

## The Prussian, the Hawk, and the "Revealed Essay"

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### Article abstract

It is commonly believed that Neo-Kantian moral theory is necessarily hostile to enlightened environmentalism. My argument: Kantians can acknowledge our obligations toward nature once they recognize the value that the aesthetics of the natural world have as a proving ground for moral judgment. Treating this as an empirical claim, I supplement it with Maurice Mendelbaum's notion of "fittingness" and test it via appeal to a specific case study provided by the phenomenological expertise of the twentieth century nature writer Loren Eiseley. What emerges is a (very) broadly Kantian defense of ecologically responsible action which does not presuppose the intrinsic moral value of non-human nature.

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# The Prussian, the Hawk, and the "Revealed Essay"

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*Ron Wilburn*

## 1. Introduction

It is reasonable to suspect that Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative implies that his moral theory is irremediably hostile to the ends of any enlightened environmental agenda. Certainly, with his speciesist injunction against the treatment of ourselves and other *people* merely as means to ends, Kant appears to insist that human worth, and human worth alone, should delimit one's range of permissible actions. Because only people can capture courses of action under concepts, articulate self-legislating laws using these concepts, and freely choose to obey (or defy) these laws, only people can populate the Kingdom of Ends. Even if this tension exists, however, it might not be an irreconcilable one. Three strategies for resolving it have been recurrent in the literature. In what follows, I promote a fourth. On this account, our obligations to nature stem from the value that aesthetic appreciation has as a proving ground, of sorts, for moral judgment.<sup>1</sup> Treating this as a broadly empirical claim, I test it introspectively via appeal to Kant's writings as well as to the phenomenological expertise exhibited by the work of one of the most insightful nature writers of the 20th century.

Note, however, that I do not offer this account primarily as an exercise in Kantian scholarship. I offer it as one to which I suspect Kant would be largely sympathetic, except in some regards which I note along the way. Irrespective of Kant's sympathies, however, I find the theory presented here to be suggested by a number of central Kantian insights. And, much more importantly, I take it to be plausible on its own merits.

Note also that several objections are likely to occur to the reader throughout the following exposition. (In particular, the reader may wonder why the terms of this account promote such a circuitous route to morality *through* aesthetics). For flow of exposition, however, I relegate my responses to these objections to my concluding remarks.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe my familiarity with this general type of strategy to Matthew Altman, on whose paper, "The Convergence Between Kant's Anthropocentrism and an Environmental Ethic," I commented on at the 12th Annual Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference: The Environment, April 14, 2016, Pullman, WA: Pullman.

## 2. Kantian Aesthetics

As noted above, there are at least three alternative remedies for the tension of concern in this paper. One is to argue that some animals are, in fact, rational enough to merit moral respect, making them persons in a Kantian sense. Another is to argue that we should treat non-human nature kindly because the failure to do so threatens to poison our natural sympathies for fellow human beings (an argument which Kant himself explicitly provides). A third is to argue that environmental concern is obligated because it promotes the preconditions of our own and others' rational agency. A discussion of these provides useful background for what follows, but to stay on point, I address them in an extended footnote.<sup>2</sup> Note that I have no interest in

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<sup>2</sup> What are these three alternative strategies in detail, and why should we doubt their conclusiveness? Consider the first. Perhaps we can argue that some animals, in fact, are rational enough to merit moral respect, making them persons in a Kantian sense. For our purposes, however, this approach fails along two dimensions. First, it's prohibitively narrow; and second, it's something of a non sequitur. It is too narrow because it endeavors to cover only animals, and presumably only some animals at that (e.g., dolphins, chimps, elephants, etc.), thereby ignoring most of our furred and feathered, let alone our leaved and needled, terrestrial cohabitants. It is a non sequitur because the rationality it extends to cogitative animals is not the type at issue. Even if we are forced to recognize that many animals do indeed possess discernable problem-solving skills, this is not enough to situate them within the Kingdom of Ends. For Kant, such placement arises from a capacity for moral reasoning, not merely from a capacity for reasoning more generally. Thus, even a poker playing dog discarding his three of diamonds on the advice of disjunctive syllogism need not know how to apply the Categorical Imperative.

Consider the second of our three strategies. Perhaps we can argue that we should treat nature kindly because the failure to do so threatens to poison our natural sympathies for other human beings. This is a strategy which Kant himself endorses, and is thus Kantian rather than neo-Kantian. (Kant, 1997, 212 (27: 459)) Like that above, however, this strategy fails along two dimensions. It is prohibitively narrow since it offers us less than we seek: activist environmentalism (generally) stems from more than a mere concern with animal suffering. We worry about animals' (continued existence, just as we worry about giant sequoias' continued existence, for which pain is not even an issue. For another thing, we are likely to bolt at the idea that our injunctions against animal cruelty rest on anything as psychologically contingent as such cruelty's alleged propensity to promote cruelty toward people.

Suppose that we could remove this connection through conditioning. Or suppose that this connection could be modified to human advantage, so that the torturing of squirrels, for instance, rendered us kinder toward people. In both cases, it seems, we might still maintain that our present discomfort at the thought of animal torture should not disappear as a result.

Finally, let's consider the last of our three preliminary strategies. Perhaps we can argue that we should treat nature kindly because we are obligated to promote the preconditions of our own and others' rational agency. Because so many of these preconditions are environmental (e.g., we must breathe and eat to live and think), we have an indirect obligation to nature. On this account, our obligations to people generate our obligations to the earth, but only insofar as environmental degradation threatens to restrict peoples' exercise of reason. (Altman, 2008). Note that this strategy is superior to the preceding two in at least one respect. It avoids their problematic scope restrictions by taking account of our attitudes toward trees and many lower, marginally-sentient forms of animal life. Unfortunately, it also encounters a completely different kind of scope complication which proves very hard to shake.

This complication arises the moment we ask about the moral status of future generations. Do future generations of humanity merit consideration in the way currently existing generations do? If not, the threat is obvious. Suppose we could reliably predict (contra reality) that climate change threatens the existence, not of us or our children or our children's children, but of our progeny twelve generations down the line? What would then keep us from using high-sulfur coal derivatives, perhaps to power turbo-charged snowmobiles in our efforts to chase down and kill baby harp

dismissing any of these strategies as canards. My aim in this paper is to supplement these strategies for two reasons. One is that the most direct alternative to these strategies, a tack which takes the natural world to have intrinsic moral value irrespective of whether it enjoys rational status, may not be acceptable to everyone. Thus, I take a different line entirely. Another is that the three strategies itemized above fail to prohibit the *full* range of irresponsible ecological behavior which we should want to rule out. They do not capture the full range and scope of our felt injunctions against environmental abuse. So, where else might we look in the Kantian corpus to identify grounds for our felt belief that nature merits kindly treatment? I develop an alternative account which I take to be inspired by Kantian observations, irrespective of whether it is an account which Kant himself would fully endorse.

Despite the acknowledged anthropocentrism of Kant's ethics, it is easy to recognize that within the overall Kantian corpus, a reverence for nature enjoys a quite secure footing. One reason for this is that Kant sees in the aesthetic experience of nature a parallel to moral judgment. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes of how a concern for "pure" natural beauty (henceforth, "natural beauty") may illustrate the way judgments of beauty (henceforth, "aesthetic judgments") may resemble moral judgments.<sup>3</sup> Since both types of judgment legislate for themselves rather than being subjected to a heteronomy of laws of experience, the pleasure accruing from aesthetic judgments is parallel to the products of moral consciousness (§59). Moreover, since aesthetic judgments of beauty stem from the way the perceived intelligibility of an item's design makes one feel, beauty can be said to give sensible form to moral ideas, providing us with a model with which to understand the latter in terms of the former. In short, aesthetic and moral judgments share crucial formal similarities. Consequently, an interest in

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seals for sport, winning extra points for those with really big eyes? The problem, of course, is a close variant of Derek Parfit's exposition of the "non-identity" problem. (Parfit 1982; 1987, 363). Parfit's concern is to determine how are we obliged to behave toward the citizens of far futurity whose very existence or non-existence is determined by our present actions?

Kant himself is careful to make clear that his concern "does not go beyond the purely moral and rightful relations to be found among human beings during life. Someone who, a hundred years from now, falsely repeats something evil about me injures me right now," when the injured party exists. Such an account of harm is hardly extendable to cases of future human beings since the very dilemma posed by Parfit stems from the fact that it is our present actions which create or fail to create these very same future generations. If our irresponsible stewardship of the earth keeps potential people from ever existing, then there will never be future individuals subject to harm. It makes all the difference in the world that the dead have a track record of having already lived. (Kant 1966, §35).

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, Kant distinguishes between judgments of "beauty" and those of "pure beauty," reserving the latter term for judgments derived from feelings of approval that stem from sensory stimuli or satisfaction alone. Thus, a scoop of gourmet French vanilla ice cream could never be judged "purely" beautiful on Kant's account, irrespective of how good it may taste (§3). It is because I am not concerned with examples of impure beauty in this paper that I use the simple unqualified locution "natural beauty."

natural beauty serves to indicate “a good soul” and a “mental attunement favorable to moral feeling.” (§42)

To flesh out such passages, let us focus on two specific ways in which aesthetic and moral judgments are similar on Kant’s telling. The first is their reliance upon a stance of personal disinterest, a stance which takes two distinct forms in aesthetic judgments. We feel pleasure in the contemplation of beautiful objects, but of a kind which requires interest in neither the object’s actuality nor in its usefulness.<sup>4</sup> Thus, to find an object beautiful, we can neither will that it be nor will that it be our own. In this respect, the beautiful prepares us to love something disinterestedly (General Remark following §29). Two points merit special emphasis in this connection. The first is that one’s disinterest in a beautiful object’s actuality and one’s disinterest in its usefulness stand in close relation for Kant, since if one has a desire for an object, then one has the desire that the object be a reality (Wicks 2007, 21). The second is that it is important to Kant’s programmatic purposes that aesthetic judgments display both types of disinterest. If aesthetic judgments are to occupy a distinct domain within Kant’s philosophy, they must be different from both theoretical judgments (concerning objects’ worldly existence) and practical judgments (concerning objects’ relations to our desires and interests).

The second way in which aesthetic and moral judgments are similar on Kant’s telling is that we attribute necessity and universality to both. (Herein, I treat these two features largely in the same breath.) “What we have in mind in the case of the beautiful is a necessary reference on its part to delight” (§18). And, being necessary, we feel that it should automatically apply to all.<sup>5</sup> Kant explains this felt necessity as follows:

[S]ince the delight is not based on any inclination of the subject (or on any other deliberate interest) ... he can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. Hence, he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person; and therefore, he must believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from everyone. (§6)

Since people issue their judgments of natural beauty from a stance divorced from any particular

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<sup>4</sup> Note that only in the latter respect does the disinterest characteristic of aesthetic judgments parallel that characteristic of moral judgments. This is because the sense of approval associated with judgments of moral goodness is directed upon the performance of actual right action. Aesthetic judgments are different. Because the sense of approval associated with them stems from the feelings elicited by objects’ apparent intelligibility of design, it simply doesn’t matter whether these objects are real or merely apparent (Kant 1988, §4).

<sup>5</sup> There has been significant scholarly debate as to whether this connection is one of strict implication. Note that we need not take a stand regarding this issue for the purposes of this paper.

set of idiosyncratic interests, they automatically regard themselves as representative of all, and thus conclude that others should share their judgments. In short, to judge objects beautiful, we must not view them in instrumental, parochial, or contingent terms. To perceive an object as beautiful is to react to it as both of value for something other than the goods it promotes (the disinterest aspect) and as properly commanding a similar reaction from every competent viewer (the necessity/universality aspect).

As we all know, however, paraphrasing Kant is dangerous. In the present case, danger stems from a critical qualification he imposes: we are unable to justify the perceived necessity/universality of our judgments of beauty through reference to an articulable rule.

It is not an objective theoretical necessity such as would let us cognize a priori that everyone will feel this delight in the object that is called beautiful by me. Nor yet is it a practical necessity, in which case, thanks to concepts of a pure rational will in which free agents are supplied with a rule, this delight is the necessary consequence of an objective law, and simply means that one ought absolutely (without ulterior object) to act in a certain way. Rather, being such a necessity as is thought in an aesthetic judgment, it can only be termed “exemplary.” In other words, it is a necessity of the assent of all to a judgment regarded as exemplifying a universal rule incapable of formulation. (§18)

So, aesthetic judgments, being ones of “subjective universality,” make no pretense of capturing beautiful objects under specifiable concepts which are themselves related to objective features that make all beautiful objects beautiful in accordance with specifiable laws. And yet the spectator, in judging the object beautiful, still feels forced to believe on some level that no judging agent who genuinely has his wits about him could fail to recognize said beauty. In this, the perceived necessity/universality of aesthetic judgment differs greatly from that of both moral and theoretical judgment. When perceived as universal, it is also recognized, at some level, to be, merely “exemplary” or “regulative.”

### **3. Eco-Phenomenological Strategy**

What is important about the preceding considerations for present purposes is the alternative strategy they suggest for mitigating the potentially destructive environmental impacts of Kant’s seeming anthropocentrism. What these considerations recommend is that the aesthetic contemplation of nature may provide us with practice for the exercise of detached and (seemingly) necessary/universal judgment, thus giving us familiarity with the stance from which something very much like moral judgment proceeds. Even though only people may be of intrinsic moral worth on this account, the aesthetic appreciation of nature may nurture our

ability to assume the kind of evaluative perspective for which the Categorical Imperative tests. And if this is true, then an indirect duty to the environment may begin to smoothly and naturally emerge: the aesthetic contemplation of nature is of value because it empowers those faculties through which we recognize the moral worth of other people. Note, however, that this is a modest claim. I do not maintain that the concept of beauty (or even those of beauty and sublimity together) allows us to express all the concerns of aesthetics, let alone of environmental ethics.

There are two distinct but related inquiries commended by such a strategy. Both of these questions fall within the domain of "eco-phenomenology," a discipline through which we endeavor to study the human experience of the natural world and "recover our moral sense of our humanity" by recovering "the moral sense of nature first" (Kohak 1984, 13). The first inquiry regards the accuracy of Kant's phenomenological theory. Is his account of our felt experience of nature accurate? The second question regards the relation between said experience and our capacity to acquire a competent moral stance. I address these two questions in the remainder of this paper. The relation between them is the one described above: if Kant's phenomenological account of our experience of natural beauty is accurate, then such experience shares essential formal commonalities with our moral perceptions of people (e.g., detachment and perceived universality/necessity). Thus, it provides us with an opportunity to practice judgment in accordance with those formal features which otherwise guide our faculty of moral judgment.

#### **4. A Case Study: Loren Eiseley's "Concealed Essay"**

Loren Eiseley (1907-1977), trained as a physical anthropologist, was an essayist on a par with Emerson and Thoreau. But unlike them, he wrote poetry in the cadences of scientific prose. His most recurrent organizing theme was 20th century evolutionary theory. His self-described genre was the "concealed essay," through which he humanized scientific explanation through the resources of personal anecdote. The narratives he relates are reflections upon his interactions with nature; his questions concern these interactions' significance. Very specific memories of sights and sounds and smells and feels occasion the thoughts that fill his essays, thoughts that Eiseley often casually tosses off without explanation, only to return to later. The felt beauty and sublimity of natural objects and the unfathomable spatio/temporal expanses of nature as a whole are phenomena that Eiseley constantly endeavors to articulate. In doing these things, Eiseley practiced ecophenomenology long before the subject acquired a name.

In the interest of focus, I use a single essay of Eiseley's as a case study in what follows. This essay is "The Bird and the Machine" (Eiseley, 1957a, 179-193). The story it relates is typical Eiseley, beginning with the barest hint of either its central events or the final moral to come. He

writes,

I suppose their little bones have years ago been lost among the stones and winds of those high glacial pastures. I suppose their feathers blew eventually into the piles of tumbleweed beneath the straggling cattle fences and rotted there in the mountain snows, along with dead steers and all the other things that drift to an end in the corners of the wire. (179)

The setting in which these speculations occur is Eiseley's breakfast table, where he reads in *The Times* that machines are on the horizon that will prove capable of doing everything that animals do, only better, and on command, and in the service of human aims. Eiseley doesn't doubt this claim. He was no animist or dualist or proponent of the sort of mystery-mongering that relishes in the eschewal of natural law explanation. Even if the details of sensation and mentation are presently unknown, Eiseley expresses little doubt that their ultimate explication, if ever forthcoming, will emerge from the resources of physical theory. However, what Eiseley objects to is the dismissive tone of the article's announcement that animals are just machines. Granted, he writes, "the cell itself dissolves away into an abstract chemical machine ... [and] the wheels get smaller and smaller, and they turn more rapidly, [and] when you try to seize it the life is gone" (182). Eiseley does not deny that this is an accurate description of reality. He denies the inference from this observation, reached by common eliminativist wisdom, that life was "[therefore] never there in the first place" (182). Thus, he writes, "I have no doubt that [the mechanization of life] can be done, though a mouse harvesting seeds on an autumn thistle" is a better sight than "a machine 'mouse' running a maze" (182). He also writes, "There is another magazine article on my desk that reads 'Machines Are Getting Smarter Every Day.' I don't deny it, but I'll still stick with the birds. It's life I believe in, not machines" (181).

These assorted news items lead Eiseley to remember an experience he had as a young naturalist that, he says, "forever left him unable to see a bird imprisoned" (183). The lesson he learned was preconditioned, he tells us, by "the lesson of time . . . [that] time is a series of planes existing superficially in the same universe" (183). He recalls an incident in the Nebraska badlands when his tempo had come to match his surroundings. He realized this one day upon discovering that he had sat for hours motionless on a ridge next to a large, coiled rattlesnake. "How long he had sat with me I do not know. I had not frightened him. We were both locked in the sleepwalking tempo of the earlier world baking in the same high air and sunshine" (184). These lessons of time are the stock in trade of ecophenomenology at its best. As David Wood writes, such instruction promises to make the "invisible" visible by trading sensory snapshots for the experience of nature as a process through time that occurs at its own natural pace (Wood, 2001).

Eiseley learned this "lesson of time" while part of a "bone-hunting" expedition which scattered



its men over several hundred miles to carry on research more effectively. Eiseley's main goal was to find fossils. But, in addition to this, he had been told to secure living things: "birds, reptiles, anything" (Eiseley 1957a, 186). Speculating that a zoo somewhere required restocking, he reasoned that "it was one of those reciprocal matters in which science involves itself. Maybe [his] museum needed a stray ostrich egg, and this was the payoff." Anyhow, his job "was to help capture some birds" and "that was why [he] was there before the trucks" (186).

These instructions led Eiseley to explore a deserted cabin with a hole in its roof which offered sanctuary to any passing birds seeking temporary shelter or room for seasonal nesting. Entering the cabin "like a trained assassin" he climbed a ladder, triggered a flashlight designed to blind and paralyze, and reached up and over a shelf, where his hand was quickly clawed and bitten to the sound of beating wings (188).

What he found on the shelf was a pair of sparrow hawks, each about the size of a human fist. It was the male, he discovered, that had sunk its beak and claws into his thumb, causing him to drop his flashlight, thereby allowing the female, her sight recovered, to escape through the hole in the roof. Eiseley was put off balance but quickly recovered. "You might think I would have fallen down the ladder, but no, I had a professional assassin's reputation to keep up, and the bird, of course, made the mistake of thinking the hand was the enemy and not the eyes behind it" (189). So, with his other hand, Eiseley seized the bird from behind, folding his wings so that he was both subdued and secured. The passage that follows next is of particular importance to our present concerns.

The little fellow had saved his mate by diverting me, and that was that. He was born to it, and made no outcry now, resting in my hand hopelessly, but peering toward me in the shadows behind the lamp with a fierce, almost indifferent glance. He neither gave nor expected mercy, and something out of the high air passed from him to me, stirring a faint embarrassment. I quit looking into that eye and managed to get my huge carcass with its fistful of prey back down the ladder. (p. 189)

What is the sense of embarrassment that Eiseley describes here, brought about by the seeming indifference of the bird? How does such embarrassment feel and what could it consist in for someone with Eiseley's naturalistic convictions and scientific sophistication? We return to these questions below. For the time being, however, let's continue his story.

Putting the bird in a box small enough to keep it from injuring itself, Eiseley walked out to welcome the arriving trucks, wherein he planned to deposit the captive, with his collection of dead bones, for its return to the city where it would spend the rest of its life in a cage. Sucking at his bleeding finger, Eiseley took the experience in stride. "An assassin has to get used to

these things,” he mused. “I had a professional reputation to keep up” (190). The next morning, Eiseley awoke and inspected his prize. Holding the hawk in one hand, he felt it situated limply in his fingers, with a pounding heart yet still dismissive gaze. “I saw him look that last look away beyond me into a sky so full of light that I could not follow his gaze” (190). Then it happened.

The little breeze flowed over me again, and nearby a mountain aspen shook all its tiny leaves. I suppose I must have had an idea then of what I was going to do, but I never let it come up into consciousness. I just reached over and laid the hawk on the grass. He lay there a long minute without hope, unmoving, his eyes still fixed on that blue vault above him. It must have been that he was already so far away in heart that he never felt the release from my hand. He never even stood. He just lay with his breast against the grass. In the next second after that long minute he was gone. Like a flicker of light, he vanished with my eyes full on him, but without actually seeing even a premonitory wing beat. (191)

Now, whatever is or isn’t happening here, Eiseley clearly takes the incident to be of enormous evaluative significance. But what went on in the period between capture and release? What change of attitude did Eiseley experience toward himself and the bird that gives the above passage its transcendent character? To answer this question, let’s consider both features of our experience of natural beauty that Kant identifies: disinterest and felt “subjective” universality/necessity. In doing this, I believe, we find that Kant’s theory describes, albeit imperfectly, some important features of any enlightened ecological sensibility.

Of these two themes, Kantian disinterest looms larger. Broadly understood as the idea that one has no interest at all in whether the object of beauty even exists (whereupon “[a]ll one wants to know is whether the mere representation of the object is to [one’s] liking, no matter how indifferent [one] may be to the real existence of the object”), the parallel between Kantian theory and Eiseley’s phenomenological musings is clouded (Kant 1987, §2). On one level (the one that Kant explicitly has in mind), Eiseley, in his essay, indicates deep concern that the hawk exist, both for its own sake and, as we will see, for the lessons of perspective it teaches him.

However, on another level there is a more nuanced sense in which Eiseley, in his essay, does express existential disinterest in the hawk: Eiseley cares very little about whether the hawk exists as part of accessible human reality. Call this “mitigated” existential disinterest. Although this notion lacks the theoretical purity of Kantian existential disinterest simpliciter, it allows us to express a critical distinction between Eiseley’s attitudes and the attitudes of those who would presumably prove tone deaf to his phenomenological appeals. In doing this, it marks an important difference between those who are likely to experience the pull of the kind of account I seek to provide and those who are likely to be left cold by it. Invoking this notion, we can gauge people’s responses to the following question: even with considerations of usefulness

aside, should we care about hawks or kiwis or bumblebee bats or hooded seals or Sumatran rabbits or hooded astor plants which we never have occasion to encounter in lived experience? This question provides us with a crucial gauge of environmental sentiment. For, it is the question of whether the *mere knowledge* that other species exist is a source of aesthetic delight, irrespective of whether they exist visibly to us or “beyond the eyes of men” (Eiseley 1957a, 192). Many people couldn’t care less whether leatherback turtles, blobfish, basking sharks, and Rafflesia flowers go extinct since these are beings with which they never interact. Eiseley’s sentiments clearly differ. The account he gives is one on which the aesthetic force of our apprehension of the natural world is not a function of whether the denizens of said world cohabit the day-to-day realm of that one particular species of primate which happens to worship at the alter of daily oral hygiene. Aldo Leopold expresses this same idea in similar terms. He dubs people who have no care for those parts of the natural world they do not themselves encounter “trophy-recreationists.” For them, regions of the world they “cannot personally see [have] no value to [them],” “unused hinterland is [of] no service to society,” and blank spots on maps are “useless wastes” (Leopold 2013, 2169). Leopold finds this attitude unfathomable and rhetorically asks: “Is my share in Alaska worthless to me because I shall never go there? Do I need a road to show me the arctic prairies, the goose pastures of the Yukon, the Kodiak bear, the sheep meadows behind McKinley?” (Leopold, 2013, 2169).

The idea that the majesty of the natural world is partly a result of its endurance beyond the range of normal human *perceptual activity* is a recurrent theme in Eiseley’s writings. In “The Judgement of the Birds,” for instance, he expresses special delight in knowing that pigeons fly between Manhattan towers before people have even awoken, and in knowing that orb spiders spin webs within the hoods of street lamps above our notice as we walk beneath them, lost in the contemplation of our day-to-day affairs. It is the very fact that the human and natural realms intersect occur so rarely which makes the shift in perspective resulting from such “interpenetrations of worlds” such a transforming experience (Eiseley 1957b, 169).

A related recurrent Eiseleyan theme is that the majesty of this world is also often a function of its endurance beyond the range of normal *conceptual activity*. Remember Eiseley’s expression of “embarrassment” upon capturing the hawk. It is because the bird stares through him with indifference with no expectation of mercy that Eiseley feels forced to avert his eyes. The hawk acts out of simple instinct, whereas Eiseley acts out of a self-interested imperative to fulfill a professional contract. Thus it is that he perceives his own “large carcass” descending the ladder: the lack of grace he ascribes to himself is not merely physical. This, I submit, is a common enough human reaction to the sensed dignity of majestic animals. They can make us feel embarrassed by the very fact that our self-serving deliberative rationality renders us so capable of dissimulation even to ourselves, empowering our capacity to justify almost anything. At the other extreme, such encounters can also leave us feeling inadequate in the virtues we do

possess. Hawks defend their mates and attain seemingly stoic manners in the face of capture as a matter of mere hawk nature, whereas we often do such things only after concerted effort and self-training, congratulating ourselves and “expecting mercy” for our efforts every step of the way. Our appreciation for majestic animals partly consists in the fact that these creatures occupy a region not merely outside our observational realm, but outside our conceptual realm of reason-giving as well. I recognize that this phenomenological aspect diverges sharply from the spirit of Kant’s account of moral virtue as conscious, self-disciplined deference to duty alone. However, I take this to provide us all the more reason to view the value at issue in these cases as directly aesthetic, rather than moral.

This idea, that the recognition of the majesty of the world requires recognition of nature’s existence beyond the range of normal human perceptual and conceptual activity, is a recurrent theme in religious wisdom literature. Consider God’s extended monologue in the *Book of Job* (as opposed to the tale’s familiar and facile framing device – which scholars generally take to have been added long after the story’s original composition – in which God’s good servant loses all his stuff but then gets it back in the end for having been such a good sport (McKibben 2005)). The most surprising thing about this monologue is that it makes little mention of human beings, but focuses instead upon the panorama of the natural order beyond the range of human acquaintance and comprehension. For the most part, people are noted only for their absence from places in the world over which God displays care, as when we are asked “[w]ho hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; to cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is” (King James Version, *Job* 38:25), or when we are asked “[w]ilt thou hunt the prey for the lion, or fill the appetite of the young lions, when they couch in their dens and abide in the covert to lie in wait,” or when we are asked, “[w]ho provideth for the raven his food when his young ones cry unto God, [and] wander for lack of meat” (King James Version, *Job* 38:39). To appreciate the natural realm, we must recognize the existence of gardens beyond our ken and appreciate the feeding of both carrion eaters and big cats who, at the time, still had odd occasion to occupy the penthouse of the food chain by dining on human flesh.

When Kant’s “disinterest” condition is more *narrowly* construed as the idea that an object is beautiful if we perceive its delightfulness without regard to any interest, that is, as the proviso that one’s delight in the object remains entirely independent of one’s instrumental ends (“that [one] can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his subjective self might alone be party”), the parallel between Kant and Eiseley is not clouded at all (Kant 1988, §6). Such pragmatic disinterest plays a paramount role in helping us understand what goes on in Eiseley’s passage. It is the mode of becoming through which we may best understand Eiseley’s transition from a trained “assassin” performing a commercial exchange to one who acts for no other reason than the fact that its performance strikes him as fitting the situation, with its

passing breeze and gently shuddering aspen. On Eiseley's description, he comes to perceive himself as an element of an evaluative context within which his personal instrumental concerns lose their normative relevance.

Leaving disinterest behind, what can we say about perceived necessity/universality? One of the interpretive assumptions I implicitly make above is that Eiseley's felt sense of objective demand is best understood in terms of the notion of "fitness" (or, better, "fittingness"). He describes the gentle breeze and shuddering aspen as though they are part of a larger matrix that calls upon him to recognize the hawk as of value for more than the position it potentially serves within a context of professional and commercial exchange. This notion of "fittingness" has a long history in metaethics, appearing first in the work of Samuel Clark, only to be lampooned by Bentham and pretty much buried until the 20th century. In recent decades, Maurice Mandelbaum is one of the few analytic philosophers who have discussed it at length. Since it is precisely the phenomenological aspects of peoples' felt perceptions of "fittingness" that are of present concern to us, let us turn to Mendelbaum's account. (Mendelbaum, 1969)

For Mandelbaum, when we ascribe "fittingness" to our natural sympathies toward an action we refer to a phenomenally objective relational characteristic which we sense as an external demand on our attitudes or actions resulting from the environment in which we find ourselves (Mandelbaum 1969, 61). Here, the notion of "environment" covers all the pertinent initial conditions which might call forth action. On this telling, "all cases in which an agent experiences a moral demand presuppose an apprehended relation of fittingness" (67). Moral demands are perceived in terms of successes or failures to satisfy fittingness relations. Moreover, and interestingly for our purposes, so are aesthetic demands. Thus, on Mendelbaum's account, just as a failure to come through on a promise may fail to fit the situation in which it occurs morally, a failure to complete a segment of a non-representational figure may fail to fit a geometric figure constructed up to that point.

Mendelbaum's locution of "fittingness" helps explain why Eiseley's felt sense of universality/necessity should be, à la Kant, merely "subjective." For Kant, remember, our attributions of necessity/universality to judgments of aesthetic beauty feel right despite their failure to enjoy the authority conferred by specifiable justifying rules. It is for this reason that he calls such judgments merely "regulative," or "exemplary." Our experience of these judgments is such that they seem to demand assent by all in virtue of "exemplifying a universal rule incapable of formulation" (Kant 1988, §18). On Mendelbaum's account, this list of contextual features is unmanageably large. It includes "not merely the present conditions that we find ourselves confronting, but those past and future events which we recognize as being relevant to the choices which we are to make" (Mendelbaum 1969, 61). I suggest that it is this very complexity and open-endedness of sets of contextual features within which our attitudes

and actions occur which explains our inability to articulate rules with which to matter-endingly justify the specific attitudes and actions we find appropriate to our dealings with nature. It is because of our recurrent concern that there may be computational leftovers which we have not considered that we are left with an aftertaste of uncertainty when we form aesthetic reactions to our surroundings. Much as we may worry that our Kantian maxims of action may be too narrowly described (e.g., anyone (and only those) lacking my DNA should refrain from treating others with cruel disdain), we may also worry that we have not grasped the larger picture when forming our aesthetic reactions to our natural surroundings.<sup>6</sup> Mosquitos may strike us as mere pests until we note the role they play in feeding birds, spiders, dragonflies, and frogs. A zebra's painful death at a lion's paws and teeth might strike us as ugly until we recognize its role within an African veldt ecosystem forged by subtle evolutionary interactions across immense spans of time. Natural events often only become beautiful to us as a function of our increasing recognition of the systematic roles they play within the wholes of which they are parts.

Remember that we are concerned with two issues in this paper. The first regards the accuracy of Kant's account of our experience of natural beauty. The second regards the connection between said experience and our acquisition of a competent moral stance. In our use of Eiseley's essay so far, our dealings have only been with the first, as I have argued that many (but not all) of Kant's contentions concerning the experience of natural beauty are plausible, and that what largely makes them plausible is the role of perceived "fittingness" as a primitive feature of said experience. Let's now turn more explicitly to the second issue. What of the idea that interest in natural beauty serves to indicate "a good soul" and "mental attunement favorable to moral feeling," providing us with practice using those very faculties required for moral judgment? (Kant 1988, §42) In dealing with this question, we can address some emerging objections. To these ends, let's return to Eiseley's story.

Remember where we left our two heroes. Eiseley had just released the captured hawk on an impulse he couldn't articulate. A bit previously in the essay, Eiseley had wondered where the female hawk had gone, the one who had escaped his capture the night before. "Probably in the next county by now," he cynically thought. But now, following the male hawk's ascent, Eiseley comes to realize something, when "from far up somewhere a cry came ringing down" (Eiseley 1957a, 191-192).

I was young then and had seen little of the world, but when I heard that cry my

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<sup>6</sup> I don't mean to suggest here that we need feel uncertainty at the times our aesthetic reactions emerge. At these moments we may feel doubtless certainty that these reactions are appropriate. Typically, I suspect, it is only after the formation of our aesthetic attitudes that worries about "computational leftovers" arise to haunt us.

heart turned over. It was not the cry of the hawk I had captured; for, by shifting my position against the sun, I was now seeing further up. Straight out of the sun's eye, where she must have been soaring restlessly above us for untold hours, hurtled his mate. And from far up, ringing from peak to peak of the summits over us, came a cry of such unutterable and ecstatic joy that it sounds down across the years and tingles among the cups on my quiet breakfast table.

I saw them both now. He was rising fast to meet her. They met in a great soaring gyre that turned to a whirling circle and a dance of wings. Once more, just once, their two voices, joined in a harsh wild medley of question and response, struck and echoed against the pinnacles of the valley. Then they were gone forever somewhere into those upper regions beyond the eyes of men. (Eiseley 1957a, 191-192)

Once again, something very important is going on here for Eiseley. Let's try to say what that is without lapsing into tempting Hallmark card sentimentality.

What this episode brings about in Eiseley is a shift of perspective which further pulls the rug out from under the complacency and myopia that had girded his prior assessments of value. What it reminds him of is that there are larger narratives to be constructed (which we need not articulate in either teleological or intentional terms) to which he had conveniently blinded himself in his efforts to conceal his comforting prejudices in pursuit of his professional ambitions.<sup>7</sup> This is his manifestation of attitudinal disinterest. His perception of the judgment's universality/necessity is revealed by the very efforts he makes to describe his experience in a manner that promises to convey its character to the rest of us. Employing the language of literature against a background of science, Eiseley presents the contextual panorama against which his experience of natural beauty displays "fittingness." But in conveying his sense of wonder upon recognizing a narrative within which his experience takes on a whole new meaning, Eiseley effectively illustrates the way broader alternative narratives may always exist to be recognized. It is for this reason that we can regard his aesthetic judgment as provisional, a matter of mere "subjective universality" dictated by a merely "regulative" principle of aesthetic judgment.

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<sup>7</sup> I have herein little to say about Kant's own views concerning the role of teleology in our judgments of natural beauty. Suffice it to say that I agree with Kant's apparent contention that organisms and nature itself (viewed with an eye toward its regulative principles of systematicity) need not actually be teleological in character. However, I disagree with his seeming contention that these items are, in some sense, only comprehensible in teleological terms. Granted that such items may recommend or suggest teleological narratives to the imagination, but this is a different matter. In any case, these are large issues with which I cannot deal in this paper (Kant 1988, §10).

It is because such stances of attitudinal disinterest and “subjective” universality/necessity are built into our perceptions of actions’ aesthetic fittingness that our experience of the former provides us with practice for the formation of moral judgment. This is because morally resonant acts toward persons follow from perceived fittingness relations just as aesthetically resonant acts toward nature follow from perceived fittingness relations.<sup>8</sup>

It is useful to invoke narrative accounts (e.g., Macintyre’s) of our perceptions of value at this point. On such accounts, the evaluative dimensionality of our experience derives from said experience’s ability to articulate unitary autobiographical stories for ourselves which “link birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (Macintyre 1984, 204). What Eiseley, bird in hand, finds confronting him is an opportunity to eschew a commercial exchange for an occasion of wonder, by reference to which he mindfully guides his actions following a narrative that affirms the rankings of evaluative salience that led him to become a naturalist in the first place.

Moreover, the moral virtue he might be said to act on – humbled non-parochialism – is less subject than many candidate virtues to charges of relativism and cultural contingency. It is an acquired human capacity which is “internal” to an extremely broad practice common to all, that of understanding and negotiating the natural world. Nussbaum writes that one of the capacities required for general human flourishing is the capacity “to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature” (Nussbaum 1999, 42). This is plausible. Because every human being is part of the natural world, it is arguable that a phenomenological failure to recognize our place in this larger setting is no less a defect of the soul than myopia is a defect of the eye.

Judgments of value generally involve the construction and endorsement of narratives. Because this is common to judgments of both aesthetic and moral value, practice with the former easily leads to a greater facility with the latter. For instance, we may easily imagine how our experiences of natural beauty might render us kinder toward other people. Consider a case study from the life of another brilliant nature writer. Thoreau, we must remember, did not stay at Walden past his experience of spring’s transforming power. He moved back to Concord and applied the lessons he had learned in solitude to his life as a social being. Foremost amongst these lessons was the call to absolution.

In a pleasant spring morning, all men’s sins are forgiven. Such a day is a truce to vice. While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return. Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. (Thoreau 1965, 280)

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<sup>8</sup> Where these fittingness relations themselves are possibly best articulated, contra Kant, in the tentative terms provided by something much like Ross’ *prima facie* duty account.



Why does this make sense? Why would clemency arise in response to the emergence of buds from stems and the arrival of geese from the South? The reason, I suggest, is that to change one's heart by attuning to broader narratives about the context in which one lives is often tantamount to acquiring a less personal and more disinterested perspective. As Emerson writes, it is to lose "all mean egotism" as one "stands on bare ground" with one's "head bathed in the blithe air, uplifted into infinite space" (Emerson 2009, 3). To become aware of such broader narratives is to recognize more general evaluative contexts from which our assessments of "fittingness" can be made, with the recognition that such awareness could only fuel our understanding of those to whom our indignation is directed. To the extent, then, that our retributive harshness toward others requires a confined evaluative space from which to be launched, the experience of natural beauty, as described by Eiseley and Thoreau, is more than likely to inspire an attitude of forgiveness and consequent kindness toward others. It excavates our better selves by leading us from anger to empathy.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued two things: First, given that three more ubiquitous strategies for defending the ecological acceptability of Kantian moral theory collectively prove inadequate to justify the full range of our environmental concerns (a claim for which I argue by lengthy footnote), an alternative strategy is made available by a neo-Kantian aesthetic account, a strategy which promises to pick up some of the implicational slack. Second, using Eiseley's phenomenological observations, we can find a fair amount of introspective empirical support for this strategy once we focus on the disinterestedness and "regulative" universality/necessity built into our perceptions of "fittingness."

Let's now turn to three possible problems. The first of these is that one might wonder why I have chosen to use the notion of the beautiful rather than that of the sublime for the purposes of the above analysis, given Kant's insistence that judgments of sublimity broaden our self-awareness by prompting us to "measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature" (Kant 1988, §28). My reason is the following: on each of the two notions of sublimity that Kant considers (mathematical and dynamic), an agent's experience of the sublime ultimately consists in the felt superiority of his own reason (understood as a supersensible faculty) over nature (Kant 1988 §28). However, this felt superiority seems to be at variance with many of our

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, to become aware of such broader narratives is to acknowledge that our present evaluative assessments are provisional, since the contextual factors that we have not recognized may suggest changes in perspective as we learn about more and more of them. I would suggest that this does much to explain the merely "subjective" or "regulative" character of our evaluative assessments generally, including (contra Kant) moral ones.

sentiments concerning nature, including those described in Eiseley's essay, where a recognizable sentiment of awed humility seems to play a more central role.

A second possible problem for the above account is potentially more serious, as it threatens my most fundamental procedural tactics. Why, one might ask, should we view our moral sympathies as routed through our aesthetic sensibilities in the case described? After all, Eiseley doesn't explicitly characterize them as such. Why shouldn't we simply take the sense of fittingness which Eiseley experiences as a recognition of moral obligation, rather than as a rattling of an aesthetic sensibility, the exercise of which then renders him a more competent moral agent? To view the episode in these terms is to circumvent entirely the strategy of legitimizing aesthetic sensibility on the grounds that it serves as a prelude to moral sensibility.

The answer to this question is that I have tried to articulate an account on which we can acknowledge the indirect value of natural aesthetic experience, in its capacity as a proving ground for the exercise of moral judgment, *even if* we find it hard to attribute proximate moral rights to the likes of hawks, honeybees, and pine trees. That is, I have tried to provide an account of the instrumental or indirect moral value of nature (as the object of natural aesthetic judgment) which proves effective for those who are dubious about the intrinsic or direct moral value of nature. I am personally sympathetic to the idea that Kant's Kingdom of Ends is the sole repository of moral rights (other, perhaps, than the right not to feel pain). This accords with my convictions and practices (e.g., I regard "happy meat" as preferable to factory-farmed beef and pork, and I take it to be obvious that, when faced with the choice between starving people and endangered lemurs, the lemurs should go in the stew pot). Others need not agree with me. They need not perceive special moral status in a subject's ability to capture courses of action under concepts, articulate self-legislating laws using these concepts, and then autonomously choose to obey (or defy) these laws. I concede that the above account may not be for them. It is a backup theory for those of us who are wary about viewing moral value in nature as intrinsic. This is the role which I see for the above account, and this concession delimits neither the ambition nor the scope I intend for it.

A third potential objection is the following: Mightn't we worry that the indirect justification for the kindly treatment of non-human nature which I advocate is dangerously *contingent*? Mightn't we want our felt sense of moral obligation to the natural world to depend on something less reliant upon our incidental emotional natures than our aesthetic reactions? Mightn't we worry that it is a mere causal accident that our aesthetic reactions are tied to our moral sensibilities in the way I have described? Fortunately, I think that there is a response to these concerns. The connection between aesthetic and moral judgment for which I have argued is not a *causal* one, but rather one of similarity or *partial identity*: the capacities for detachment and universalization are *constitutive*, not only of aesthetic judgment, but of moral judgment

also. What this means is that to engage in aesthetic judgment is just to rehearse those faculties involved in moral judgment. Consequently, no contingent causal connection between the two need be supposed.

In conclusion, let me say something about larger purposes. Even though my explicit purpose in this paper is to argue for a fourth strategy for employing Kantian insights to promote environmentally responsible action, I have a broader agenda also. I seek to promote Eiseley's essays to ecophenomenological researchers as a rich but surprisingly underused resource. Eiseley offers much in this connection. He offers insights with which we may tackle not only environmental concerns, but "culture war" issues besides. Think, for instance, of the criticisms of science which perennially echo through fundamentalist churches and conservative school boards in the United States. Naturalism robs the world of value, we are told. It promotes moral nihilism and turns us all into machines. Like Einstein, who insisted that life without wonder is tantamount to death, Eiseley seeks to remind us that it is in our experiences of non-human nature that our detached evaluative faculties, and consequent capacity for normative judgment, receive some of their best practice and some of their most delicate fine-tuning.

To come full circle, these experiences also remind us of how we might agree with the letter and yet disagree with the spirit of the newspaper items that frame Eiseley's essay and prompt his recollections in the first place. That is, they tell us how it could be that animals are machines without being "mere" machines. When Eiseley contrasts birds with potential robotic birds and writes "but the machine does not bleed, ache, hang for hours in the empty sky in a torment of hope to learn the fate of another machine, nor does it cry out with joy nor dance in the air with the fierce passion of a bird," he is not anthropomorphizing (Eiseley 1957a, 192). Nor is he lapsing into the obscurantism of Thoreau, who insists that any science which "enriches the understanding ... robs the imagination" (Thoreau 1962, 155-56). Eiseley is simply noting the obvious: a machine, by nature, is built to serve our personal and practical interests; and because of this, it can seldom lead us to question these interests. A machine may fly. Indeed, many of them do. But we can seldom follow their flight into a luminous sky and have the narrative perspective that gives wonder to our lives broadened and enriched in consequence.

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