

Accentuate the Positive Aesthetics

I am attracted to unattractive places. The prairies, swamps and scrub deserts dismissed as dull and unremarkable have always held a strong personal appeal. My appreciation of these places never required extra work or special effort to cultivate. On my first family road trip to the Dakotas, when I was in my early teens, I was immediately enthralled by the vast expanse of short-grass prairie. Where my brother saw dull monotonous flatland, I marveled at graceful waves rippling across the tops of grasses, speeding towards a distant horizon as sun-warmed winds whipped across a wide landscape lain out beneath an impressively big sky. The contrasting shapes and textures of broad leaves and long stems clustered close at hand melded into a soft, tone-on-tone color field as their countless ranks repeated into the distance, rolling hazily over the gentle contours of low hills. I gazed out and instead of seeing the featureless landscape of fly-over country, I found it beautiful.

I can think of small instances of unappealing nature, my personal aversion to centipedes or a squirming, maggot-covered elk corpse, to use an example cited from Rolston Holmes III. (Saito-a, 101) But perceiving entire natural landscapes as unattractive? That hasn't been my experience. Yet the same environments are cited again and again as difficult to appreciate. Conservationist William T. Hornaday's assessment of the Florida Everglades, when proposed as a national park in the 1930s, 'found mighty little that was of special interest, and absolutely nothing that was picturesque or beautiful.' (Parsons, 55) When discussing ecologist Aldo Leopold's frustrations with people overvaluing showpiece scenery, Yuriko Saito states, "Because we expect to be entertained by the grand, amusing, and spectacular parts of nature (such as in national parks), we find the Kansas plains 'tedious' and the prairies of Iowa and Southern Wisconsin boring." (Saito-a, 101)

Historical accounts of the Great Plains, confirm a deeply-rooted bias devaluing these places from Europeans' very first encounters.

Daniel Webster called the pending Louisiana Purchase a “vast, worthless area.” Painter and naturalist John James Audubon referred to the countryside of the Dakotas as “the most arid and dismal you can conceive of.” (Savage, 14) In summarizing Europeans’ early impressions of the Great Plains, Candace Savage observes, “all they could see was where they weren’t. This was not forest or sea coast or mountains; it was nothing but light and grass, the Big Empty in the middle of the continent. A vacant space, as they saw it, in desperate need of improvement.” (Savage, 16) Historical accounts and current actions indicate many find the landscapes of prairie, swamp, etc. unremarkable and my untutored love of these places is a personal quirk, by no means universal.

But is there anything wrong with dismissing prairies, wetlands, tundras and the like as boring and unattractive? Isn’t this just a trivial matter of taste? It is not. Because this manner of thinking about non-picture-postcard nature causes real harm. The unattractive quickly becomes the unvalued and the unprotected. Since 1900, 50% of the world’s wetlands have been destroyed.¹ Less than 1% of the North American tall-grass prairies are still extant. (Savage, 50) In Illinois, nicknamed The Prairie State, the 22 million acres of prairie in 1820 has been reduced to 2500 acres today.² And this is not only a historic problem, in 2014 construction was completed on the “clean” energy project Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System, a massive 3500-acre complex on what had been intact habitat in California’s Mojave Desert.³ As I write this, Bell Bowl Prairie, a rare Illinois gravel prairie remnant, is threatened by bulldozers scheduled to create an access road for the expansion of the Chicago Rockford International Airport.⁴ It is far too easy to see unappreciated places as empty wasteland in need of improvement or open for consequence-free resource extraction.

To counter this harm, work must be done to overturn the idea of unattractive nature. A guide is needed to teach everyone how to experience the beauty of overlooked places, the experience I felt as a teenager on the Dakota prairie. To this end, I will explore how the tenets of Positive Aesthetics, a proposition that all untouched nature is

beautiful, can serve as this guide. I will also turn to David Hume's notion of true judges for assistance.

Earlier I declared that overlooking unattractive nature is not simply a trivial matter of personal taste. But in the end, although it is not trivial, judgements of these landscapes, like all aesthetic judgements are still matters of taste. This makes Hume's Of the Standard of Taste, and the notion of true judges it contains, a useful tool for assessing the effectiveness of Positive Aesthetics' influence on aesthetic judgements of nature.

To establish the titular standard, Hume posits that judgements of taste are not all equally valid personal sentiments, but can be correct or incorrect. To demonstrate this, Hume offers a set of literary assessments he believes his contemporaries will immediately dismiss as absurd at face value. As absurd as declaring "a pond as extensive as the ocean."⁵ (Hume, Section 8) To update Hume's literary examples with artworks more familiar to me, it would be foolish to praise the stacked pots of ceramicist Peter Volkous for their dainty, ethereal charms or the color field paintings of Mark Rothko for their celebration of bombast and discord. In light of such examples, Hume believes judgements of taste can be scrutinized as to their correctness.

In another illustration on the nature of correct judgements, Hume uses a story from Don Quixote. The character Sancho tells a story about two of his kinsman renowned for their wine tasting prowess. When asked to taste from what should have been, by nature of its age and vintage, an excellent hogs-head of wine, one of Sancho's relatives declared the wine superb, except for a slight taste of iron. The other found the wine to be very fine, but with a tinge of leather. Both were ridiculed for their pronouncements, everyone believing the tasters had misjudged a very fine wine. But later on, when the hogs-head was emptied, an iron key with a leather fob was found at the bottom. (Hume, Section 15) Hume points out that the judgements of Sancho's kinsman were proven to be correct, but their judgements still would have been correct, even if the key and fob had never been discovered. (Hume, Section 16)

In this story, Sancho's relatives fulfill the role Hume establishes to assess the correctness of judgements of taste. They are true judges. When describing the assets needed to qualify a critic as a true judge, Hume cites a "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty." (Hume, Section 23) Yet, despite their superior tasting abilities, both true judges were only partially correct in their assessment of the wine. Neither tasted both the iron and the leather. Being a true judge does not require perfection. A true judge need not be beyond reproach. All judgements will be partial judgements because no one can experience all aspects of their subject. All judgements will be partly incorrect, or at least incomplete. Being a true judge only requires enough careful, studied, consistent and largely-correct deliberation to provide competent guidance for others.

In pursuit of our own true judge to aid in disbanding the notion of unattractive nature, Positive Aesthetic might serve this role. Positive Aesthetics proposes that all of nature, in its unsullied state, is always beautiful. Allen Carlson cites American naturalist John Muir's description of his own aesthetic experience as a precursor for what's now called Positive Aesthetics.

Muir's artist companions, who focus on mountain scenery, exemplify aesthetic experience of nature as guided by the idea of the picturesque. This differs from Muir's own aesthetic experience, which involved an interest in and appreciation of the mountain environment somewhat more akin to that of a geologist. This way of experiencing nature eventually brought Muir to see the whole of the natural environment and especially wild nature as aesthetically beautiful and to find ugliness primarily where nature was subject to human intrusion. The range of things that he regarded as aesthetically appreciable seemed to encompass the entire natural world, from creatures considered hideous in his day, such as snakes and alligators, to natural disasters thought to ruin the environment, such as floods and earthquakes.

Muir's enthusiastic embrace of everything in an environment offers a powerful alternative to the dismissive treatment of allegedly unattractive landscapes. How helpful it would be for our pursuit to have a reliable tool that can, stated in the reverse, "be understood as the idea that negative aesthetic judgments about nature are not possible." (Hettinger, 5) This framework is very much akin to my own

lived experience with unattractive landscapes, but more radical as it embraces the beauty of centipedes and elk carcasses.

To even consider Positive Aesthetics viable, it is first necessary to accept the division of the natural and the manmade. It is perfectly valid to argue that humans are part of nature and everything we do or make, from throw pillows to deep water oil spills, is natural. This argument is correct, but without a replacement framework, it robs us of an important tool for making sense of the world. How can we continue to assess both the human and non-human forces that shape the world around us? It is important to do so because natural oil pipelines, natural bulldozers and natural internal combustion carbon emissions still cause harm. As Glen Parsons puts it, “we will still want, and need to worry about how human activities, such as fossil fuel use, are impacting things like temperature cycles, animal migration patterns and the behavior of ocean currents. But if we throw out the concept of ‘natural’ we are left with no general way to refer to these processes.” (Parsons, 4)

That said, I still want to find language that avoids the harmful mindset falsely dividing humanity and nature, a root cause of the extractive and exploitative thinking that causes much of the environmental damage I listed at the start. As Deanna Beacham, an educator who formerly worked for the Virginia Council on Indians and NPS Chesapeake Bay, entreats us, it must be “emphasized that ‘nature’ is not something apart from humans, but includes humans, indoors or out. You say nature when you mean outdoors. Natives know all beings are our relatives, all the time.”

There is no dividing line between the manmade and nature, nor should it be considered desirable to create one. The vast North American “wilderness” encountered by the early European settler-colonialist had been shaped and managed by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Plastic debris reaches the most isolated regions of the oceans and an altered atmosphere affects the entire planet. (Parsons, 2-3) One difficulty stems from the attempt to find an overarching term for all environments. To call a place a desert or a wetland or a prairie needn’t divide the objects of human

culture from the rest of nature. Phoenix and its sprawling suburbs are as much a part of the desert environment as saguaros, arroyos and javelinas. In his essay "The Land Ethic," Leopold proposes the following ethical guideline, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (Leopold, 224-225) Settings that retain this integrity are what is often meant when calling a place "nature." For the remainder of this paper, and until a better term comes into common usage, I will call these environments robust biotic communities. With this terminology, even some human cultural artifacts can be included along with the plants, soil and wildlife, if they are in keeping with the integrity and stability of a particular environment.

Taken to its extreme, Positive Aesthetics becomes hard to defend. It is easy to picture robust biotic communities, particularly those involving death or suffering, that are difficult to find aesthetically pleasing. One might, with practice, be able to see the elk carcass rotting in the field as in harmony with natural cycles and, therefore, worthy of aesthetic attention.⁶ (Saito, 103) But what of a field littered with the carcasses of hundreds of caribou done in by a wasting disease, or a pod of beached whales, or an opossum burned alive in a wildfire? And even if these disturbing scenes could be looked upon with a disinterested eye, what about the overpowering smells of rot and decay that can make a witness physically ill? Can the literally gut-wrenching still be categorized as aesthetically pleasing? Probably not.

But Positive Aesthetics need not be infallibly correct to act as a true judge. Just as Sancho's partially-correct kinsman may have been able to teach their detractors what flavors to focus on in the wine, if they had only been listened to, Positive Aesthetics can act as a promising, albeit imperfect, teacher. Positive Aesthetics may not be much help when confronted with the truly horrific or distasteful, but when encountering a landscape that is, at first impression, devoid of interest, it will be helpful to ask "How is this landscape, like all robust biotic communities, a place of worthwhile aesthetic experiences?" "What here merits my attention?" This questioning can focus new light on an unappreciated place. This optimistic mindset can be a powerful tool for appreciating robust biotic communities.

Of course a baseline maxim can't be a true, true judge. An actual true judge must be a person. Strongly equipped to make subjective calculations, a person can witness and frame an aesthetic experience in a manner akin to how other people might experience it. They can help in matters of taste by providing a model to emulate, their guidance can take the form of demonstration and examples. Where a person can show me specifically that a painting is good because of its provocative use of color and subtle balancing of forms, Positive Aesthetics only tells me that all robust biotic communities are good. Muir and Leopold can act as true judges of environments. Positive Aesthetics is a less helpful, but more broadly available, substitute. By adopting the principle of Positive Aesthetics, we can accomplish what Hume believes very few are qualified to do, establish our "own sentiment as the standard of beauty." (Hume, Section 23) Once the primary tenet of Positive Aesthetics is adopted, we are assured that judgements that lead us to positive aesthetic experiences of robust biotic communities are correct judgements of taste. I will add one caveat to this assessment. Although I want to keep the ways in which these experiences find positive value broad; sensual, scientific, cultural, visual, auditory, religious, etc., I do not want the possibilities to be limitless. Reveling in a landscape's resemblance to a tantalizing ice cream sundae cannot be considered an appropriate manner of appreciating an environment, no matter how positive the experience is. To counter this, I add the caveat that correct judgements of robust biotic communities must also, to borrow a phrase from Saito, appreciate nature "on its own terms." (Saito-b, 135–149) It would take space that I do not have here to determine how religion, sounds and scientific understanding all meet an environment on its own terms and fanciful personal imaginings do not, but a notion along these lines can provide needed guide rails for Positive Aesthetic judgements.

So does adopting Positive Aesthetics as a true judge and an aesthetics mentor address the harms done to biotic communities listed at the start of this paper? It does, insofar as it brings value to landscapes that may have been overlooked and undervalued, but Positive Aesthetics can never be a tool for making conservation decisions, for valuing one threatened area over another or to rank the

relative aesthetic worth of various environments. In “Evaluating Nature Aesthetically,” Stan Godlovitch worries that if “all aspects of the environment are to be deemed of equal appreciative value” it “effectively eliminates the relevance of aesthetic value in nature conservation policy by failing to provide any pertinent aesthetic or other nonfunctional, noneconomic differentia on which to ground differential treatment of the environment.” (Godlovitch, 113-114) It is true, once all robust biotic communities are judged to be aesthetically positive, worth is flattened in exactly the way Godlovitch fears. But this simply means that Positive Aesthetics is the wrong tool for one specific job, like trying to perform surgery with a screwdriver. Properly used, Positive Aesthetics is extremely useful when appreciating an outdoor setting while standing within it. Positive Aesthetics asks one to be mindful of what they see and sense before them; experiencing this swamp, this desert, this mud flat, this gravel prairie as amazing and wondrous, simply by existing here, on our shared planet.

Hume claims that few are qualified to “establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty.” (Hume, Section 23) The persistent notion of unattractive nature marks just such a failure in popular judgements of taste. But Hume also believes the joint verdict of true judges to establish a “true standard of taste and beauty” (Hume, Section 23) can overcome such failures. “Many men, when left to themselves, have but a faint and dubious perception of beauty, who yet are capable of relishing any fine stroke, which is pointed out to them.” (Hume, Section 27) Even after we admit that not all robust biotic communities can offer positive aesthetic experiences, adopting the flawed principle of Positive Aesthetics as a true judge will be of service. By assuming that negative aesthetic judgments about robust biotic communities are not possible, we will gain the capacity to relish the fine strokes of any and all such landscape we have the privilege of experiencing.

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5. “Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean.”

6. According to Rolston, “the presumed negative aesthetic value of the dead elk with maggots stems from isolating these objects from a larger context. ‘Every item must be seen not in framed isolation but framed by its environment, and this frame in turn becomes part of the bigger picture we have to appreciate—not a “frame,” but a dynamic play.’