

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art

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Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty"

*Most contemporary [1966] aestheticians only attend to the aesthetics of art, not considering the aesthetics of natural (i.e., non-artifact) objects or scenes (as 18th Century aestheticians did).

--Hepburn offers various reasons for this shift: nature has lost its role as "educator", the sciences have shown that our perspective on nature is just one of many, and the arts have shifted emphasis from imitation or representation to the creation of new forms. Also, we can control the aesthetic properties of an artifact, in fact adding aesthetic properties not to be found in nature, and this might give the impression that artifacts are the ideal objects of aesthetic appreciation.

--Hepburn thinks that this neglect is a bad thing, and he wants to remedy it.

*Hepburn will first discuss varieties of aesthetic experiences of nature, guided by a recognition of the following 2 principles:

1. Nature *involves* us in a way that art does not—more intensely and pervasively.

"...for we are *in* nature and a part *of* nature; we do not stand over against it as over against a painting on a wall." (523)

2. Art-objects are framed (in some general sense—i.e., "set apart"), whereas nature is not framed.

--This may be an aesthetic advantage for nature, as it allows for surprise additions—such as the sound of a train whistle in the distance—to be allowed into the experience (since nature is not "closed" by a frame).

"A tree growing on a steep hill-slope, bent far over by the winds, may strike us as tenacious, grim, strained. But from a greater distance, when the view includes numerous similar trees on the hillside, the striking thing may be a delightful, stippled, patterned slope, with quite different emotional quality—quixotic or cheery. So with any aesthetic quality in nature; it is always provisional, correctible by reference to a different, perhaps wider context, or to a narrower one realized in greater detail." (524)

Q: Can't a similar conclusion be reached about art-objects, though?

*Hepburn discusses themes that have emerged in past treatments of natural beauty.

--There is the distinction between focusing on the beauty of particular natural objects, at one end of a spectrum, and focusing on the unity of all of nature at the other end. This sense of unity can emerge as a result of expanding the context of aesthetic appreciation, "humanizing" nature, "naturizing" ourselves, or having a sense of "at-one-ness" with nature. (526-527)

Summary thus far:

"(i) Although some important features of art-experience are unattainable in nature, that by no means entitles the aesthete to confine his studies to art; for even these points of apparent privation can yield types of aesthetic experience that are well worth analysis.

(ii) Accounts of natural beauty that take 'unity' as their central concept are often metaphysically extravagant, and are chronically unperceptive of ambiguities in their claims. Nevertheless, a cautious aesthete would be unwise to let this extravagance deflect him from patiently teasing out the numerous and important strands of experience that originally prompted these accounts." (528)

*Criticisms of the expression theory typically diminish the importance of artistic intentions, and to that extent bring art-objects and natural objects closer together.

--But they are not so close, Hepburn claims. Even if we had two exactly resembling objects, one artifactual and the other natural, we would have a different aesthetic reaction to them if we had knowledge that one is an artifact and the other is natural. (528)

*Hepburn gives special attention to the word 'realize':

"Here 'realize' involves making, or becoming, vivid to perception, or to the imagination." (529)

--It is also a success term, though, in that you cannot realize something that is not the case.

--We attempt to realize, when taking an aesthetic stance towards nature.

*Hepburn, throughout, has been objecting to the Formalist.