoff. On the other hand, I am not sure what Sepänmaa's essay (chap. 16) is doing in this particular volume. He is the only author who neither refers back to Carlson's theory nor is explicitly concerned with modeling the aesthetic experience of nature, either normatively or descriptively. Moreover his allusive, continental style clashes with the analytic, argument-oriented essays that make up the rest of the book.

Quibbles aside, this is a great volume. Libraries should stock it. Professors should assign it. Individuals working in this or related fields will want to have it close at hand.

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