

# Ugliness and Nature

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## Abstract

In this paper, I object to the view that ugliness is only apparent and that what might seem to be ugly is in fact beautiful. This view holds that ugliness is really just a variety of beauty, and there is no negative aesthetic value in the world. In environmental aesthetics, my focus, this is expressed as the thesis of «positive aesthetics», which has been developed by several philosophers, most notably, Allen Carlson. As he puts it: «the natural environment, insofar as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic» (Carlson, 2000, p. 5). Against this type of position, I argue that ugliness in nature is real and cannot be explained away by acquiring knowledge of some ugly thing or through some holistic understanding of how apparently ugly things/phenomena function within beautiful ecosystems. Although I ultimately argue that ugliness is a form of negative aesthetic value, I then develop a position to show why we might have other reasons to care about ugliness in nature, and therefore seek to protect it.

**Key words:** ugliness, positive aesthetics, nature, Carlson, Sibley.

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## Resumen. *Fealdad y naturaleza*

En este artículo, me opongo a la concepción de que la fealdad es tan sólo aparente, de que cuanto pudiera parecer feo, es en realidad bello. Esta concepción sostiene que la fealdad es sólo una variedad de la belleza, y que no existe un valor estético negativo en el mundo. En la estética medioambiental, en la que me centro, esta concepción se expresa con la tesis de la «estética positiva», que ha sido desarrollada por diversos filósofos, especialmente por Allen Carlson. Tal como él la presenta: «el entorno natural, en tanto que no tocado por el ser humano, tiene principalmente cualidades estéticas positivas; es, por ejemplo, elegante, delicado, intenso, unificado y ordenado, en vez de soso, aburrido, insípido, incoherente y caótico». (Carlson, 2000, p. 5). Contra esta posición, argumento que la fealdad en la naturaleza es real y que no desaparece cuando adquirimos conocimiento sobre el objeto feo ni gracias a una comprensión holística acerca de cómo cosas o fenómenos aparentemente feos desarrollan su función dentro de ecosistemas que son bellos. Aunque finalmente argumento que la fealdad es una forma de valor estético negativo, entonces desarrollo una posición para mostrar por qué tendríamos otras razones para preocuparnos por la fealdad en la naturaleza, y por tanto tratar de protegerla.

**Palabras clave:** fealdad, estética positiva, naturaleza, Carlson, Sibley.

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### Summary

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## I. Introduction

Ugliness has been theorized, not surprisingly, as a category of aesthetic value in opposition to the beautiful. It has been associated with qualities such as incoherence, disorder, disunity, deformity, and so on, and is said to cause negative feelings such as uneasiness, distaste, dislike, revulsion, but also fascination. Apart from discussions of tragedy and horror, contemporary aesthetics tends to neglect an exploration of potentially negative forms of aesthetic value. Work on aesthetics of nature and environmental aesthetics has also, on the whole, focused on positive aesthetic value.<sup>1</sup> While positive value is important, and something significant when it comes to protecting the environment, we can learn a great deal from looking at negative aesthetic value in nature too. I am interested in taking a close look at ugliness to find out what sort of aesthetic status it has in our appreciation of nature. In opposition to a thesis popular in environmental aesthetics, «positive aesthetics», I will argue that ugliness in nature is real, and that ugliness is a type of negative aesthetic value. I then make moves toward answering a question that lies at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics: what reasons might we have for thinking that there is some kind of value, if not aesthetic value, in our experiences of ugliness?

## II. Positive Aesthetics

I object to a common approach which claims that ugliness is only apparent, and that what might seem to be ugly is in fact beautiful. This approach holds that ugliness is really just a variety of beauty, and there is no negative aesthetic value in the world. A number of philosophers have held this view, including Augustine, and more recently, Stephen Pepper, John Dewey, and George Santayana.<sup>2</sup>

In environmental aesthetics, this approach takes the particular form of «positive aesthetics», which has been developed by a number of philosophers,

1. An important exception is: SAITO, Y. (1998). «The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature». *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56(2), p. 101-111. Also, Frank Sibley discusses mainly natural objects in his essay: «Some Notes on Ugliness». In: SIBLEY, F.; BENSON, J.; ROXBEE COX, J.; REDFERN, B. (eds.). (2000). *Approach to Aesthetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 191-206. Umberto Eco (2007) has edited a fascinating book relating to ugliness and the arts: *On Ugliness*, trans.: A. McEwen, London: Harvill Secker.
2. For some discussion of these views see MOORE, R. (1998). «Ugliness». In: KELLY, M. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford.

most notably, Allen Carlson.<sup>3</sup> As he puts it: «the natural environment, insofar as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic».<sup>4</sup> Positive aesthetics can be analyzed into a set of stronger and weaker theses. The stronger theses include the claim just given, and the views that: (1) All of the natural world is beautiful; and (2) All of virgin nature is essentially good. Two weaker theses are: (3) Being natural is connected, in an essential way, to positive aesthetic qualities; and (4) Nature which is not affected by humans has more aesthetic value than nature which is.<sup>5</sup>

Several objections can be raised against these different theses. What is wild nature and does such a conception have any real meaning today given widespread anthropogenic effects on the environment? The position also favours wild over cultivated nature, but this seems odd. What justifies this? There may well be cases of cultivated nature that are beautiful. More worryingly, while some comparative aesthetic judgments of wild nature are possible, these will lie on a scale of the more or less beautiful, there being no apparent negative aesthetic value in wild nature.<sup>6</sup> I'll focus on this problem in the position, arguing against it that ugliness in the natural world is, in fact, real. Let me clarify from the start what I mean by ugliness being «real». I am not arguing for a strong form of aesthetic realism. I take aesthetic properties to be relational and response-dependent. My use of the term «real» is intended to indicate that ugliness cannot be explained away or replaced by some other property in the ways I'll be setting out here. As I see it, the aesthetic value we call «ugliness» is anchored in some ways to the object's non-aesthetic perceptual properties, such as colours, textures, forms, arrangements of elements, and sounds.

Now, how exactly does positive aesthetics argue that all wild nature is beautiful? The central claim is that something which appears to be ugly is in fact judged to be beautiful when we adjust aesthetic appreciation through a more

3. CARLSON, A. (1984). «Nature and Positive Aesthetics». *Environmental Ethics*, 6, p. 5-34. Other adherents include HARGROVE, E. (1984). *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall; ROLSTON III, H. (1988). *Environmental Ethics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 239 ff. The position probably also has some roots in pre-Enlightenment theological views which held that one could not find ugliness as such in nature, since only beauty exists in God's creations. Ugliness was often associated with evil.
4. CARLSON, 1984, p. 5.
5. Based on a discussion by FISHER, J. A. (1998). «Environmental Aesthetics». In: JAMIESON, D. (ed.) *Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. Blackwell.
6. For various discussions of positive aesthetics and its problems, see SAITO, (1998); BUDD, M. (2002). *Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; GODLOVITCH, S. (1998); HETTINGER, N. (2010). «Animal Beauty, Ethics and Environmental Preservation», *Environmental Ethics*, 32; PARSONS, G. (2002). «Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics». *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 42(3), p. 279-295. Budd points out the problems too in establishing the most «ambitious» form of the position, which would appear to demand that everything in wild nature has roughly equal (positive) aesthetic value (BUDD 2002, p. 127).

holistic scientific story. Holmes Rolston, for example, argues that the apparently repulsive experience of a rotting elk carcass teeming with maggots has positive aesthetic value when we grasp that this natural occurrence is a key part of the successful, healthy functioning of an ecosystem. He says: «the ugly parts do not subtract from but rather enrich the whole. The ugliness is contained, overcome, and integrates into positive, complex beauty».<sup>7</sup> So, ugliness becomes part of a complex holistic beauty when we take on board the bigger ecological picture.

There are a number of problems with this type of explanation. First, it begs the question. How do the qualities of decaying flesh and the deformity of the carcass become beautiful? What is identified now as beautiful is not the qualities of the carcass itself, but the healthy functioning of an ecosystem that we find in some greater narrative. For comparison, consider a scab on human skin. The scab is ugly, evidence of a wound, and although part of a healing process with positive value, this doesn't convert the scab itself into something beautiful. This sort of reply to denying ugliness sidesteps the real issue, which is a question of aesthetic attention to particular perceptual qualities, rather than broader, holistic knowledge of some natural event or system.<sup>8</sup> I'm not here setting up a dichotomy between aesthetic experience and knowledge; knowledge of all kinds will inform and potentially enrich aesthetic experience. Rather, I'm stressing a distinction between aesthetic and scientific appreciation, and how the positive aesthetics claim seems to slide from one to the other. Ugliness cannot be explained away by a holistic story unless that story can show how the relevant aesthetic qualities become beautiful.

Leading from this, Rolston's explanation is undermined by a second problem, one which also arises for the «conversion theory», a theory offered in answer to the problem referred to as the paradox of tragedy.<sup>9</sup> The paradox of tragedy rests in what is seen to be the paradox of feeling pleasure in response

7. See ROLSTON, 1988 (as quoted in SAITO, 1998).

8. See also SAITO, 1998, p. 104.

9. Moore says the paradox of tragedy is the «generic parent» of the paradox of ugliness (1998, p. 420). There's been a long debate, reaching as far back as Aristotle, as to how this paradox might be resolved. Also, there are a range of experiences and associated aesthetic qualities which fall into the category of what we might call «difficult» or «challenging» aesthetic experience or appreciation. In respect of both art and nature, and things falling in between, several forms of appreciation can be included here, but perhaps most commonly: the sublime, tragedy and ugliness. In aesthetics, especially in the eighteenth century when these topics reached a pinnacle in philosophical debates, experiences falling into these categories were seen as difficult because they involve, typically, a mixed response of negative and positive feelings, or just negative feeling, to qualities that are in some way challenging or unattractive. The response to the sublime mixes liking, pleasure or delight with uneasiness, anxiety, fear, terror, and a feeling of being overwhelmed or overpowered (for example in accounts by Burke and Kant). Tragedy (as tragic drama) has been argued to involve a mix of negative and positive emotions, with negative or painful emotions such as fear or horror at the tragic events portrayed, and positive emotions in response to the artful representation of these events.

to painful, tragic subject matter in artworks. As David Hume once put it, «It seems an unacceptable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy? The more they are touched and affected, the more they are delighted with the spectacle...»<sup>10</sup> The conversion theory—which some say Hume held—argues that our displeasure in response to painful content is converted into something pleasurable through pleasure taken in the representational or depictive aspects of the artwork.

We can put the elk carcass problem in terms of a paradox of ugliness: how is it that something seemingly ugly and repulsive turns out to be something that has positive aesthetic value for us; something we can admire? Rolston and others argue that scientific knowledge frames and supports appropriate aesthetic judgments of nature, and such knowledge, it appears, is responsible for converting apparent ugliness into something beautiful. Yet, we are given no explanation about how such a conversion or transformation takes place.

A possible explanation might be found in discussions of ugliness and the arts. The aesthetic theories of Aristotle, Kant and many others have argued that ugliness and repulsiveness can be rendered beautiful through artistic representation. Kant writes, «Beautiful art displays its excellence precisely by describing beautifully things that in nature would be ugly and displeasing. The furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting».<sup>11</sup> So the argument would go that analogous to the way the representational and creative aspects of artworks are supposed to render unpleasant subject matter attractive, even beautiful, the «content» of the aesthetic experience of the rotting elk carcass, that is, the putrefying flesh and feasting maggots, coupled with a rotting stench, are rendered beautiful and somehow pleasant through an ecological story. But it is difficult to grasp how such a transformation can take place through a scientific story rather than the imaginative, artistic one provided through a painterly representation, poem or fictional description. Instead of a second artistic object we have, rather, a live squirming phenomenon framed through an ecological context. It may be that we come to recognize how the rotting carcass represents the incredible life and death at work before our eyes, yet the sensuous qualities remain ugly.

My point here has also been made in relation to the conversion explanation in tragedy. The subject matter remains bleak and cannot be readily explained away, and the negative feelings evoked by tragedy are not converted at all, they remain negative. Of course, there may also be some pleasure, perhaps from the representational qualities of the artwork, but this does not oblit-

10. HUME, David (1757). «Of Tragedy». In: *Four Dissertations*. Reprinted in NEILL, Alex; RIDLEY, Aaron (ed.) (1995). *Arguing About Art*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 198.

11. See KANT, I. ([1790] 2000). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Guyer, P. and Matthews, E. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, §48, Ak. 312. See also ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448b; ECO (2007), p. 19.

erate the negative strand in our experience. Likewise, in the case of ugly nature, it remains ugly, even if our response is mixed, involving dislike but also curiosity, wonder or fascination rooted in the new knowledge we take on board. One of the main reasons such a conversion cannot take place is that to a great extent the concepts and knowledge of an ecological story just cannot penetrate the perceptual and sensuous experience of ugliness.

A further objection which supports the reality of ugliness in nature has been raised by Malcolm Budd. Essentially, he argues that all the scientific knowledge in the world cannot alter our judgments of negative aesthetic qualities: «grossly malformed living things will remain grotesque no matter how comprehensible science renders their malformation».<sup>12</sup> So, while knowledge may enrich our experience and enable us to see some qualities in a new light, it does not necessarily hold that knowledge will transform the ugly into the beautiful. It is also possible that the more knowledge we have the more ugly something becomes.

Take the aye-aye, for instance, a nocturnal lemur found in Madagascar. It is all out of proportion: small eyes, huge large ears, a rather bald and fleshy-looking body, and sharp razor-like incisor teeth. We learn that it gets much of its food by tapping tree trunks and then scooping out grubs from inside the tree, using its teeth and a long, narrow, creepy middle finger.<sup>13</sup> The more knowledge one has, perhaps the more one reacts with mild revulsion. Of course, it may be that this reaction also involves fascination, but this does not discount, in itself, the negative reaction connected to the very odd features of the animal.

To take another example, predation is a natural occurrence which enables mammals to exist and prosper. When we observe acts of predation they display positive aesthetic qualities such as the remarkable, graceful action of a cheetah chasing a gazelle. But the activity witnessed is also violent and bloody, leading to the death of another animal.<sup>14</sup> Explaining such activity only in positive aesthetic terms verges on a kind of aestheticization of nature (I will have more to say about this below).

Some philosophers have taken a slightly different route to trying to explain ugliness in the world. Samuel Alexander has argued that «Ugliness... is an ingredient in aesthetic beauty, as the discords in music or the horrors of tragedy. When it becomes ugly as a kind of beauty it has been transmuted. Such ugliness is difficult beauty».<sup>15</sup> Although some forms of ugliness border on difficult beauty or overlap with terrible and horrible qualities in the sublime, it

12. BUDD, M. (2000). «The Aesthetics of Nature». *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 100, p. 149.

13. www.slate.com. Accessed 28/2/08.

14. See HETTINGER (2007).

15. ALEXANDER, S. (1968). *Beauty and Other Forms of Value*. New York, as quoted in MOORE, p. 418. Carolyn KORSMEYER argues for this kind of position in «Terrible Beauties». In: KIERAN, M. (ed.) (2005). *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*. Blackwell, p. 47-63.

can be maintained that ugliness exists independently of other kinds of aesthetic value and disvalue. This needs teasing out.

First, the cheetah-gazelle chase and kill presents a case of something that has both beautiful and ugly elements: the grace of the chase and the bloody attack of the kill. But the beauty does not negate the ugliness that is found there. On my approach, it is judged as a beautiful chase with an ending causing revulsion, rather than something holistically beautiful, where beauty overcomes any other elements. This is of course from the human point of view—but that is my concern here: aesthetic judgments by humans of the rest of nature.

This suggests a similar type of case, where an unattractive thing, perhaps a tree or animal ravaged by disease, has beautiful aspects. We often talk of the «inner beauty» of things. What's going on here, I believe, is not a rejection or explaining away of the perceptual qualities of ugliness, but a recognition of other features that are appealing, perhaps beautiful actions of some kind. So, as Ron Moore points out: «an ugly thing may have its appealing, even beautiful aspects without thereby becoming “negatively beautiful” or “beautifully ugly”».<sup>16</sup>

Finally, against views that attempt to explain away ugliness, we want to know what constitutes proper cases of negative value. Just as we want to understand what makes something beautiful, we want to understand its opposites. It does not reflect our experiences of the world to identify only instances of terrible beauty, without recognizing that there are instances of true ugliness.

### III. What is ugliness in nature?

If ugliness in nature cannot be explained away as some variety of beauty, then we need some kind of explanation of what ugliness is. What kind of substantive account can be given about ugliness in nature? To explore this issue, I would like to make a few distinctions. Many theories of ugliness, importantly, distinguish it from the non-aesthetic reaction of *strong* repulsion or disgust.<sup>17</sup> Repulsion or disgust of a strong kind may be so overwhelming that attention to the object is either truncated or never gets a foothold in the first place. Because, as many would argue, the aesthetic response necessarily involves some kind of sustained perceptual attention, disgust must be classed as a more visceral sensory reaction. This is not to say that ugliness in a person or an animal, say, could not include repulsive qualities or that the aesthetic response might have elements of disgust in a weaker sense. My point refers to what lies at an extreme and at what point the response becomes non-aesthetic.

16. MOORE (1998), p. 418.

17. On disgust, see POLE, D. (1983). «Disgust and Other Forms of Aversion». In: ROBERTS, G. (ed.). *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion*. London: Duckworth; KORSMEYER, C. (2002). «The Delightful, Delicious and Disgusting». *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60(3), p. 217-225; MILLER, W. (1997). *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Another important point relates to how beauty and ugliness are related. We can view them as lying on a scale of positive and negative values. On the positive side of the scale are varieties of beauty, while varieties of ugliness lie on the negative side. The scale is intended to show that ugliness is something associated with objective qualities; that it can exist in greater or lesser degrees; and that the concept of ugliness is not simply an empty notion understood as the absence of beauty.<sup>18</sup> Some have argued that in the middle lies a zero point, which suggests a kind of aesthetic indifference, where one does not care one way or the other about the object. It could be that this represents some sort of aesthetic neutrality. Frank Sibley suggests that this neutrality is given content in terms of our use of certain aesthetic concepts like «plain», «ordinary», or «undistinguished».<sup>19</sup> These expressions are used in aesthetic judgments of things that are unremarkable. I think Sibley's got it wrong here. Such judgments are not really neutral at all, but rather belong to aesthetic disvalue. To call a person plain-looking or ordinary is surely to make a negative judgment. The person is not attractive but plain. It makes more sense to describe unremarkable things as lying on the side of negative aesthetic value, but not synonymous with ugliness. Ugly things can be new and remarkable in our experience, invoking curiosity, as in the case of the aye-aye.

How might we unpack that negative side of the scale in relation to nature? Ugliness, like beauty, varies with objects, environments or whatever being more or less ugly. It is associated, certainly, with qualities like deformity, decay, disease, disfigurement, disorder, messiness, distortion, odd proportions, mutilation, grating sounds, being defiled, spoiled, defaced, brutal, wounded, dirty, muddy, slimy, greasy, foul, putrid, and so on.<sup>20</sup> I am not putting forward a universal view of what ugliness consists in. Ugliness may be real but it is not reducible to one property or other, and we could not know that something is ugly without experiencing it firsthand for ourselves. Also, as noted earlier, qualities we associate with ugliness may exist alongside attractive ones, just as negative and positive aesthetic values can be associated with the same thing, for example an attractive bird with an ugly, grating call.

In thinking through ugliness, we ought to embrace a broad understanding as indicated by some of the terms I just listed. Because beauty has been historically associated with order and harmony, many philosophers have identified ugliness with disorder and disharmony.<sup>21</sup> For example, Rudolf Arnheim describes ugliness as «a clash of uncoordinated orders...when each of its parts has an order of its own, but these orders do not fit together, and thus the whole

18. MOORE (1998), p. 419.

19. SIBLEY (2001), p. 192.

20. See SIBLEY, 2001 and ECO's (2007) list, p. 16.

21. See LORAND, R. (1994). «Beauty and Its Opposites». *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52(4), p. 399-406.



is fractured». <sup>22</sup> This captures the ugliness identified in the aye-aye's odd features, but this view is both too formal and too narrow because it does not capture the more disgusting-type features of ugly things such as slimy textures, rotting stench or bizarre sounds.

Some philosophers have argued that ugliness in nature is essentially connected to deformity or malformation, where this counts as an aesthetic defect in some natural form or kind, usually of the organic variety. <sup>23</sup> Sibley rightly points out that only things capable of being deformed can be understood as such and thus ugly in this way. For example, he says that while it might make sense to judge a tree to be ugly due to its deformity, it would be odd to describe a stone as deformed. <sup>24</sup> However, and in any case, ugliness is not always tied to deformity, and we need to understand ugliness more broadly as connected to a variety of qualities, like those mentioned a moment ago. A toad may be judged to be ugly in virtue of its odd features —slimy and bumpy texture and dull, bloated croak— without being a case of a deformed toad. The aye-aye is ugly in virtue of having a very bizarre mix of features, especially, but not solely, when compared to the features of human beings.

Marcia Eaton, a philosopher who supports a cognitive approach to aesthetic appreciation of nature akin to views put forward by Carlson and Rolston, disagrees with the positive aesthetics thesis. While she believes that knowledge can enable shifts in perception, she also holds that there are cases of genuine ugliness. Eaton uses the example of an ugly shell, the pen shell, described in shell guidebooks as unattractive and avoided by collectors. <sup>25</sup>

So far I have been referring mainly to ugly qualities or properties. But judgments of ugliness are, in my view, importantly made by valuers ascribing negative value to things and having certain reactions such as shock, (weak) repulsion, and so on. In this respect, ugliness relates to both properties in objects and to the cognitive stock, imaginative associations, emotions and biases of individual valuers across communities and cultures. Ugliness, like other aesthetic properties, is response-dependent, depending upon a valuer valuing something. Undoubtedly, while we will find agreement on ugliness across cultures, ugliness will also vary culturally and historically, as Umberto Eco has shown so well in his recent anthology, *On Ugliness*. <sup>26</sup>

22. LORAND (1994), p. 402.

23. See SIBLEY, 2001; Glenn Parsons makes the claim that deformity only applies to organic nature, a point which he uses to support positive aesthetics in relation to inorganic nature. See: PARSONS (2004). «Natural Functions and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Inorganic Nature». *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 44(1); Cf. BUDD, 2002.

24. I'm not convinced that Sibley's example is apt —a geologist has informed me that we can understand deformity in rocks (particularly crystals) in terms of irregularities or malformation.

25. EATON, M. (2005). «Beauty and Ugliness In and Out of Context». In: KIERAN, M. (ed.) *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*. Blackwell, p. 48.

26. ECO (2007).

Let me take this analysis a step further by classifying ugliness, rather tentatively, into three types.<sup>27</sup> This will help us to flesh out some of the complexities that arise with ugliness as an aesthetic category.

- i) *Relative ugliness* is ugliness relative to some norm. Probably most cases of ugliness fall into this class. For example, humans may find the faces of some other humans ugly because they are being compared to some ideal of human beauty. Or, a human may find a toad's face ugly relative to some norm of human facial beauty. It's not uncommon for humans—and possibly other species—to judge ugliness relative to norms set by their own species. Comparisons to such norms also explain differences between cultural norms and why some things may be judged as ugly in some cultures while not in others.
- ii) *Inherent ugliness* identifies something which is ugly in itself and not in relation to any norm. There may be fewer instances of this, but it is certainly the case that some things are just ugly. Some candidates frequently mentioned are: eels, spiders, ticks, mosquitoes, mudflats, muddy rivers and burnt forests. The objection could be made here that these sorts of things aren't really ugly at all, rather there is some deep-seated or not so deep-seated bias operating on our judgment which makes them so. (I deal with this sort of problem below.)
- iii) *Apparent ugliness* identifies cases where things are considered in themselves, wholly apart from any comparisons to other things, and wholly apart from any knowledge or unfavourable associations; a purely formal appreciation, if you will. Considering toads in themselves or even a wound or bruise, we might in fact see these things as beautiful, whereas if we were to compare them to some ideal norm, for example, healthy, glowing skin, they would be ugly. We might have to sever a bruise from its extra-aesthetic context, say, the causes and pain related to the bruise to see it as beautiful. As Frances Hutcheson points out: «there is no form which seems necessarily disagreeable of itself when we...compare it with nothing better of a kind....swine, serpents of all kinds, and some insects [are] really beautiful enough».<sup>28</sup>

The category of apparent ugliness suggests another form of the argument which attempts to explain away ugliness if we take a certain kind of approach. In this case it is not the role played by knowledge, but rather, the role played by keen attention alone, and importantly, setting aside or backgrounding biases, cultural norms, comparisons, context, etc. In some cases it will be true that setting aside cultural or personal biases will enable us to appreciate the beauty

27. For some other ways of classifying ugliness, see STOLNITZ, J. (1950). «On Ugliness in Art». *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 11(1), 1-24; CARMICHAEL, P. (1972). «The Sense of Ugliness». *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 30(4), 495-498.

28. Quoted in SIBLEY, 2001, p. 205.

of something. Snakes are a possible case in point. Yet, it does not necessarily follow that things appreciated apart from negative associations and so on will be judged to be, after all, beautiful.

Apparent ugliness raises another possible problem, which I will call the «familiarity effect». There will be cases where the more familiar we become with something, the less ugly it will seem to us; the initial shock will have worn off. Perhaps the more time we spend with a toad, the greater aesthetic interest of a positive kind we might find. Yet, it will still be possible that it just remains ugly, and we may in fact grasp better why we find its features so ugly. It does not follow from keen perceptual attention or repeated viewings that an aesthetic object gains in aesthetic value (or indeed, the other way around that, a beautiful thing does not necessarily lose value after repeated experiences of it).

Some headway has been made in arguing for the reality of ugliness in nature. Given the categories of ugliness in nature set out, I have suggested that most cases of ugliness will be relative to some norm, but there are also cases of inherent ugliness. I have challenged the ideas underlying the category of apparent ugliness, that is, keen perceptual attention can not get us past all cases of apparent ugliness, and so ugliness is not always apparent. There is much that I have not been able to address here. Further work is needed, for example, in thinking through more finely grained distinctions between kinds of ugliness in nature.

I have also had to set aside cultural issues and a discussion of moral issues involved in aesthetic appreciation of ugliness, for example, where ugliness is used to identify evil character, a view taken by the ancient philosopher, Plotinus, and others.<sup>29</sup> Another key issue in discussions of moral ugliness is the nature of our reactions to ugly things and how that reflects on our moral character, e.g., the problem of taking delight in the misfortune of deformed, mutilated, etc., nature, or treating ugliness as some sort of spectacle. These topics take us into the realm of moral philosophy, and I am not able to pursue those tricky issues here.

#### IV. Why care about ugliness?

In working toward a conclusion, I would like to say a few things about why experiences of ugliness might have some significance in our lives. Given that ugliness is unpleasant and unattractive, if not entirely repulsive, why might it matter? In other words, what value, if not aesthetic value, does it have? To ask this question is not to explain ugliness away and assert its positive aesthetic value, but rather to ask what sort of place it has in our lives.

Clearly, when ugliness is mixed with fascination and curiosity, this explains why we might be engaged by ugly things. As mentioned earlier, ugliness is not equivalent to being boring, dull or insignificant. There is no doubt that ugly things can capture our imagination, at least because of their novelty. Now,

29. See MOORE (1998); STOLNITZ's (1950) discussion of Stephen Pepper's position, p. 8 ff; and K. Rosenkrantz's study, the *Aesthetic of Ugliness* (1853).

while this answer helps in understanding the significance of some forms of ugliness, it does not really address the difficult or challenging nature of ugliness. It is the more difficult or challenging experiences that interest me.

In thinking through the place of ugliness in our lives, it is important to avoid a strategy which relies upon a hedonic theory of value, that is: all that matters is understanding experiences in terms of whatever pleasure might arise, rather than the more nuanced responses or effects that arise from our experiences. As we have seen, a common move is to try to explain away ugliness, to show that it is in fact a variety of beauty where the pleasant things in life, nature and so on, are always the case. In response to why we engage with tragic art, for example, Stephen Davies argues that we engage all the time in activities that are difficult, painful, challenging, and we come back for more. That's the kind of creatures we are.<sup>30</sup> These experiences contribute to the worthwhile life; and they have value in ways unconnected to pleasure. I believe this is also the case with ugliness in nature.

In an effort to explain the paradox of ugliness, some approaches try to show «how our experience of ugliness can be edifying, no matter how negative its inherent character».<sup>31</sup> This connects to a long tradition in aesthetics which argues that negative emotions can be edifying in various ways.<sup>32</sup> Experiencing the full range of emotions can deepen our experience of other humans, other creatures, and things unlike ourselves. These negative feelings in aesthetic experience can acquaint us with a range of feelings not available with easy beauty. This kind of exploration is also a feature of the sublime and the tragic, where we confront things that terrify us or disturb us, albeit at some safe distance.<sup>33</sup>

It is also a kind of exploration evident in various forms of avant-garde art and some forms of land and environmental art which challenge norms of beauty and art as beauty. I have in mind, in particular, Robert Smithson's «aesthetics of disappointment», as he called it, his own exploration of how forces of entropy and decay permeate our experience. Some forms of a post-industrial aesthetic are also in this vein. Aesthetic engagement of this kind can be worthwhile in itself but may in turn evoke satisfaction in discovering our capacity to apprehend ugliness outside ourselves. Contemplation of ugliness in nature caused by humans —aesthetic offences against nature as some philosophers have described them (graffiti in national parks; strip-mining, etc, clear-cutting)— may also be explored, with the effect of some enhanced awareness of environmental harm.<sup>34</sup>

30. DAVIES, S. (1994). *Musical Meaning and Expression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 316-320.

31. MOORE (1998), p. 420.

32. See note 9, above; KORSMEYER (2005).

33. There might also be some biological advantage to negative values in nature. Disgust, fear, aversion, and alienation from nature, for example, function in ways that provide security, protection, and safety. See KELLERT, S. (1996). *Values of Life*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

34. See GODLOVITCH, S. (1998). «Offending Against Nature». *Environmental Values*, 7; CARLSON, A. (2000). *Aesthetics and the Environment*. New York and London: Routledge.

Proponents of positive aesthetics might object that connecting ugliness in nature with these edifying effects smacks of humanizing nature and failing to take it on its own terms, that is, bringing value somehow back to ourselves. The account of ugliness given here does not attempt to sidestep the cultural context we bring to our judgments of ugly nature. Positive aesthetics and scientific cognitivism together argue for the importance of taking nature on its own terms and getting past what might be seen as a shallow form of aesthetic valuing which ignores the deeper ecological story. What responses can be given to this type of concern? First, it can be argued that science is itself shaped by culture, and its categories are not necessarily the best ones through which to aesthetically value nature. Second, while positive aesthetics would appear to value nature in itself, on its «own terms», it may be in danger of aestheticizing nature, that is, not fully grasping or taking on board negative aesthetic value and how this kind of value operates in human-nature relations.<sup>35</sup> While the environmental education implicit in positive aesthetics is laudable, especially in how it functions to move beyond personal and potentially distorting biases, fears, narrow norms or standards and in turn reassess previous negative aesthetic judgments, it would be naïve and idealistic to assume that this approach will always eliminate negative aesthetic value. We might also find that experiences of ugliness fulfill some function in human and non-human lives, where disgust and revulsion play some key role in enabling survival.

Positive aesthetics also presents an incomplete environmental aesthetics, risking an attitude which ignores the true diversity of characteristics possessed by various natural environments and animals. Ignoring ugliness potentially impoverishes this dimension of our experience of environments and creatures of all kinds that fall beyond the realm of comfortable aesthetic experience.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, then, experiences of ugliness have epistemic value, they increase our «aesthetic intelligence» through the development of an engaged appreciative awareness of ugliness and all forms of aesthetic value. How might this aesthetic intelligence translate into developing a moral attitude toward nature? Through the exploration of the negative side of aesthetic value, we discover, I think, a different kind of relationship to nature, one that is not friendly or close, but one that strains us through its uneasiness. It may be a relationship of distance rather than intimacy because after all, while there may be some fascination in the mix in some cases, ugliness is still something unattractive in the end. In any case, it *is* a form of relationship, and one that we

35. While obviously laudable in some ways, PARSONS (2002) argues that although there can be a variety of aesthetic categories through which we can aesthetically appreciate nature, we ought to choose those as most appropriate via a beauty-making criterion, which gives us the best aesthetic value.

36. See also KORSMEYER (2005); and LINTOTT, S. (2006). «Eco-Friendly Aesthetics». *Environmental Ethics*, 28, Spring, p. 56-76.

value for its complexity —and perhaps, in some ways, for its integrity, where recognition of the variety found in nature becomes explicit. In this way, an aesthetic response might underpin an ethical attitude, where the epistemic value arising from ugliness leads to caring for the bizarre aye-aye or huge earthworms. Life just wouldn't be the same without them.