

Aesthetic Insight: The Aesthetic Value of Damaged Environments*

María José Alcaraz León[†]
University of Murcia

ABSTRACT. In this paper I will start by assuming that positive aesthetic experiences of damaged nature are possible and I will try to motivate the idea that the aesthetic pleasure derived from that contemplation might reveal something of the environment's overall character. I hope to show that, sometimes, positive aesthetic experiences help to promote emotional attitudes that can have an insightful role in the configuration of other non-aesthetic attitudes. In order to do so, I will critically appeal to some of the thoughts Kant articulated about the notion of aesthetic experience and its relationship to cognition and morality. I think the sort of experience I am after in this paper cannot be easily accommodated within a Kantian framework and that the possibility of positive aesthetic experience of damaged nature will show that the relationships between the aesthetic and the cognitive or the moral are more complex and enriching than they have been acknowledged.

1. The Possibility of Positive Aesthetic Experiences of Damaged Nature

In this paper I will be interested in the aesthetic character that damaged or ecologically distorted environments – such as contaminated rivers or lakes, carved mountains, or spoiled valleys – might possess when their appearance is due, directly or indirectly, to human activities. In this sense I

* This paper has been possible thanks to the financial support from the research projects FFI2011-23362 “El valor estético y valores en arte: el lugar de la expresión” (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación) and 08694/PHCS/08 supported by Fundación Séneca-Agencia de Ciencia y Tecnología de la Región de Murcia.

[†] Email: mariajo@um.es

will not focus upon cases of naturally burned woods or natural alterations of an eco-system. The reason for concentrating upon cases of damaged natural environments in which the cause of the damaged is human action is that there might be in these cases moral considerations about the propriety of experiencing aesthetic pleasure that, apparently, render that sort of pleasure problematic. In fact, it seems more or less a matter of agreement – or commonsense – that damaged nature cannot afford positive aesthetic experiences at all. However, I will not argue for the possibility of taking warranted aesthetic pleasure out of the contemplation of damaged natural landscapes here¹. Rather, I will start from the possibility that this can be so in some cases. Now, if some damaged environments might afford aesthetic pleasure, I would like to explore what sort of significance, if any, these experiences have in a broader sense. The interest that motivates this search is grounded in a twofold concern: in the first place, a concern about some of the connections between the experience of beauty and other moral or cognitive experiences Kant introduced in the *Critique of Judgment*². In the second place, a concern with how the aesthetic pleasure that some damaged landscapes or environments can affect or determine our overall attitude towards those landscapes and environments.

2. Aesthetics, Morality and Cognition

In this section I aim at exploring whether the fact that some deteriorated or damaged landscapes can be beautiful can have some further significance beyond the merely aesthetic. This can be understood in a general or in a particular sense. In its general sense, I would like to explore to what extent some of the Kantian claims about the experience of beauty as a symbol of morality fare against the possibility that I have been contemplating. In its particular sense, I am interested in the possible relationships between the aesthetic value that one might find in the landscapes and other attitudes that we might develop towards them. Briefly, I would like to consider the

¹ For a defence of this claim see Stecker, R. 'Epistemic Norms, Moral Norms and Nature Appreciation' *Environmental Ethics* (forthcoming) and Alcaraz León, M. J., 'Morally wrong beauty as a source of value', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 40-41, 2010-2011, pp. 37-52.

² Kant, I., (1790), *Critique of Judgment*. Translated with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

possibility that the aesthetic worth found in some paradigmatic damaged landscapes contributes to the development and the consolidation of some cognitive or moral attitudes. Both of these considerations spread from a general concern with the possible relationships that can be reasonably established between the aesthetic and other realms and from an attempt to account for how our aesthetic attitudes might transform other significant non-aesthetic attitudes.

2.1. *Beauty, Knowability, and Morality: Kant's Idea of Beauty as a Symbol of Morality*

Although Kant's project in the *Critique of Judgment* can be rightly described as one in which the autonomy of the judgement of taste is central, there are several remarks in his work that tie the nature of the aesthetic experience to the cognitive and moral spheres. Some of these connections become evident in what has become a sort of Kantian motto that the experience of beauty is the symbol of morality, or in the Kantian idea that the aesthetic experience in some way indicates the *a priori* principle of the finality of nature necessary for the possibility of knowledge of nature. The significance of the aesthetic judgement – as a paradigmatic kind of exercise of the Faculty of Judging in general – has also been thought of in relation to the importance that the mere exercise of aesthetic judging might have in constituting a self-image as an autonomous being capable of taking her judgment at face value³. So it can be barely denied that aesthetic experience and judgment play an important role not only in providing a particular way of experiencing nature, but also in revealing some aspects or conditions that go beyond the aesthetic, and that, consequently, reveal some structural links between the different realms: cognitive, practical and aesthetic.

I am not so much interested in exploring the plausibility of these connections in general as in assessing whether the examples of beautiful damaged nature that I have been exploring might bring these thoughts under a new light or introduce some tensions that could not have been contemplated by Kant.

³ John, E., 'Beauty, Interest, and Autonomy' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70 (2), Spring 2012, pp. 193-202.

I will mainly focus upon Kant's thought about the moral significance of aesthetic experience and I will try to assess the implications that may arise in relation to this Kantian idea in cases like a beautiful polluted river such as *Songhua* River in North East China. Following P. Guyer's analysis⁴, there are at least three possible ways in which aesthetic experience relates to morality: first, aesthetic experiences are thought to possibly contribute to the cultivation of moral feelings; second, aesthetic objects can be contemplated as sensible representations of moral ideas; and, third, aesthetic experience can be a symbol of morality in the sense of sustaining, in the free exercise of our faculties, a disposition to love something for its own sake⁵.

The first and the third remarks bear some relation within Kant's thought. If experiencing something as beautiful prepares us to love it for its own sake and not for any interest we might have in the object, there seems to be in aesthetic appreciation a similar attitude to the one required in moral judgement, and, hence, aesthetic experience can be said to promote the sentiments that can contribute to the realization of moral duty. Nevertheless, Kant does not believe that these sentiments are necessary for the moral action; for the only relevant attitude in this respect is that of the subject's assuming her duty on the basis of the recognition of the Practical Imperative. Whether this recognition is accompanied or not by the sentiments or attitudes that would fuel its realization can be of pragmatic interest, but is not a logical necessity. So in this sense, although aesthetic experiences might have a role in the development of the right attitudes and sentiments for moral duty and action, they fall short of constituting a necessary component for them.

However, among the duties that Kant assumes moral subjects have in relation to their own moral dimension, there is the duty to seek and promote the right sentiments towards moral ends⁶. This involves a sort of

⁴ Guyer, P., *Kant and the Experience of Freedom. Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁵ "[T]he disposition of sensibility...to love something without regard to use (...)" "much advances morality, or at least prepares [us] for it." (*Virtue*, §17, 6:433) in Guyer, P., (1993), p. 33.

⁶ "It is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral

duty to improve one's own sensibility; a process that Kant thought to be specially linked to the structure of aesthetic appreciation. Thus, the very freedom that underlies the autonomy of the judgement of taste and that makes it a symbol of morality can be connected back to the improvement of our moral, sentimental profile.

Now, I think we can grasp some tension between the idea that our sentiment of beauty can prepare us to love something – or to bear it under our best consideration – and the cases in which the experience of beauty can have as its object the sort of damaged landscape I have introduced in this paper. I think that even if it is not logically impossible that our aesthetic attitude promotes that sentiment in these cases, our moral concerns towards the processes that have led to that particular appearance might introduce some tensions about the way in which aesthetic experience provides us with grounds to love something for its own sake. In short, if here, as in other less problematic cases, the experience of beauty amounts to the disposition to love the object of our experience for its own sake, there seems to be a tension in the experience of taking the attitude of loving something which we know has been the result of some damage. One could say here that there is no tension at all within that sort of experience, and that the regrettable ecological state of a landscape does not at all diminish its capacity to inspire the sort of experience Kant is after. Although I agree that what I have said so far does not, strictly speaking, motivate a worry about the coherence of Kant's thought under the assumption that damaged landscapes might be beautiful, I would like to introduce a couple of comments that might point in that direction. The first one relates to another Kantian idea, which partly spreads from the considerations we have made so far. This idea is that we have a duty to take care of nature as part of a duty to ourselves as members of humankind. This duty towards nature is not based upon its possible utility for our ends but upon our own duty to seek and promote our moral character and dispositions. As we have just seen, there is a connection in Kant's thought between the exercise of the aesthetic judgement and the sentiment of loving something for its own sake that, in turns, contributes to the role of aesthetic experience

principles and the Feeling appropriate to them." (Virtue, §35, 6:457) quoted in Guyer, P., (1993), p. 388.

in the conformation of the sentiments that can improve our disposition to act morally. This idea plays a crucial role in the reasons why disregarding nature and destroying it can be considered as contrary to our duty to improve and promote our sensibility through experiences that paradigmatically promote proper sentiments⁷. In destroying nature we contribute to the weakening of our disposition to love something for its own sake and to the underdevelopment of the sensibility necessary to seek to develop our moral sensibility so that it is in tune with our moral principles. Under this new connection between the experience of beauty and the duty not to destroy it, it might become more evident that, at least within Kant's thought, we should treat my examples in a peculiar way. Either they cannot be experienced as beautiful or, if they can, the connections that Kant has traced so far between aesthetic experience and the moral one seems to be such that the destruction of nature has a place, oddly enough, within the structure that leads to the improvement of our sensibility.

I would like to explore a second related thought that might be relevant for explaining the difficulties I believe examples of damaged nature might pose for a Kantian aesthetic.

This second thought explores two Kantian ideas together in order to show in which sense the experience of beauty can be considered as expressing a sense of accordance between our cognitive and moral reason and nature. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section there is in Kant an aim to connect the experience of beauty with the cognitive and the moral, albeit preserving the autonomy of the aesthetic judgement. On the one hand, and in relation to cognition, Kant thinks that precisely because the experience of beauty is one in which the pleasure arises independently of any concept and exclusively out of the contemplation of the mere form of the object, the experience of beauty in nature provides a kind of experience of the knowability of nature in general⁸. The knowability of nature

⁷ "A propensity to wanton destruction of what is *beautiful* in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to man's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that Feeling in man which, though not of itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something (...) even apart of any intention or use" (Virtue §17, 6:443) quoted in Guyer, P., (1993), 307.

⁸ "Judgement presupposes a system of nature even in terms of empirical laws, and

or its amenability for our cognitive faculties is made manifest in the experience of beauty because the felt pleasure that constitutes it indicates that the mere form of the object fits our cognitive capacities in spite of the fact that no cognitive judgment is being produced in this process. In this sense, the experience of natural beauty presents nature as generally fitting in with our cognitive faculties and hence as something which is not alien to our cognitive aims.

On the other hand, we have already seen that there is in Kant's thought a conception of the moral significance of the aesthetic experience that feeds a plausible role of the aesthetic within the moral. Moreover, Kant's thinking that the experience of nature as beautiful might also be a symbol of the idea that nature is not contrary to the realization of our moral ends or, to put it in other words, that the realization of our freedom can be reconciled with nature. Here, as well as in the previous idea, the idea is that natural beauty is a kind of experience that provides some hint or sign that nature is not hostile to our moral ends.

Thus, both when one considers the experience of beauty in relation to the possibility of cognition in general and in relation to the possibility of the realization of our moral ends in nature, aesthetic experience seems to symbolize, and hence to make possible, the sought connections between freedom and nature, rationality and contingency. These ideas do not only reveal a deep interest in Kant to connect the different realms of the experience demarcated in the previous *Critiques*, but they also contribute to the sort of picture within which, I think, the beauty of damaged landscapes can be problematic. Although strictly speaking one cannot experience the knowability of nature, or the amenability of nature to our moral ends, the fact that aesthetic experience is related to these ideas motivates a further comprehension of the experience of beauty as one in which one finds oneself in a state that could be metaphorically described as being "at home" in nature⁹ – both morally and cognitively speaking, in the sense that nature

it does so *a priori* and hence by means of a transcendental principle." (FI 20:212n; 400) quoted in Henry E., A., (2001), *Kant's Theory of Taste. A Reading of the Critique of the Aesthetic Judgment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, , p. 33.

⁹ Harris, K., 'What Need is There for and Environmental Aesthetics?' *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 22, no. 40-41, pp. 7-22. I owe to Kalle Poulakka the relevance of this idea for this topic.

presents itself as amenable to our cognition and our practical interests.

Now, if the interweaving of these two ideas connects the experience of natural beauty with the feeling of being at home in it, the examples I have been trying to analyse seem to pose a sort of paradox. For they would promote the feeling of being at home – insofar as they sometimes typically afford positive aesthetic experiences – while reclaiming awareness of the destroyed character of the landscape or environment so experienced. Again, one could say this does not need to be regarded an impossibility within Kant's framework. However, it seems to me that the deepness and significance that Kant aims at attributing to the aesthetic experience in its capacity to indicate some ultimate harmony between our different attitudes and forms of experience loses part of its appeal when we consider these cases. For what they make evident is that the experience of natural beauty might well take place with objects, landscapes, or environments whose transformation cannot be described in positive ways.

I think that the difficulty that the examples of beautiful damaged nature might pose to a Kantian perspective reveal to some extent that the connections traced within his view might not be stated innocuously and, in particular, that the autonomy of the judgement of taste might impose some restrictions to their soundness.

In the final part of this paper I aim at exploring another possible way of connecting the aesthetic experience of nature to other non-aesthetic cognitive and moral concerns, which, I hope, avoids the impasse that I think a Kantian framework might lead to.

2.2. Aesthetic Insight

In the first section I have assumed the possibility of positive aesthetic experiences of damaged nature. Accordingly, it is possible to experience aesthetic pleasure in the contemplation of damaged landscapes while perceiving them as what they are: damaged landscapes. Since it seems obvious that these cases bring considerations both from the aesthetic realm and from the moral and cognitive one, I would now like to see whether our positive experience has any further impact upon our cognitive or moral attitudes towards those landscapes. In the previous section I have examined a possible way to address this issue by exploring some of the most appealing thoughts offered by Kant. But if my analysis is correct, Kant's

account of the connections between aesthetics and cognition and aesthetics and morality seems inadequate to properly acknowledge the possibility of beautiful damaged nature.

I will turn now to what I think might be the conditions within which those relationships can be fruitfully grasped. In the first place, I think that regardless of the way in which one finally understands those relations there should be an indispensable acceptance of aesthetic autonomy and of the specific character of aesthetic experiences. Only under such a condition, can it be possible to avoid any account that subordinates the aesthetic value to other moral or cognitive values in some respects. In fact, if one truly aims at exploring the relationships between the aesthetic and the moral and the cognitive, one should respect the autonomy of each.

With this requirement in place, we may now ask what, if any, contribution does our aesthetic experience of these particular landscapes make to our broader attitude towards them. I would like to explore the hypothesis that the aesthetic qualities and the aesthetic experience afforded by natural landscapes sometimes contributes to the sharpening of our more general attitudes towards those landscapes. That is, I would like to suggest that sometimes our aesthetic experiences enrich our perceptual experience of those landscapes and qualify its character, bringing them under a new light and enhancing their overall quality to us; this, in turn, might have some effect on the ways in which we address these landscapes cognitively and morally. But how can aesthetic qualities make such a contribution within the constraints of their autonomy? How can the beauty of a landscape contribute to my overall apprehension of a particular landscape or environment?

It might seem that the question demands something unattainable given the theoretic framework necessary for guaranteeing aesthetic autonomy. If aesthetic qualities are those qualities grasped in an aesthetic experience of the sort Kant defined, they completely lack cognitive or moral content and merely express the way in which a particular object, landscape, or environment might affect us in a disinterested way. This lack of cognitive content might seem an obstacle to conceive of any plausible contribution that aesthetic properties may be thought to make to our cognitive descriptions of the object of appreciation.

On the other hand, the pleasure or feeling experienced within the aes-

thetic experience differs from the pleasure of the morally good in that it is not responsive to the accordance of the form of the object to any concept of good, and hence, one might similarly wonder how this pleasure may be indicative of, or contribute to, the apprehension of the morally good or bad character of the object.

Thus, it does not seem plausible to defend a view in which the aesthetic character of a landscape or environment *directly* contributes to the improvement of our cognitive approach to that landscape or environment, or to the moral considerations that might be correctly held towards them.

However, I would like to explore the possibility of an *indirect* contribution in a way that I hope to clarify in what follows.

I think we can explore the way in which aesthetic qualities demand and promote some emotional attitudes in order to clarify what sort of contribution they can make. Generally, identifying some aesthetic property, both in nature and in art, involves some evaluative attitude, positive or negative. These attitudes might provide a sort of framework within which other qualities might become salient or more precisely perceived. Without directly determining the character of these ultimate qualities, an aesthetic attitude might induce particular states of attention and emotional attitudes that might contribute to the way in which one focuses on other non-aesthetic properties. Maybe, if one thinks of an example, such as Ansel Adams' famous picture *Jeffrey Pine, Sentinel Dome* (1940)¹⁰ one can come to see the kind of contribution I am interested in here. Of course, one might think this is a complex example, for we are not directly experiencing nature through Adams' picture; rather there might be some aesthetic properties that contribute to the aesthetic appeal of this image due to its photographic nature. However, I would like, for the sake of argument, to take this picture as if it were transparent – after all, except for the black and white colours, it is not impossible that one can have a face to face experience of a similar tree. Now, it seems that some of the aesthetic and expressive qualities the tree possesses, i.e., its distortion, its bent position due to the effects of the wind that somehow conveys a sense of struggling to keep its upward position, the twisted branches, etc. af-

¹⁰ I owe this example to Pérez-Carreño, F., 'Two routes to expression in painting', *XIII Colóquio de Outono do CEHUM: "Estética, Cultura Material e Diálogos Intersemióticos"*, (forthcoming).

fect us in a strong aesthetic way and these effects might, in turn, help us to focus in a special manner on the relationship between the form of the tree, its aesthetic character, and the way in which it has come to have that particular appearance.

Thus, an aesthetic quality can have some effect upon our non-aesthetic attitudes, if its consideration somehow transforms or organizes the landscape such that overlooked cognitive properties – or unnoticed moral considerations related to the appearance of the landscape – become salient; and, in so doing, they prepare us to adopt new attitudes towards that landscape. The (positive) aesthetic qualities that are experienced as salient in some cases of damaged nature might shape our overall emotional attitude towards the damaged landscape and reveal aspects that might have been overseen were our contemplation not so inflected by our aesthetic experience. In a sense, Kant's idea that the experience of beauty prepares us to adopt certain attitudes towards the object of appreciation finds some echo in the view I would like to develop. However, in contrast to Kant, I do not think this attitude is morally oriented as such or can be reduced to the idea that experiencing something as beautiful prepares us to love it. Rather, the attitudes and sentiments flourishing within the aesthetic experience acquire moral and cognitive relevance in virtue of the way in which they re-organize and structure the object of our apprehension.

This picture of the relationships between the cognitive and the moral and the aesthetic is construed in such a way that it represents them as operating in a feedback manner. On the one hand, knowledge about the ecological deterioration of the environment as well as moral considerations about the human activities involved in such a deterioration are relevant for the proper grasp of the aesthetic character of the landscape. On the other, the aesthetic properties that conform the aesthetic character of the object are characterized as having an effect in the way we overall perceive that landscape or environment. We could talk here of a form of aesthetic insight in the sense that it is due to the way in which the landscape becomes structured within our aesthetic experience that formerly overlooked properties which might become salient.

I think that although the possibility that I am entertaining might be widely instantiated in ordinary aesthetic experiences, it is not necessary to grant it some plausibility that our aesthetic experiences always play that

role. Not all our aesthetic experiences restructure our perception in the way I am suggesting, but it might be that it does so sometimes; and when this occurs the aesthetic character revealed to us in the experience can be seen as opening a wider perceptual spectrum regarding the object of our apprehension.

I take it that some of our experiences of damaged landscapes or environments are of this kind and that the pleasure and the emotional attitudes that derive from their contemplation allows us to pay more attention and discover aspects that go beyond the aesthetic.

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to motivate the idea that our aesthetic experiences of natural environments might contribute to a broader understanding, both cognitive and moral, of these environments, even when these can be damaged and experienced as beautiful. In my view, an account of the ways in which our aesthetic experience relates to other non-aesthetic attitudes towards the environments should be conceived in a way that allows for the possibility of an aesthetic contribution to other non-aesthetic attitudes without undermining the fundamental autonomy of the former. In order to motivate this idea I have firstly, critically examined the way in which Kant conceived the relationships between the aesthetic, the cognitive and the moral; and secondly, I have tried to offer an explanation of how this contribution might take place by appealing to the attitudes and perceptual attention that aesthetic experiences might provide. In this sense, I have introduced the notion of 'aesthetic insight' as a way to refer to how aesthetic experiences might promote a deeper understanding, both cognitively and morally, of the natural environments we experience. Even though, this role might be described as a modest one, I believe its potential to inform our attitudes and sentiments should not be disregarded.

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