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Hutcheson and Reid on Natural Beauty

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Introduction

In this paper, I compare ideas about natural beauty in the philosophies of Hutcheson and Reid, with special attention to the relevance of their ideas to contemporary debates in aesthetics of nature and environmental aesthetics. Why look to this period for ideas about aesthetics of *nature*? The principles of taste, beauty, sublimity, novelty, ugliness structured theories of aesthetics during this time. By structuring theories through 'taste' and focusing on capacities in the subject such as perception and imagination, the starting point was not questions about the arts and their status in society (as we see, chiefly, in contemporary aesthetics). Rather, the starting point and subject matter of aesthetics was conceived broadly in relation to these principles. That subject matter included animals, the human figure, landscapes, natural processes and places, as well as gardens and other modified environments. This wide remit can also be explained by the influence of the natural sciences and religion on aesthetic theories of the time. Ideas that were central to eighteenth-century aesthetics resonate with new thinking in environmental

aesthetics, for example, non-instrumental aesthetic valuing of nature as emerging from disinterestedness, the association of aesthetic value with moral value, and the role of knowledge in appreciation.

This is a worthwhile project for a few reasons. Along with Addison, Hutcheson had a strong influence on aesthetic theories developed in the eighteenth century, and both Hutcheson and Shaftesbury were important influences on Reid. Reid's explicit criticisms of Hutcheson are, themselves, interesting for reflecting on aesthetic appreciation of nature. In contemporary debates about aesthetics of nature, while Kant has been discussed widely, Hutcheson and Reid have not, and together they have interesting ideas to contribute to these discussions.¹ In historical discussions about eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, natural beauty tends to get short shrift.² Also, Reid's work has enjoyed a rise in importance, generally, in contemporary philosophy, yet his aesthetic theory remains understudied.³

¹ Hutcheson and Reid are not the only philosophers who offer interesting ideas about natural beauty in the eighteenth century, but I take the position that their ideas are interesting and relevant for the reasons I set out in this paper. Perhaps the widest discussion of aesthetics of nature among philosophers of this period can be found in numerous treatises on the sublime; see Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge, 2013), 11-46.

² For example, Peter Kivy's important study of Hutcheson discusses his views of natural beauty, but not in very much depth; see, *The Seventh Sense: Francis Hutcheson and Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2003).

³ Esther Engels Kroeker, 'Thomas Reid Today', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 13 (2015), 95-114, 104. For some of the latest work in this area, see Rebecca Copenhaver, 'Thomas Reid and Aesthetic

The paper begins with a short background section on empirically-driven theories of aesthetics, before proceeding to a discussion of Hutcheson's ideas on the sense of beauty, perception and natural beauty. I turn to Reid on these same topics next, showing how his theory differs from Hutcheson's, and what it has to offer in that regard. In the final section, I argue that their ideas on natural beauty usefully inform two central issues in contemporary debates: what it means to appreciate nature 'on its own terms', and the role of perception and knowledge in that appreciation. In discussing each philosopher, my focus will be on their concept of beauty, and I shall set the aside question of whether or not there is a standard of taste with respect to beauty.

Empiricism and Nature

Many of the philosophers writing about beauty and other aesthetic categories were also interested in human nature and Newtonian science. This is significant for writing in aesthetics because it will have developed, in Britain at least, within a context of empirical philosophy deeply influenced by Locke's empiricism, which brought the senses into prominence. The aesthetic sense was described as an

Perception', and Rachel Zuckert, 'Thomas Reid's Expressivist Aesthetics', both in Rebecca Copenhaver and Todd Buras, ed., *Thomas Reid on Mind, Knowledge, and Value* (Oxford, expected 2015). Hutcheson's aesthetic theory, while receiving more attention than Reid in aesthetics and moral philosophy, is also relatively understudied. As an addition to Kivy's in depth work, the current volume of papers will help to remedy this.

‘internal sense’ and compared to other senses such as gustatory taste.⁴ In particular, Hutcheson became an important influence on subsequent aesthetic theories. This empirical foundation explains a genuine concern about actual qualities and phenomena in the world in contrast to the more metaphysical and cosmological ideas of beauty found in ancient and medieval philosophy.⁵

It is especially useful for grasping what it is that gives natural phenomena aesthetic value. While an ideal theory of beauty, characterized by order, harmony, and so on sits nicely with a holistic concept of natural beauty – perhaps aligned with ecological ideas – it can hide our lived, immediate experiences of the natural environment. From extraordinary to more ordinary encounters, experience through the senses, I would argue, must form the starting point for aesthetic appreciation of nature.

At least because of emerging interest in the science of human nature and natural history, eighteenth-century philosophers in Britain and the Continent write generously not only about the arts but also the natural world. ‘Nature’ is certainly a contested concept, and in the eighteenth century, as today, it has many meanings, including religious ones. For example, ‘Nature’ with an upper case ‘N’ is used by Shaftesbury to denote the cosmological whole that is divine creation.⁶ When Nature

⁴ The term, ‘aesthetic’ did not come into usage until well after Alexander Baumgarten’s coinage in 1735.

⁵ Dabney Townsend, ‘Lockean Aesthetics’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49 (1991), 349-361.

⁶ Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed., Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999). Costelloe’s discussion of divine ‘Nature’ in Shaftesbury’s

is used for the natural world as created by God, for Hutcheson, Reid and other contemporaries this also included 'nature' with a small 'n', an empirical reality in all its particularity – the universe, mountains, rivers, insects, mammals, plants, and natural environments of sky, sea, and land, and so on. In the philosophical lineage from Shaftesbury to Hutcheson and Reid we find a stronger empirical basis for natural beauty, with Hutcheson's 'more earthy empiricism' and Reid's 'common sense' philosophy signaling a move beyond the stronger deism of Shaftesbury's approach.⁷ It is interesting to know that Reid had a strong interest in botany, and natural history more generally, having studied it and writing a text on the subject.⁸ Of course, we still see in Hutcheson and Reid an anthropocentrism inflected with deism, which is to say that God is the final cause, and the non-human/non-divine is generally considered inferior to the human and divine.

The Sense of Beauty

In *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1726) and *An Essay On the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728), Hutcheson develops the idea of a 'sense of beauty', which he compares to our external senses of

aesthetics is insightful; see, Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition: From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*, (Cambridge, 2013), 13.

⁷ Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition*, 22.

⁸ See Paul Wood, 'Introduction' in, *Thomas Reid and the Animate Creation: Papers Relating to the Life Sciences*, ed. Paul Wood (Edinburgh, 1995), 1-20.

sight and hearing.⁹ With the sense of beauty, he instantly indicates an interest in qualities of the world as the basis of beauty rather than metaphysical ideas. This empiricist approach articulates beauty as related to an aesthetic sense, grasped through perception that is immediate, rather than mediated by cognition or knowledge: 'Beauty is taken for the Idea rais'd in us, and our Sense of Beauty for our Power of receiving this Idea'.¹⁰ The power for receiving these ideas is the 'internal sense', and when beauty is experienced it is accompanied by pleasure. This internal sense, unlike our external senses, can discern beauty in non-extended things such as 'Theorems, or universal truths, in general Causes, and in some extensive Principles of Action'.¹¹ Like the external senses, the internal sense is natural rather than acquired, though we can develop the capacity and, thus, develop aesthetic taste.

Although influenced by Shaftesbury, especially in aligning aesthetics with morality, Hutcheson departs from his cognitive, neo-Platonist approach. Hutcheson's emphasis on perception means that the senses show us the way to beauty: 'This superior Power of Perception is justly called a Sense, because of its Affinity to the other Senses in this, that the Pleasure does not arise from any Knowledge of Principles, Proportions, Causes, or of the Usefulness of the Object; but

⁹ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, rev. ed., ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis, 2008), hereafter abbreviated as *Inquiry*; Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay On the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis, 2003).

¹⁰ *Inquiry*, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

strikes us at first with the Idea of Beauty...'¹² The way in which Hutcheson likens our perception of beauty to a sense underlines the non-cognitive nature of his approach. The external senses and the sense of beauty are not concerned with reflection, and thus knowledge does not mediate or enable the perception of beauty: 'a dull Critick, or one of the Virtuosi.... can tell all the specific Differences of Trees, Herbs, Minerals, Metals; they know the Form of every Leaf, Stalk, Root, Flower, and Seed of all the Species, about which the Poet is often ignorant: And yet the Poet shall have a vastly more delightful Perception of the Whole....the most accurate Knowledge of what the External Senses discover, often does not give the Pleasure of Beauty...'.¹³

With no role for reflection, we also find that the immediacy of the sense of beauty precludes utility and self-interest or 'self-love'; beauty is 'necessarily pleasant to us, as well as immediately so; neither can any Resolution of our own, nor any Prospect or Advantage or Disadvantage, vary the Beauty or Deformity of an Object...'¹⁴ The pleasure which accompanies beauty is 'distinct from that Joy which arises from Self-love upon Prospect of Advantage.'¹⁵ Hutcheson agrees with Shaftesbury concerning the absence of practical interest in matters of beauty, but this is expressed more emphatically in his work.¹⁶ The sense of beauty is characterized by disinterestedness, a concept which would be deeply influential on

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 318-319.

the aesthetic tradition which followed Hutcheson, and on Kant in particular.¹⁷

Hutcheson does recognise that although beauty is in actual fact perceived via the internal sense (with accompanying pleasure), knowledge about the object and its uses 'may super-add a distinct rational Pleasure from prospects of Advantage, or from the Increase of Knowledge.'¹⁸ When knowledge is fed in, while it can embellish appreciation it does not form its foundation.

Overall, we find an argument that our power to perceive ideas of beauty is based in an 'internal sense' comparable to our external senses. Beauty is experienced through the subject's perception of objects in the world or non-extended things such as mathematical ideas. As disinterested, our grasp of beauty is non-reflective, non-cognitive, and non-practical; bound up with perception and feeling rather than rationality. In the next section, I consider 'absolute beauty' and how this type of beauty is concerned with nature.

Absolute Beauty and Nature

Hutcheson makes an important distinction concerning beauty: 'Beauty is either Original or Comparative...Absolute, or Relative...by Absolute Beauty understand only that Beauty, which we perceive in Objects without comparison to any thing external, of which the Object suppos'd an Imitation, or Picture; such as that Beauty

¹⁷ Miles Rind, 'The Concept of Disinterestedness in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 41 (2002), 67-87.

¹⁸ *Inquiry*, 25

perceiv'd from the Works of Nature, artificial Forms, Figures, Theorems.

Comparative or Relative Beauty is that which we perceive in Objects, commonly considered as Imitations or Resemblances of something else.¹⁹ 'Original' or 'absolute' beauty is non-representational, it does not imitate anything, and is not beautiful in relation to anything else. Comparative or relative beauty is imitative of things, and the arts are characteristically imitative or representational (in Hutcheson's time, at least).²⁰ For example, consider a painting of a peach versus the peach itself, or a poem about clouds, versus clouds themselves. Gardens make an appearance in his chapter on relative beauty, most certainly because they are designed (in many cases strongly so, as we see in the French style of formal gardens).

Absolute beauty operates not as an objective quality and more like a secondary quality (after Locke): 'Beauty, like other Names of sensible Ideas, properly denotes the Perception of some Mind; so Cold, Hot, Sweet, Bitter, denote Sensations in our Minds, to which perhaps there is no resemblance in the Objects, which excite these ideas in us, however we generally imagine that there is something in the Object just like our Perception were there no Mind with a Sense of Beauty to contemplate Objects, I see not how they could be call'd beautiful.'²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.,26-27.

²⁰ Natural beauty also features as comparative beauty but only to the extent that we see God's systematic work as creator; see *Inquiry*, 45. I agree with Kivy's interpretation here that natural beauty is principally absolute beauty; see *The Seventh Sense*, 96-97.

²¹ *Inquiry*, 27.

Beauty is always relational in this way, that is, it always depends upon an internal sense – the human mind, perception and an idea of beauty as arising in the mind from some cause. That idea is closely associated with a feeling of pleasure in the subject as well. So, there is a clear emphasis on beauty in relation to the subject and, as we shall see, it is a point that Reid found objectionable.

Hutcheson identifies three kinds of absolute beauty: natural beauty, the beauty of theorems, and the beauty of art that is not imitative or representational. When the idea of beauty is aroused in us, we experience pleasure. What is it about the qualities of objects that causes pleasure? Absolute beauty is occasioned by what Hutcheson calls ‘uniformity amidst variety’. In arguing the case for this universal feature of beauty, a deep interest in mathematical forms is shown; his presentation of examples begins with them because they are ‘simpler Kinds...and we may perhaps find that the same foundation extends to all the more complex Species of it.’²² His articulation of uniformity amidst variety is itself mathematical, as Paul Guyer points out: ‘greater beauty can be produced either by greater variety when uniformity is constant or greater uniformity when variety is constant.’²³ Additionally, we find that the beauty of theorems is distinguished from other kinds of absolute beauty, at least because ‘there is none which we shall see such an amazing Variety with Uniformity’.²⁴ Although Hutcheson by no means discusses

²² Ibid., 28.

²³ Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics. Volume 1: The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2014), 106.

²⁴ *Inquiry*, 36.

mathematical forms exclusively, by his lights they seem to provide exemplars of uniformity amidst variety in absolute beauty.

In explaining natural beauty and arguing for uniformity amidst variety, Hutcheson's method is empirical; a range of examples of things that have uniformity amidst variety is presented. It is a systematic too, with his section on 'Beauty in nature' beginning with the universe and the uniformity amidst variety of spherical planets, elliptical orbits, regularity of changes in daylight and seasons, and other phenomena of the atmosphere and universe. Hutcheson moves from the heavens above to the earth below, with sections ordered by headings: 'Earth', 'Plants', 'Animals', 'Proportion', 'Fowls', 'Fluids', 'Harmony' (in music, which he takes to be non-representational).²⁵

To understand how uniformity amidst variety works in natural beauty, consider plants and birds, consider two of his examples. Amongst the great variety of plants, we find uniformity, according to Hutcheson, in the way they grow and propagate, and also in their structure, especially if seen under a magnifying glass. 'In the almost infinite Multitude of Leaves, Fruit, Seed, Flowers of any one Species, we often see an exact Uniformity in the Structure and Situation of the smallest Fibres. This is the Beauty which charms an ingenious Botanist.'²⁶ Likewise, there are many species of birds that differ because of their variety of colours and feathers, yet all have feathers that are structurally similar across species. In any particular bird, we may also find a variety of colours, yet here too those colours are displayed in

²⁵ Ibid., 30-34.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

feathers which have a uniform shape and grow from the body in a uniform rather than disordered way, for example, on each wing, symmetrically.²⁷ Hutcheson's discussion of animals is noteworthy in so far as he observes their beauty in motion, as living creatures, rather than merely specimens, 'walking, running, flying, swimming'. He does not venture further beyond visual interest in natural beauty, however. Although he discusses harmony in music, or 'Beauty of Sound', he does not consider natural sounds such as birdsong or waterfalls.²⁸ This is disappointing because aesthetic appreciation of nature potentially draws on more senses compared to the arts and Hutcheson, unlike later philosophers, does not take an interest in this.²⁹

The method used by Hutcheson for examining natural beauty begins with forms and patterns that we understand through astronomy and other sciences, yet he is clear that uniformity amidst variety is experienced through the sense of beauty rather than through knowledge, thereby maintaining a non-cognitive view of beauty: 'This Delight which accompanys Sciences, or Universal *Theorems*, may really be call'd a kind of *Sensation*; since it necessarily accompanys the Discovery of any Proposition, and is distinct from bare Knowledge it self...'³⁰ In closing his discussion of absolute beauty of nature, he emphasises that our experience of uniformity

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See, for example, work by Edmund Burke and Archibald Alison on the sublime, as discussed in Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*.

³⁰ *Inquiry*, 40.

amidst variety does not arise from reflection and, 'We may have the Sensation without knowing what is the Occasion of it'.³¹ This last point is especially interesting, for it shows that natural beauty does not seem to require special expertise. Later in the *Inquiry*, we see this democratic tendency reappear. In contrast to enjoying the arts, natural beauty may be enjoyed widely, not requiring a position of wealth or power: 'Contemplation of the Works of Nature, is expos'd to every one without Expence; the Poor and the Low, may have as free a use of these Objects, in this way, as the Wealthy or Powerful.'³² We will see a similar generosity in Reid's account, and for both philosophers, the explanation is that beauty is linked to perception and feeling, rather than knowledge.

The immediacy of our perception of beauty and its disinterested character is an essential first step in formulating the foundation of the moral sense for Hutcheson, though he takes the sense of beauty and moral sense to be distinct. Beauty is independent, not subsumed by the moral, but nonetheless the two sentiments are intimately connected. His generous view of just what may be available in terms of beauty to any person can be explained at least because he is striving to provide an account of beauty in preparation for his defense of the moral sense, where self-interest is absent from both.

This raises the question of the extent to which Hutcheson's views about natural beauty are shaped by his broader philosophical aim of arguing against Hobbesian egoism. One might take the view that it is easier to provide an account of

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² *Ibid.*, 77; see also, *Essay*, 74.

beauty as grounded in disinterested pleasure with respect to beauty that is not a sign of wealth or power; beauty that does not have a price tag. Natural beauty is perceived to be of this kind, not owned or possessed. In the *Essay*, Hutcheson is clear that the poet or *connoisseur* of art or nature, rather than the *possessor* of it, has a 'higher taste'.³³ He cites Horace to underline this point about nature's significance in this respect, 'Is the grass poorer in fragrance or beauty than Libyan mosaics? Is the water purer which in city-streets struggles to burst its leaden pipes than that which dances and purls adown the sloping brooks?' In this regard, consider mathematical theorems. Are they owned or possessed? Do they give us advantage? Here too, it appears easier to make a case for a disinterested concept of beauty by providing evidence of this kind.

While there is certainly something to this sort of argument, it does not sufficiently acknowledge other features of Hutcheson's account of absolute beauty, which is to say that his interest in natural beauty does not function simply to serve his argument for the moral sense. First, Hutcheson shows a genuine interest in harmony and order, and his account of natural beauty as linked to unity amidst variety turns out to be holistic, prioritizing unities above particulars. For this reason, natural beauty is conceived, arguably, more narrowly than we see in Reid's approach (more on this below).³⁴ Second, beauty as uniformity amidst variety, together with several mentions of harmony, suggests a strong emphasis on order in his theory. That order is not accidental, and though Hutcheson genuinely finds it in

³³ *Essay*, 114 (English translation appears in note 34).

³⁴ Cf. Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*, 99.

nature, in our appreciation of birds or planetary movements, it is ultimately down to a divine cause. Certainly, then, Hutcheson holds up natural beauty as worthy of appreciation in its own right, even if his approach is wanting in its attention to particulars and to the more multisensory dimension of aesthetic appreciation of nature. I now turn to a discussion of Reid's ideas on the sense of beauty, and natural beauty, before discussing the relevance of each philosopher's ideas for contemporary debates.

Reid: Natural Beauty and Aesthetic Realism

Reid's theory of taste, appears in his essay, 'Of Taste', in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), and this text will be my focus.³⁵ It is not my intention to suggest that he offers theory of natural beauty as such; rather, among eighteenth-century aesthetic theories his approach, like Hutcheson's, is well suited to thinking about natural aesthetics. I shall argue, though, that his aesthetic realism is especially instructive with respect to aesthetic appreciation of nature. This more realist approach to beauty is grounded in his theory of perception and his common sense epistemology, which he uses to oppose Hutcheson's subjectivism.

Like Hutcheson and others falling under his influence, Reid explains beauty through a kind of internal sense that discerns beauty. He also recognises the role of feeling, pleasure and displeasure, in our experience of beauty, and how different

³⁵ Reid also wrote on the arts, but this is less relevant for thinking about natural beauty; see Thomas Reid, *On Logic, Rhetoric and the Fine Arts*, ed. Alexander Broadie, (Edinburgh, 2005).

backgrounds and experiences shape our responses to beautiful things. Reid sets out the standard principles of taste – beauty, grandeur (or sublimity), and novelty – with deformity or ugliness appearing as a form of aesthetic disvalue. Taste is defined as:

That power of the mind by which we are capable of discerning and relishing the beauties of Nature, and whatever is excellent in the fine arts...The external sense of taste, by which we distinguish and relish the various kinds of food, has given occasion to a metaphorical application of its name to this internal power of the mind, by which we perceive what is beautiful, and what is deformed or defective in the various objects we contemplate.³⁶

Here we see an interest in both natural and artistic beauty, and his analogy to the external senses follows the contours of Hutcheson's account. Reid then builds a different, more realist picture of beauty through his understanding of aesthetic qualities as 'excellences,' and how these excellences are perceived: 'When I hear an air in music that pleases me, I say, it is fine, it is excellent. This excellence is not in me; it is in the music. But the pleasure it gives is not in the music; it is in me...'.³⁷ Reid wants to emphasise that beauty is not found in the mind or feelings of the

³⁶ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek Brookes (Edinburgh, 2002), 573 (abbreviated, hereafter, as EIP).

³⁷ EIP, 574

experiencing subject, and it is not an idea raised via perception. Rather, beauty is perceived and is occasioned by 'excellences' of aesthetic objects.

Now, as Hutcheson also points up, we might not always be able to say just what it is that makes something beautiful when we ascribe beauty to it: 'Perhaps I cannot say what it is in the tune that pleases my ear, as I cannot say what it is [in] a sapid body which pleases my palate; but there is a quality in the sapid body which pleases my palate...and there is a quality in the tune that pleases my taste....'³⁸

Nonetheless, we can be certain that we have found *something* of aesthetic merit. In comparing our aesthetic perception to the other senses, Reid thinks that we can be as certain in our ascription of some excellence to an object through aesthetic perception as we are in finding something delicious through gustatory taste. Much of the time though, Reid thinks that we are in fact able to discern and identify excellences and, in noting this, it is clear that he recognizes a range of ways we may respond aesthetically: 'In some cases, that superior excellence is distinctly perceived and can be pointed out, in other cases, we have only a general notion of some excellence which we cannot describe'.³⁹

Reid's points here are in step with his more general theory of perception, which says that our perceptual engagement with the world is direct and immediate.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 578. Reid's point here is shaped by his particular understanding of secondary qualities, as Roger Gallie notes, 'our senses only give us a relative and obscure notion of secondary qualities. They inform us only that secondary qualities are unknown qualities that affect us in a certain way'; see, Roger D. Gallie, *Thomas Reid: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Anatomy of the Self*, (Dordrecht, 1998), 5. These kinds of qualities appear to be, nonetheless, directly perceived on Reid's account.

Famously, he objected to the 'way of ideas' of Descartes, Locke, and others, dispensing with a representational theory of perception where the object of perception was a mental representation of a thing rather than the thing itself. In perceiving a quality, we do not form an intermediary idea upon which a belief is formed; rather, belief is enfolded in the sensation which forms a part of any perception. In perception of beauty, this amounts to an aesthetic judgment of some excellence in a landscape, poem, and so on: 'When a man pronounces a poem or palace to be beautiful, he affirms something of that poem or that palace; and every affirmation or denial expresses judgment. For we cannot better define judgment, than by saying that it is an affirmation or denial of one thing concerning another. I had occasion to show, when treating of judgment, that it is implied in every perception of our external senses. There is an immediate conviction and belief of the existence of the quality perceived, whether it be colour, sound, or figure; and the same thing holds in the perception of beauty and deformity.'⁴⁰ To underline that we directly perceive excellence in objects, Reid points to the way language reveals the convention for which we ascribe beauty to objects rather than to feelings in ourselves, insisting, in this way, that aesthetic subjectivism is mistaken. Importantly, our perception of excellences is evident from the aesthetic counterpart, as it were, of our common sense. The ways we speak about beauty reveal that it is not something internal to ourselves:

⁴⁰ Ibid., 577.

My language, according to the necessary rules of construction, can bear no other meaning but this, that there is something in the poem, and not in me, which I call beauty. Even those who hold beauty to be merely a feeling in the person that perceives it, find themselves under a necessity of expressing themselves, as if beauty were solely a quality of the object, and not the percipient.....No reason can be given why all mankind should express themselves thus, but that they believe what they say. It is therefore contrary to the universal sense of mankind, expressed by their language, that beauty is not really in the object, but is merely a feeling in the person who is said to receive it.⁴¹

The linguistic dimension of our aesthetic experiences seems to be deeply important for Reid in so far as it reveals beauty as something we converse about, point to, and recognize as real, found in qualities in the world.⁴²

These ideas mark Reid out from the more idealist and subjectivist leanings of his two main influences, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. As noted above, Reid interprets Hutcheson as strongly subjectivist, as if beauty could only be identified with a feeling of disinterested pleasure in the subject. While I agree with

⁴¹ Ibid.; see also, EIP, 584.

⁴² By contrast, Reid's view of grandeur (the sublime) appears to be less direct and objective. Grandeur 'is found originally and properly in qualities of the mind...discerned in objects of sense only by reflection...those who look for grandeur in mere matter, seek the living along the dead'; EIP, 591.

commentators who argue that Reid may interpret Hutcheson's theory as overly subjective, an important difference between their positions can still be detected.⁴³

Now, Reid must also give some role to the mind behind perception of beauty and the pleasure felt in response. He explains that excellences originate in the minds that create them: in the case of art, signs refer to the excellence of the artist's mind, and for nature, to the excellence of God's mind.⁴⁴ In all cases, ultimately, excellences originate in the divine mind. What can this mean? What place does Reid assign to mind and feeling in the perception of beauty? As part of his argument for not reducing excellences to minds, Reid holds that excellences are related to the *structure* of objects, to some 'arrangement of qualities'; they are what he calls 'signs' of excellences in minds, and are not merely mental qualities. I shall return to this point below.

It would be too hasty, however, to conclude that beauty does not belong to art or nature in any real sense and must somehow always refer beyond itself to some mind. Even if excellences as objective, value-laden qualities have the quasi-mental status Reid assigns to them, they remain the source of beauty and the

⁴³ See Emily Michael's discussion in, 'Francis Hutcheson on Aesthetic Perception and Aesthetic Pleasure', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 24 (1984), 241-255.

⁴⁴ Even if God is the final cause, the natural world, natural order and natural laws are best explained through Newtonian science, on Reid's view. We know that Reid read, understood, and taught Newton's writings', even if he did not always agree with his ideas; see, Ryan Nichols and Gideon Yaffe, 'Thomas Reid', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/reid/>>. Accessed 1/7/15; Wood, 'Introduction' in *Thomas Reid*.

pleasurable feeling associated with it. Beauty is perceived through excellences and signs, but it is not reduced to them. Following a discussion about why the idea of secondary qualities is mistaken and how this mistake has shaped theories of taste (in particular, Hutcheson's), Reid writes, 'The sense of beauty may be analysed in a manner very similar to the sense of sweetness. It is an agreeable feeling or emotion, accompanied with an opinion or judgment of some excellence in the object, which is fitted by Nature to produce that feeling....the use of all language shows, that the name of beauty belongs to this excellence of the object, and not to the feelings of the spectator.'⁴⁵ Peter Kivy's interpretation of Reid's resistance to subjectivism about beauty is instructive: 'Reid was insisting on the objective existence of aesthetic qualities in the strong sense....For Reid, I suggest, the world was nondispositionally colored and aesthetic.'⁴⁶

Reid's emphasis on perception and language, on our sense that beauty lies in things, and belongs to things, shapes an aesthetic realism driven less by metaphysics and more by common sense.⁴⁷ Beauty in some ways might be said to 'track' common sense, in so far as we can have a direct and self-evident grasp of it.⁴⁸ This kind of approach places the qualities of nature and artworks front and center in a different

⁴⁵ EIP, 594; see also, Reid's mention of Hutcheson's remarks here.

⁴⁶ Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*, 172; see also, Copenhaver 'Thomas Reid and Aesthetic Perception', 136, on secondary qualities as properties of objects.

⁴⁷ See Zuckert, 'Thomas Reid's 'Expressivist Aesthetics'; Dabney Townsend, 'Thomas Reid and the Theory of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61 (2003), 346.

⁴⁸ Another way of putting this, perhaps more strongly, is that there are 'first principles' of taste, in the sense that Reid understands this notion; see Gallie, *Thomas Reid*, 151.

way than Hutcheson's theory, and moves beyond the close association of beauty with the subject and their pleasure. Given Reid's contrasting picture of the aesthetic subject, where does this leave the concept of disinterestedness?

Reid does not explicitly discuss the concept, as we find in Hutcheson, but he does recognise beauty's independence from utility. The pleasure that accompanies beauty 'gives value to the object, abstracted from its utility'. With possessions, beauty 'greatly enhances the price', but this is not all, 'A beautiful dog...is valued by its owner and by others, not only for its utility, but for its beauty.'⁴⁹ By the time Reid was setting out his theory of taste, beauty's independence from utility had become well established, so I would speculate that he felt no need to give disinterestedness special attention. This could also be explained by the fact that, as we have seen, Reid makes a sharper separation between beauty and pleasure than Hutcheson. Our perception of beauty gives rise to a *judgment* about the object's value (recall that for Reid, belief is wrapped into perception in a more direct way). In this way, we see that the ground of the judgment seems to be perception of the object rather than an immediate feeling of pleasure in the subject. If this is how the perception of beauty works, then aesthetic value is not *dependent* on pleasure, but only on the perception of qualities in objects.⁵⁰ The upshot is that aesthetic qualities become especially important, with less emphasis on pleasure in the subject. In the next section, I consider how this approach to taste and beauty shapes his ideas about natural

⁴⁹ EIP, 591.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

beauty, before turning to the relevance of his aesthetic realism for contemporary discussions.

Instinctive and Rational Judgments of Beauty

Generally speaking, like Hutcheson, Reid thinks that we are naturally fitted to experience beauty and ascribe aesthetic qualities to things, that is, to perceive their excellences and feel pleasure in response. 'Some objects strike us at once, and appear beautiful at first sight, without any reflection, without our being able to say why we call them beautiful, or being able to specify any perfection which justifies our judgment.....In the plumage of birds, and of butterflies, in the colors and form of flowers, of shells, and of many other objects, we perceive a beauty that delights; but cannot say what it is in the object that should produce that emotion.'⁵¹

In recognizing this kind of response, Reid points to a capacity to experience beauty immediately that will be available to children and adults, amateurs and experts alike. He even suggests that non-human species also possess the aesthetic sense, using it in sexual selection and in looking after offspring, quoting Addison at length on how birds may exhibit the sense of beauty in courtship.⁵² This sense of beauty is described as 'instinctive', and he illustrates it in this way: 'In a heap of pebbles, one that is remarkable for brilliancy of colour and regularity of figure, will be picked out of the heap by a child. He perceives beauty in it, puts a value upon it, and is fond of the property of it. For this preference, no reason can be given, but that

⁵¹ Ibid., 596.

⁵² Ibid., 596-597.

children are, by their constitution, fond of brilliant colors, and of regular figures...'.⁵³

Reid makes a distinction between this instinctive sense or judgment of beauty and a more developed one, which he calls a 'rational' judgment of beauty. In rational judgments we are able to identify relevant qualities and provide reasons or an explanation for our judgment. The quality of the object is 'distinctly conceived, and may be specified':

The beauties of the field, of the forest, and of the flower-garden, strike a child long before he can reason. He is delighted with what he sees; but he knows not why. This is instinct, but it is not confined to childhood; it continues through all the stages of life. It leads the florist, the botanist, the philosopher, to examine and compare the objects which Nature, by this powerful instinct, recommends to his attention. By degrees, he becomes a critic in beauties of this kind, and can give a reason why he prefers one to another. In every species, he sees the greatest beauty in the plants or flowers that are most perfect in their kind — which have neither suffered from unkindly soil nor inclement weather; which have not been robbed of their nourishment by other plants, nor hurt by any accident.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid., 598. Reid may have been making an implicit reference to Hutcheson's remark that children tend to like 'simpler' and 'regular' figures (*Inquiry*, 30).

⁵⁴ EIP, 607.

It is important to understand that this is the only sense in which he thinks that aesthetic judgments are 'rational'. Reasoning is not the basis of aesthetic experience and we do not arrive at aesthetic judgments through reasoning, say, as if we could deduce beauty in some way from a set of qualities in objects. The sense in which experience of beauty is rational tracks his common sense idea that perception includes belief. Knowledge will play some role, certainly, and more so than we see in Hutcheson's account.⁵⁵ The appreciator with more experience of some aesthetic object will potentially experience greater beauty, able to grasp why the object has aesthetic value and able to make comparisons to other beauties.

On first glance, it might seem that appreciators lacking experience and knowledge have shallow experiences of beauty, but I do not think this is what Reid means to say.⁵⁶ Reid, like Hutcheson, sketches a democratic picture of the capacity to experience beauty – from the experience of the child, to an adult lacking experience of something, to an adult who has acquired more understanding through greater experience of the aesthetic object or through specialist knowledge. It is noteworthy that his list of experienced appreciators of flower-gardens does not privilege scientific knowledge over other ways in which we might develop the capacity to make rational judgments of beauty. The florist and the botanist are on equal footing: the florist, with extensive sensory experience of flowers and formal

⁵⁵ Cf. Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*, 158-168. I would argue against an interpretation of Reid's theory as a type of 'rationalist aesthetics' (or, even, without qualification, 'empiricist aesthetics'). It is a distinctive aesthetic theory, strongly shaped by his complex epistemology.

⁵⁶ Cf. Copenhaver, 'Thomas Reid and Aesthetic Perception'.

arrangements of them; and the botanist, with their specialised scientific knowledge of plants. We have also seen that the sense of instinctive beauty extends to non-humans animals.⁵⁷

In addition, it is certainly the case that the instinctive judgment of beauty is a kind of aesthetic judgment in its own right. It is a judgment of aesthetic merit, where beauty strikes us, even if we cannot pin it down to particular qualities. The passages quoted above provide evidence of the child's capacity to experience beauty in this way, perceiving aesthetic qualities and experiencing pleasure. So, while greater beauty might follow with more experience, this does not seem to diminish the *quality* of these experiences and the judgments that we make. They are not necessarily superficial, being only of a different kind. Reid holds that instinctive judgments cannot be true or false, the standard of taste which he holds for rational judgments, because if we cannot pin down the qualities which strike us as beautiful, it will be more difficult to provide an explanation for our judgment.

In light of these points, we find that Reid's distinction not only identifies but is also able to capture the broad range of our aesthetic responses to nature, from being struck by we know not what to responses with a greater degree of attention, repeated experiences, or where background knowledge and experience fill out appreciation. We also find that he values the genesis of taste across our lives, from childhood to adulthood, as it develops and expands. The mature taste of an adult, traced through empirical experience by Reid, rather than development of the mind

⁵⁷ Hutcheson also alludes to this; see *Inquiry*, 28.

exclusively, is more valuable, but he also observes that 'each is beautiful in its season.'⁵⁸

The broadness in Reid's account also reflects an interesting pluralism in his grasp of natural beauty. Like Hutcheson, he provides an inventory of beauties, but two points of contrast are immediately apparent. First, Reid's inventory is less systematic, and while it moves through the natural world, from inanimate matter to plants to animals, and finally, to human beauty, he does not really treat each class of things as carefully as Hutcheson. Second, Reid does not privilege mathematical theorems as a class of beauty. I surmise that this is because he objects to the reduction of beauty to one source or common quality, as we see found in 'uniformity amidst variety'. He argues: 'Beauty is found in things so various, and so very different in nature, that it is difficult to say wherein it consists, or what there can be common to all objects in which it is found....What can it be that is common to the thought of a mind, and the form of a piece of matter, to an abstract theorem, and a strike of wit? I am indeed unable to conceive any quality in all the different things that are called beautiful, that is the same in them all'.⁵⁹ Without the emphasis on mathematical theorems and the discussion of astronomical phenomena, order and harmony are mainly limited to his own discussion of the planets and the universe, and otherwise do not feature strongly in his theory. The upshot is a more pluralistic

⁵⁸ EIP, 614.

⁵⁹ EIP, 591; see also EIP, 575; and Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition*, 30.

approach to natural beauty that is closer, I believe, to the actual range of natural beauties many of us experience.⁶⁰ I shall return to this point below.

A potential stumbling block for Reid's views about natural beauty arises from his wider philosophical ideas as well as his deism. Unlike Hutcheson, Reid draws a distinction between 'original' and 'derived' beauty. Original beauty is found in qualities of mind, while 'objects of sense' have derived beauty, which is 'derived from some relation they bear to mind, as the signs or expressions of some amiable mental quality, or as the effects of design, art, and wise contrivance.'⁶¹ Human beings have original beauty (e.g., in the virtues), and works of art, as the products of human minds, have derived beauty.⁶² Where does this leave natural beauty that is not human beauty? This is where Reid's deism comes to the fore. Natural beauties will exhibit divine mental qualities and their beauty will be expressive of such qualities.⁶³ The question arises, however, as to whether or not nature's derived beauty is therefore reduced to divine beauty, and not something appreciated in its own right.

⁶⁰ This wide-ranging picture of beauty need not collapse into relativism because, on Reid's account, we nevertheless perceive excellences as objective qualities; see Gallie's defence of Hutcheson on this point in, *Thomas Reid*, 148-149.

⁶¹ EIP, 601.

⁶² Reid also points to human beings as the greatest kind of natural beauty; see EIP, 608.

⁶³ Zuckert shows that the derived beauty of plants and animals is also expressive of mind for Reid, in the sense that they express signs of flourishing ('Thomas Reid's Expressivist Aesthetics'). Here, we see mental qualities which appear to be reflected across human and non-human life.

That natural beauty is reduced to divine beauty would not do justice, I believe, to the ways in which Reid's aesthetic theory moves on from Shaftesbury's, especially in light of Reid's familiarity with subsequent theories of taste and beauty, as well as own interest in natural history and Newtonian science. A more charitable interpretation, supported by Reid's remarks quoted earlier, would be that nature is appreciated as beautiful for both its own qualities and its qualities of mind as derived from God. That is, those qualities, even if indicators of and originating in the divine, will still have the objective qualities that make something beautiful, such as a particular configuration of colours and forms.⁶⁴

Hutcheson, Reid, and Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Aesthetics

Perhaps the most central question motivating new work in aesthetics and nature and environmental aesthetics is: What are the grounds of appropriate aesthetic judgments of nature? One way that appropriateness is construed in this context is in terms of appreciating nature *as nature* as opposed to, say, appreciating nature as if it were a work of art. With works of art, artistic considerations such as style and

⁶⁴ Gallie makes a similar, though rather more sophisticated, argument for the derived beauty of objects of sense (*Thomas Reid*, 171-174). Copenhaver defends Reid against claims that his distinction between original and derived beauty commits him to some kind of subjectivism ('Thomas Reid and Aesthetic Perception', 136). These arguments, as well as Zuckert's (see previous note), provide additional reasons why derived natural beauty may be considered independently of human or divine mind or intentions.

intention help to ground and guide our judgments about why we find works of art beautiful, ugly and so on. With respect to nature and environment, this kind of guidance does not make much sense, so we need to consider where such guidance might come from. If one agrees with the view that aesthetic judgments of nature are more indeterminate than judgments of art – somehow more free, less constrained by, for example, by the conventions and ways of the artworld – this issue becomes especially important. Environmental aesthetics has sought to move beyond imposing human frameworks on nature, humanising nature, where one such framework would be appreciating nature always through the lens of art. The aesthetic perspective is commonly identified with culture, in so far as we are, here, talking about aesthetic valuing made by human culture. That is, aesthetic judgment is *anthropogenic*. However, it is possible to distinguish between aesthetic perspectives and values which are more and less *anthropocentric*.

In recent debates, answers to the question of appropriate appreciation of nature divide into two competing approaches: ‘scientific cognitivism’ and ‘non-cognitivism’. Scientific cognitivism holds that if our aesthetic valuing of nature is to reach beyond a superficial response and to be appropriate to what it is we perceive, that valuing must be informed by scientific knowledge. The most well established position, Allen Carlson’s ‘natural environmental model’ rests on an argument by analogy.⁶⁵ In artistic judgments, art history and criticism provide the appropriate foundation. For natural aesthetics, Carlson finds the most legitimate and ‘objective’

⁶⁵ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London and New York, 2000).

source in the natural sciences. It is claimed that such knowledge will ensure aesthetic judgments that accord with their objects, enabling a grasp of relevant aesthetic qualities. For example, if I were to appreciate a humpback whale under the category of 'fish' rather than 'mammal', the whale may appear as a clumsy fish rather than a majestic mammal moving gracefully through the ocean.

Non-cognitivists agree that we need to avoid aesthetic valuing that distorts or humanises nature, but they argue that scientific cognitivism too narrowly characterises what is appropriate and thereby discounts the range of legitimate ways we experience the natural world, for example, through immersive, environmental, appreciation, or responses which are open to the place of imagination and emotion as layers that enhance perception and increase forms of attention to the world.⁶⁶

Now, it seems to me that a baseline for appropriate appreciation will be a non-instrumental approach, that is, one that appreciates the object for what it is, the qualities it actually possesses. Yuriko Saito expresses this idea as appreciating nature 'on its own terms', which means adopting a normative aesthetic approach: '...an attitude which would involve listening to nature's own story....recognizing and respecting nature as having its own reality apart from our presence'.⁶⁷ It is in articulating this normative feature of aesthetic appreciation of nature that

⁶⁶ For a representative sample of cognitive and non-cognitive approaches in environmental aesthetics, see, Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, ed., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Peterborough, 2004).

⁶⁷ Yuriko Saito, 'Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms', *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998).

Hutcheson's theory becomes especially significant, in so far as disinterestedness means that our judgments of natural beauty, as grounded in the sense of beauty, will be directed at natural items, processes and phenomena themselves, and not our own interests or desire for possession or appropriation. On his account (and from within his necessarily more anthropocentric philosophical and historical framework), there is no explicit interest in grasping nature's own terms, but there is an interest in theorizing the sense of beauty as independent from self-interest, as he prepares the ground for his case for the moral sense. We can learn from his approach that aesthetic judgment is constrained in this way, and as such, signifies a stance that will resist imposing one's own utilitarian interests – human interests – on the aesthetic object. Given that Reid also recognises the independence of beauty from utility, his ideas are consistent with such an approach.

Our own human ways of seeing things will show themselves in our engagement with the natural world, no doubt, and we may never be able to grasp what nature's 'terms', in fact, are. But the main point of Saito's idea is that we ought to make the effort if we are truly to appreciate nature in all its distinctiveness, and not what we want from it or what we want it to be. This does not mean that our aesthetic engagement with nature must be totally 'dehumanized', somehow divorced from the cultural position of any human aesthetic stance, but it ought not be overly humanizing either. In this vein, Hutcheson recognizes the role of association of ideas, and with respect to nature this takes the form of seeing resemblances between nature and culture: 'Thus a Tempest at Sea is often an

Emblem of Wrath; a Plant or Tree drooping under the Rain, of a Person in Sorrow'.⁶⁸

However, he also admonishes the way some associations of ideas take the form of biases which prevent proper perception of beauty: 'Thus Swines, Serpents of all Kinds, and some Insects really beautiful enough, are beheld with Aversion by many People, who have got some accidental Ideas associated to them.'⁶⁹ Reid also describes expressiveness in nature through his concept of natural signs, but as I have argued earlier in the paper, his account is not reductive and recognises the excellences that underlie beauty of nature in their own right.⁷⁰

The independence of beauty from utility and knowledge as well as Hutcheson's categorising of the natural world within 'absolute' beauty makes his theory of beauty a good fit for a non-cognitive approach. That knowledge may play some role as an added effect, but not as grounding our aesthetic judgments, is also present in both Hutcheson's theory and non-cognitive views. Where does Reid's theory fit with respect to contemporary ideas about natural beauty?

Reid's distinction between instinctive and rational beauty is especially interesting for reflecting on this question. On the one hand, it fits with cognitive approaches in so far as our capacity for rational beauty means that when we gain knowledge and experience of, say, plants, we may become better at identifying and explaining their beauty. But unlike Carlson, Reid does not appear to prioritise the experience of the botanist over the experience of the florist, which also has more

⁶⁸ *Inquiry*, 44.

⁶⁹ *Inquiry*, 62.

⁷⁰ For some of Reid's remarks on expressiveness in nature, see EIP, 590.

experience (in Reid's 'rational' terms), yet not from science. The florist's experience is one of learning how to formally arrange flowers (based largely in sensory or perceptual experience) and, presumably, developing a sense for what colours and forms work best to create appealing arrangements. For Carlson, the botanist would always make the most appropriate or correct judgments because they have knowledge of natural history and, in that respect, an understanding of the appropriate appreciative categories.

In this way, Reid's ideas chime nicely with theories in environmental aesthetics which do not prioritise perception thickened by thought elements over aesthetic engagement where the senses are more prominent. Ronald Hepburn explains the range of appropriate appreciations we might find in aesthetic experience. 'We need to acknowledge a duality in much aesthetic appreciation of nature, a sensuous component and a thought-component. First, sensuous immediacy: in the purest cases one is taken aback by, for instance, a sky colour-effect, or by the rolling away of cloud and mist from a landscape. Most often, however, an element of thought is present, as we implicitly compare and contrast here with elsewhere, actual and possible, present with past.'⁷¹ Each experience is appropriate and aesthetically valuable for Hepburn, opening up space for a wide range of appropriate responses and different aesthetic frameworks. Given Reid's botanist and florist, as well as the instinctive beauty perceived by a child, we find a more open approach to natural beauty than the cognitivist offers.

⁷¹ Ronald W. Hepburn, *Reach of the Aesthetic* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2001), 2.

Instinctive beauty maps nicely, too, onto Saito's own approach, which sits between the cognitive and non-cognitive, supporting the role of science but challenging its centrality. Her views embrace a range of appreciative frameworks, which nonetheless begin and end in the sensuous surface of natural phenomena.

Certainly, the philosophical ideas of Hutcheson and Reid are products of their time. Although we do see an interest in nature where the three 'kingdoms' of nature – animal, plant, and mineral – are recognized in their own right as worthy of aesthetic consideration, their overall perspective remains anthropocentric. Yet, we also find that their theories of beauty, as well as their empirical examples from natural history, are sensitive to natural qualities possessed independently of human utility. Ultimately, their views present a non-instrumental valuing of natural beauty that is meaningful in its own time and significant for ours.