

The Theragāthā Model of the Aesthetic Appreciation of Natural Environments

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For the past several decades, analytic aestheticians have held a fascinating conversation over the correct way to understand the appreciation of natural environments. (Many of the important articles in this conversation have recently been reprinted in a volume edited by Carlson and Berleant [2004]). As with many attempts at conceptual analysis, the models proposed are to various degrees descriptive and normative; that is, they are both describing how we typically appreciate and how we should appreciate natural environments. Participants in this conversation disagree on two major issues. The first is whether the aesthetic experience of nature should be a disinterested contemplation of something one has no moral or personal stake in or an engaged interaction with something that pulls on all aspects of one's being. The second line of disagreement is whether the aesthetic experience of nature should be cognitive, guided by categories from history and natural science, or noncognitive, free of guiding narratives. In this paper I would like to defend a model of nature appreciation that is simultaneously disinterested and noncognitive, which I believe will solve many of the problems raised in contemporary aesthetics of natural environments. I will argue that nature should be appreciated with a lot of detachment, and that failure to detach will either cause mental suffering in the observer or force her to misrepresent what she is seeing. However, the truths that one should appreciate in nature are not easily linguistically articulated. One might call this mode of appreciation cognitive, because one's appreciation is still mediated by *truths*. But these truths are not well understood as propositions assigned the value *T*. The model I am advocating is drawn from traditional Buddhist nature attitudes, particularly those seen in the ancient Pali sutra the *Theragāthā* and continued in the

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modern forest monk tradition in Southeast Asia. Given this provenance, I will label it the *Theragāthā model*. I am not, however, claiming that I have completely captured the nature attitudes of this part of the Buddhist tradition. My goal here is simply to show how the Theragāthā model can contribute to a debate that is taking place in contemporary aesthetics. Indeed my understanding of the Theragāthā and the forest monk tradition is largely filtered through Westerners who are explicitly interested in developing a modern Buddhist environmental ethics, especially Cooper and James (2005).

I will begin by outlining in a bit more detail the models of aesthetic appreciation that are foils to mine. The next section will introduce the model I advocate via some Buddhist texts and western commentators on Buddhism. The third section will give a positive argument for embracing this model and discuss the role of pluralism in the aesthetics of nature. The final section will explain how this model solves problems in the contemporary literature on the aesthetics of natural environments.

Models of the Aesthetic Appreciation of Natural Environments

For my purposes, a natural environment is any place large enough to walk around in whose prominent, sensible features are not the products of human intervention in any direct or obvious way. By talking about *a place large enough to walk around in*, I hope to avoid making any theoretical assumptions about environments, such as whether they should be thought of as bounded entities lying outside the subject, an assumption challenged by Berleant (2002). By talking about *the obvious causes of the prominent features* of the environment, I hope to sidestep the fact that the environments that we take to be natural are actually the products of human influence, either because previous human

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inhabitants had a bigger impact on the landscape than we thought or because global climate change has infected every part of the Earth with unnaturalness (Coates 1998; McKibben 1989)

I am situating models of aesthetic appreciation of such environments in a two dimensional space. These two dimensions are sometimes confounded, so we need to be clear here. The first axis runs from the disinterested to the engaged. The discussion of disinterest and engagement famously goes back to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who advocated contemplating a landscape without thinking of one's personal stake in it or of the religious or moral significance of the landscape, and more recently advocated by Jerome Stolnitz (Stolnitz 1961). The most famous contemporary opposition to the disinterested model comes from Arnold Berleant (1992), who advocates an engaged approach. For Berleant, aesthetic appreciation occurs not when one views nature as a separate object, but when one is immersed in it and acutely aware of the way it pulls on one. The second axis runs from the cognitive to the noncognitive. The debate over cognitivism began with a paper by Allen Carlson (1979), suggesting that the proper appreciation of natural objects requires an understanding of the relevant biological science. Others have suggested supplementing Carlson's scientific cognitivism model by allowing knowledge of history or folklore to play the role of biological knowledge (Saito 1998). The contrasting models emphasize the aspects of the appreciation of nature that cannot be tied so easily to a linguistically articulated mental framework, talking about "acentric" aesthetics that connect people to the "ambient" in natural environments (Godlovitch 1994; Foster 1998). Also included among the noncognitivists are those who shun linguistic frameworks because they want to focus on purely sensory or formal

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aspects of the landscape. The eighteenth century theorists of disinterestedness were noncognitivists in this sense.

To see that these two axes are separate, we need to give examples of viewpoints in the four corners of the plane they form. Allen Carlson's aesthetic is both cognitive and disinterested. The cognitivism of his model is easy to see: his science-based model started the debate. Carlson's model, however, retains a good deal of disinterestedness. Although he criticizes many aspects of the disinterestedness tradition, he wants to retain the key insight that aesthetic appreciation is guided by the object itself and not the interests of the appreciator (Carlson 2000, chapter 7). Carlson's model involves both (1) stepping back and abstracting your experience from personal concerns and (2) conceptualizing what you experience under categories appropriate to the object. Arnold Berleant occupies the opposite corner from Carlson. His aesthetic is both engaged and noncognitive. The focus of his arguments is on the need for an aesthetic of engagement. However, the mode of engagement he advocates is also distinctly noncognitive, in that he does not use a guiding narrative the way Carlson uses science. Thus he writes "Nature exceeds the human mind... The ultimate limitlessness of nature comes from recognizing that the cognitive relationship with things is not the exclusive relation or even the highest one we can achieve. The proper response to nature in this sense is awe, not just from its magnitude or power, but from the mystery that, as in a work of art, is part of the essential poetry of the natural world" (Berleant 1992, 169). Berleant not only wants us to immerse ourselves in nature, to feel the way it pulls at us, but he also expects that this immersion will overwhelm our ability to categorize and impose narratives, leaving us with a feeling of boundless awe.

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Because Carlson and Berleant disagree with each other in at least two respects, it is possible to find other combinations of views. I have already mentioned that Shaftsbury and Hutcheson were like Berleant in that they were noncognitivists but like Carlson in that they were disinterested. The remaining logically possible position is engaged and cognitive. Dewey fits this slot. Dewey's experiential aesthetic is similar to Berleant's in that it is engaged, but similar to Carlson's in that it is cognitive. In his *Art as Experience*, Dewey looks for the aspects of ordinary experience that form the root of our conception of art: "In order to understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw, in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens" (Dewey 1934, 4). This activity is obviously for Dewey engaged. It flows from our experience of falling out of balance with our environment and from that gaining "a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those conditions under which it lives" (ibid, 14). This mode of engagement is also cognitive. It differs from science only in its emphasis. The artist cultivates both moments of disharmony and unity, while the scientist strives only to unify. In fact "science itself is but a central art auxiliary to the generation and utilization of other arts" (ibid, 26). Although Dewey intended this as a description of the appreciation and production of the arts, it is clear that it also applies to the appreciation of natural environments. Indeed, Dewey is expressly patterning the proper experience of the arts with the normal experience of nature.

The Theragāthā model that I advocate occupies the same part of logical space as the modes from Shaftsbury and Hutcheson in that it is disinterested and noncognitive. It is motivated, however, by different concerns and actually describes a different mental state.

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Although “disinterested and noncognitive” may sound extremely spaced out, perhaps disconnected from nature altogether, I hope to show that it really is a way of appreciating the environment. In what follows I will make use of some premises from Buddhism, but not so many that my argument will only be compelling to those already following the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. In particular, I will assume some of the Buddha’s insights into the nature of desire—basically the first three of the four noble truths—but I will not rely on the theory of reincarnation and karma, which Buddhism inherited from Hinduism. At times I will draw on Buddhist metaphysical ideas like *sūnyatā* or *anatta*¹, but these moves will be separable from the rest of my argument.

The Theragāthā Model

Buddhist texts contain frequent descriptions of natural environments as sources of tranquility and enlightenment, going all the way back to the Pali Canon. The Buddha himself attained enlightenment sitting under a tree and passed into extinction while sitting between two others. The *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, both parts of the Pali Canon, consist of poems describing the path to enlightenment taken by various monks and nuns of the Buddha’s original Saṅgha (monastic order). The poems frequently describe the Buddha’s disciples finding tranquility and enlightenment in the forest. Verse 13, for instance, is attributed to the monk Vanavaccha, whose name literally means “woodland monk”:

The color of blue-dark clouds,
glistening,
cooled with the waters

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of clear-flowing streams

covered with ladybugs:

those rocky crags

refresh me.ⁱⁱ

The *Theragāthā* is littered with passages like this. (See, for instance, verses 18, 22, 41, 49, 50, 524–526, 537–546, 991–998, and 1132–1137). The words of verse 13 themselves reappear elsewhere in the *Theragāthā*: verse 113, also attributed to a Vanavaccha, has the same basic form and ending line; and the entirety of this verse appears within a longer poem attributed to Kassapa–Mahā (verses 1058–1061).

These passages in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* represent the oldest record of a tradition of forest-dwelling, hermit monks and nuns. Harris (2000) describes this as a minority tradition, which never had the influence of the careful treatises on nondualistic metaphysics written by urban, scholastic, elite monks like Nāgārjuna. In contemporary Buddhism, the forest-dwelling tradition thrives in Southeast Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand, where it was revived in the midnineteenth century and enjoyed a major resurgence midtwentieth century (Kamala 1997; Carrithers 1983). It is worth emphasizing that the contemporary Southeast Asian forest movement is consciously reactionary, attempting to recreate the Buddha’s original Saṅgha in the face of a monastic community that had fallen into rigid scholasticism. Further, as the collective authors of Wikipedia note, this movement occurs within Theravāda, which is generally perceived as the most conservative of the major branches of Buddhism (the Wikipedia Community 2006).

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Naïve readers often assume that the experience of nature in the forest monk tradition is just like the experiences of a John Muir or William Wordsworth. The legacy of writers like D.T. Suzuki and Gary Snyder, who promoted the idea of a Green Buddhism to North Americans, makes this mistake very easy to fall into. But, as Ian Harris (1995a, 1995b, 1997, 2000) and other critics of Green Buddhism have pointed out, many aspects of the Buddhist experience of nature are quite foreign to Western environmentalist sensibilities. The John Muir experience of nature is associated with an ethic of nature preservation. However, it is extremely difficult to find any analogue of any of the Western concepts associated with the word “nature” at work in Buddhist thought (Harris 1997). The word “nature” itself has no synonym in the canonical languages of Buddhism—Pali, Sanskrit, and Classical Chinese—and no other word does even a large subset of the work the word “nature” does in English and related languages (*ibid.*). The closest analogues to the concept of nature in Buddhist thought, like *Saṃsāra*, have extremely negative connotations. Even if nature existed in Buddhist thought, there would be no imperative to preserve it, because Buddhism is above all else committed to the doctrine of eternal flux. The Buddha’s own last words, as recorded in the *Digha Nikaya*, were “All compounded things are subject to vanish. Strive with earnestness.”ⁱⁱⁱ What’s worse, the impulse to preserve what is inherently decaying is the paradigm source of human suffering.

Criticisms like these show thoroughly the naïveté of Westerners who see the experience of nature in the forest monk tradition as a simple echo of the Western romantic tradition of Muir and Wordsworth. But this is a far cry from saying that there isn’t an experience of natural environments here that we can learn from. David Cooper and Simon James, in their virtue theoretic treatise on Buddhist environmental ethics, give

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a useful reading of Buddhist nature aesthetics (Cooper and James 2005). Cooper and James do not simply note that there are plenty of descriptions in the sutras of people attaining enlightenment in natural settings, nor do they fall for any of the broad cultural generalizations of David Suzuki. They note two facts: first, the sutras describe nature as a place where you can easily see “the impermanence and *duḥkha* that infuse the world” (Cooper and James 2005, 119); second, the sutras describe nature as conducive to the virtues of tranquility, equanimity, and self-restraint. This leads them to propose a model in which natural environments are valuable precisely because they are places where one can see the impermanence and suffering of things. This might not seem like a pleasant vision, but when it is combined with the appropriate mental practice, it yields tranquility and enlightenment. Cooper and James compare the experience of nature in the sutras to aesthetic experience in Kant and Schopenhauer, a detached and disinterested appreciation. They don’t say this exactly, but it looks in particular like the Kantian experience of the sublime because it involves a detached appreciation of stuff that is huge and terrible. (It is worth noting in this context that for a contemporary Thai forest monk, a cemetery is as appropriate a place to sleep as a forest [Kamala 1997]).

The stories of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā* give us a picture of both the right way and the wrong way to understand natural environments. The story of the nun Subha Jivakambavanika from the *Therīgāthā* highlights the wrong way to view nature and provides a clue to the right way.^{iv} Subha is walking in a mango grove when she finds her way blocked by an attractive young man who asks her not to go forth into the contemplative life. The young man’s opening line is blunt and unromantic, and it also displays a superficial understanding of the joys of nature:

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‘You are young & not bad-looking,
 what need do you have for going forth?
 Throw off your ochre robe —
 Come, let’s delight in the flowering grove.
 A sweetness they exude everywhere,
 the towering trees with their pollen.
 The beginning of spring is a pleasant season —
 Come, let’s delight in the flowering grove.
 The trees with their blossoming tips
 moan, as it were, in the breeze:

Well, “not bad looking” is hardly a winning compliment, especially when delivered by a man who has simply appeared on the path in front of you. But our hopeful paramour does offer a very sexy portrayal of the sensual delights of wilderness, with its moaning, pollinating trees, which might garner him favor. He also offers a threat, for the nature that is pleasant when shared is dangerous for a woman alone.

What delight will you have
 if you plunge into the grove alone?
 Frequented by herds of wild beasts,
 disturbed by elephants rutting & aroused:
 you want to go
 unaccompanied
 into the great, lonely, frightening grove?

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The young libertine can picture two aspects of nature, beauty and danger. The text is not explicit, but an enlightened reader will recognize that the libertine is hurt by the danger because he longs for the beauty. He is also not making much of a pitch for himself—does he really want to remind Subha of elephants in heat? Our lothario makes up for his poor opening, though, by promising Subha great riches and praising her beauty, especially her eyes. Sadly for our gentleman caller, this is one of those texts that remind you that Gotama Buddha's middle path is substantially more ascetic than Aristotle's mean. The nun asks, why are you so enamored of my body?

What do you assume of any essence,
here in this cemetery grower, filled with corpses,
this body destined to break up?

What do you see when you look at me,
you who are out of your mind?

Subha specifically talks about how moribund her eyes are. They are composites of jelly, tears, and other gross secretions. Subha's equation on the compound nature of the body as the source of its impermanence and unworthiness is almost Platonic. But when she pulls away from the flux of the body, she takes a path far from Plato's

Knowing the unattractiveness
of things compounded,
my mind cleaves to nothing at all.

But Subha has to do something to let this man know she is serious, so she decides to give him exactly what he has been pining for:

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Plucking out her lovely eye,
with mind unattached
she felt no regret.

‘Here, take this eye. It’s yours.’

This display prompts the young man beg forgiveness and run off, comparing what has happened to grabbing a “poisonous snake.” Thus the libertine’s attraction to and subsequent repulsion from Subha mirrors the delights and dangers he sees in the forest.

The story of Subha seems to only urge us to be indifferent to beauty. The young man’s passions fill his life with attractions and repulsions, but Subha has peace because she is indifferent to these things, neither entranced by the beauty of an eye in a head, nor repulsed by the gooey eye in a hand. But there has to be more to the nun’s nature attitude than this. She, after all, is doing half of what the libertine asked her to do: she is going in to the woods, just not with him. Why is the forest a good place for her to be, if she is neither drawn by its pleasures nor repulsed by its dangers?

The answer is that she can attain a different kind of joy precisely because she is not drawn in by sensuous pleasures or repulsed by danger. Being alone allows her to cultivate a *disinterested* pleasure. Consider the poem of Ekavihariya (Dwelling Alone) from the Theragāthā.

If nobody is to be found,
In front of one or behind one,
That is exceedingly pleasant
For the lonely forest dweller.

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So be it! I will go alone
To the forest, praised by Buddha;
For the self-resolute bhikkhu,
Dwelling alone, it is pleasant.

Pleasing, and joyful to sages,
Haunted by rutting elephants,
Seeking my goal alone, quickly
Will I go to the wild forest.

In the well-flowered cool Garden,
In a soothing mountain grotto,
Having anointed all my limbs,
I will walk back and forth, alone.

When indeed shall I come to dwell
All alone, without companion
In the great forest, so pleasing!
My task accomplished, without taint?

While the gentle breezes flutter,
Soothing and laden with fragrance,

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I'll burst asunder ignorance
While seated on the mountain top.

In a grove covered with flowers,
Or maybe on a cool hillside,
Gladdened by the joy of release,
I'll be content on Vulture's Peak.^v

Although there are seven references to being alone in as many passages in this poem, I take it that the value of solitude is instrumental, in that it allows the bhikkhu to take up the proper attitude. Further, it is clear that the proper attitude is disinterested. This is a basic piece of Buddhist doctrine, but it is also clear from the content of the poems. Thus the monk finds release in both the pleasant and painful aspects of the environment. The poem doesn't just talk about cool hillsides and flowers; the rutting elephants appear again. (I imagine that in central Asia in the last few centuries BCE, elephants in heat were about the scariest thing you could bump into.) Vulture's peak doesn't sound like an appealing place, and the descriptions of mountains in other parts of the *Theragāthā* emphasize the barren, windy, and rocky. Indeed, many poems specifically emphasize the monk's indifference to surroundings that most are terrified of. (See, for instance, the verses attributed to Sāriputra and Bhūta.)

In addition to being disinterested, the attitude a renunciate like Subha or Ekavihariya takes up is clearly disinterested and noncognitive. You are supposed to “burst asunder ignorance” and feel the “the joy of release.” Now this may not seem like the noncognitive appreciation of nature, for a couple reasons. The first, weaker reason is simply that the

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state of enlightenment actually seems quite cognitive. The stronger reason is that the state of enlightenment does not seem to be an appreciation of nature, or even about nature at all. A complete reply to the first objection would require a complete account of one of the most difficult aspects of Buddhist teaching, the idea of enlightenment, along with a serious discussion of what Western philosophers mean by cognitive, both tasks well beyond the scope of this paper. For now it suffices to point out that bursting asunder ignorance is a far cry from Carlson's image of someone appreciating a whale properly because they put it in the biological category "mammal" rather than "fish."

The second objection is more serious. One could say that the forest monks living the Theragāthā tradition are not experiencing nature at all but merely using it as a means to enlightenment. I will reply to this from two sides. On the one hand, I think the attitude described in the Theragāthā model is about nature in a certain sense. So if the Theragāthā model isn't sufficiently *about* nature, then a lot of other models will have to go too. For the first point, I will only note that poems like the verses of Ekavihariya do describe "the great forest, so pleasing" as a direct source of comfort. When Vanavaccha says "those rocky crags refresh me" it is the crags doing the refreshing. On the other hand, I think that other models of nature appreciation also allow for nature attitudes to contain insights that go beyond the landscape before one. It is commonly acknowledged that one of the joys of nature is that it gives us the opportunity to exercise what Ronald Hepburn called "the metaphysical imagination" (Hepburn 1996). We exercise our metaphysical imagination when we see a landscape as expressing certain emotions—Hepburn's example is seeing a dark cloud as ominous—or when we see a landscape as expressing a metaphysical or cosmic truth. One example of the latter is the image given by Philo in

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Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in response to the ubiquity of predation of "blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children" (Hume 1779). The awareness found in the Theragāthā model clearly qualifies as just this sort of exercise of the metaphysical imagination. It is, as Cooper and James first described it, an awareness of the impermanence and *duḥkha* inherent in all things.

Two features of Hepburn's metaphysical imagination are important to note. First, the metaphysical truth revealed is not simply a proposition assented to; it is *sensed* in what is before you. "It is fused with the sensory components," Hepburn writes, "not a meditation aroused by these." This is significant because it further establishes that the Theragāthā model of nature appreciation really is about nature. The second interesting thing about Hepburn's metaphysical imagination is that it is fallible. Indeed, two different people may see contradictory metaphysical ideas in nature. One is not having truths directly revealed to one. Instead one is experiencing, bodily, an idea that was probably already floating around in your culture. Thus the awareness of impermanence and suffering felt by the Bhikkhu is not knowledge given to the monk, but a state achieved through meditation and discipline.

Interestingly, there is also a sense in which the Theragāthā model is noncognitive in the formalist sense of the eighteenth century disinterestedness theorists. One of the most important aspects of traditional Buddhist metaphysics is its anti-essentialism, the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, that all things are "empty" or devoid of self-existence. When applied to people this becomes the doctrine of *anatta*, a sort of null theory of personal identity over time. Buddha himself only emphasized the idea of *anatta*. The expansion of *anatta* into

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śūnyatā is a part of Mahayana Buddhism rejected by the ultra-orthodox, Theravada, forest monks I am focusing on. Nevertheless, if one accepts a strong doctrine of śūnyatā, a disinterested attention to the things around you will wind up focusing on their formal, sensory properties. The objects of contemplation simply have no deeper nature to ponder. This combined emphasis on the sensory and ephemeral can be seen in a lot of Zen art, such as the haiku of Bashō.

Why You Should Embrace the Theragāthā Model

The *Theragāthā* and subsequent forest monk tradition thus give us an example of how to be in nature. Why should we follow this example, rather than any of the other models that I have identified? On one level, we shouldn't. That is, you shouldn't follow this model to the exclusion of the others. When I first introduced the contemporary discussion of models of nature appreciation, I said that the proposed models were to various degrees normative and descriptive. They sometimes are meant to capture what we do when we are in nature and what we should do. But there is no need for either the descriptive or the normative functions of these models to be monolithic. It is unlikely that we all experience nature the same way and, moreover, we probably shouldn't. Some of the analytic aestheticians writing on nature appreciation, such as Yuriko Saito, have rejected pluralism, on the grounds that one has an ethical duty to perceive nature as it is (Saito 1998). But even within the framework of such a mandate, there is a lot of leeway, simply because different people will enter a natural environment in different contexts.

I spend a fair amount of time outdoors with my children, and like most ecologically minded parents, I try to impart some lessons while I am out there. In this context, the

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mode of nature appreciation I promote is thoroughly Deweyian—completely engaged, and laden with as many stories and scientific ideas as I can muster. This is, after all, how children learn and how they play, and at their age the need for playing and learning is bottomless.

Nevertheless, I think at some point one must engage nature in the Theragāthā fashion. The alternatives are either to misrepresent nature or to experience suffering. To show this I will essentially walk through the argument of the first three of the Buddha’s Noble Truths. I begin with the commonplace that nature is red in tooth and claw, a truth expressed profoundly by the Hume quotation above. The brutality of the natural world is not only apparent on first observation; it grows deeper the more one studies nature. Witness Darwin’s dismay at the natural processes he discovered: “I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars or that a cat should play with mice” (letter to Asa Gray, 1860, reprinted in F. Darwin, ed. [1891]). Thus we see in nature the first of the Buddha’s four noble truths, the truth of *duḥkha*, or suffering. The natural world is in a perpetual state of suffering.

If one is of good conscience and contemplating the natural world, one will suffer with it. If you don’t do this at least a little, you are a sociopath (or perhaps a cat). The only way for someone who is not a sociopath to perceive the world as it is and not suffer is to become disinterested. This insight comprises the second and third noble truth. The second noble truth says that suffering comes from having interests, from wanting things to be one way or another. The Sanskrit word *duḥkha* has both a folk meaning and a technical philosophical meaning. The folk meaning carries with it all the associations of the

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English word “suffering”: wailing, gnashing of teeth, rending of garments. The technical meaning is closer to simple dissatisfaction. It refers to the way that a thinking subject not only perceives what is, but is always reaching out to what could be. This stretching into the possible hurts. The second noble truth is simply that the technical meaning of *duḥkha* describes the source of the folk meaning. The third noble truth is then simply that one can end suffering by ceasing to stretch into the possible, giving up one’s interested investment in what is before one.

The main reason to follow the Theragāthā model of nature appreciation, then, is because it allows you to see nature as it is without suffering. This in turn is necessary for human flourishing, since a person who is flourishing should both be free of pain and of delusion. If the experience of naturalists like Darwin is any guide, the importance of the Theragāthā model will actually deepen as one learns more. The Deweyian model is good for us as learners, the Theragāthā model, for us as knowers.

How the Buddhist disinterested model solves problems

The Buddhist disinterested model solves many of the problems in contemporary aesthetics of natural environments. First, it provides a notion of disinterested contemplation that avoids problems that afflicted the older disinterested model from Shaftsbury and Hutcheson. Advocates of immersive models have linked disinterestedness in the Western tradition to objectification and dehumanization. Disinterestedness requires putting the object of contemplation in a frame, either literally or mentally, that binds it and controls it, cutting it off from the vitality of the life world. Berleant, for instance, says the disinterested mode of contemplation belongs to an intellectualist tradition “that grasps

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the world by knowing it through objectifying it, and that controls the world by subduing it to the order of thought” (Berleant 2005, 5). This imperial subjugation comes out, for instance, in the characterization of the space landscapes are pictured in, “Space here becomes an abstraction, a medium that is universal, objective, and impersonal, independent of the objects that are situated in and move through it. Such an objective space leads to the objectification of things in it, which are then regarded from the stance of an impersonal observer” (ibid). This accusation can get traction because the partisans of disinterestedness are generally giants of the enlightenment like Kant, whom we are quite used to accusing of objectification, dehumanization, and imperialism. The Theragāthā model avoids this charge. Although it occupies the same part of logical space as the European disinterestedness tradition, it is in many ways a different mental state. The focus of the Theragāthā model is on disciplining oneself, not the landscape. The goal is precisely not to control what can’t be controlled. The mental state is not shaped by awareness of an impersonal space, but of an ineffable time.

The Theragāthā model also gives us a way of dealing with Dickie’s criticisms of the European disinterestedness tradition. George Dickie, in his famous attack on the very idea of an aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness (Dickie 1964), presses two main criticisms against the disinterestedness tradition that began with Shaftesbury. The first is that there is no such thing as disinterested attention, because all of the possible examples of interested attention are really examples of people being distracted—not attending at all—because of personal interests. If I watch a play with an eye to how much money I will make as the producer, I am simply distracted by money. I am not engaged in the wrong sort of attention. The second criticism is that the claim that one must take up a

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disinterested attitude to appreciate art amounts to an unjustified and a priori ban considering certain kinds of information as relevant to appreciating an object. In particular, it automatically rules out moral criteria of judgment.

The Theragāthā model responds to the first criticism by giving us a different sense of what it means to look interestedly at something, and this solution allows us to further sidestep Dickie's second criticism by showing that the Theragāthā model actually makes no claims about criteria for aesthetic judgment. For the Theragāthā model, interested contemplation amounts of desirous contemplation. If one looks upon something and wants to do something with it, one is being interested in the negative sense. If you look on a broad tract of land and wish to build a suburb; if you hope for the hero of a story to win a fight the way one would hope a real person to win a real battle; or if you yearn to have sex with a person you meet, you are being interested. You are attached to an outcome and crave its realization. If you accept things as they are, you are free of this craving. Purging yourself of craving does not imply any criteria for aesthetic judgment. It does not demand that one ignore the naturalness of a landscape in judging its beauty, or ignore the morality of a struggle in judging the power of a narrative, or ignore the goodness of a person's character in judging their charm. Judging itself has been removed from the aesthetic experience.

Finally the Theragāthā model gives us a better understanding of the aesthetic importance of unscenic nature, the dismal swamps and stretches of barren tundra that many environmentalists want to preserve but that have little postcard value. Environmental aestheticians in the English-speaking world often invoke the doctrine of positive aesthetics, the idea that all natural landscapes are beautiful (or have other

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positive aesthetic qualities) because they are natural, to justify the appeal of such places. This leaves the aesthetician sounding uncomfortably like Mark Twain discussing the appeal of Wagner: “his music is much better than it sounds.” The model of Buddhist disinterest, on the other hand, does not force one to talk about an unseen beauty. Instead the forbidding nature of the landscape becomes itself the core of the landscape’s aesthetic appeal.

Conclusion

Early Buddhist scripture describes a practice of retiring alone to the wilderness to meditate that continues today in south Asian Theravadin Buddhist countries. This practice resembles an old Enlightenment model of disinterested nature contemplation but improves upon it in many ways. While there are many different valuable ways of being in the wilderness, this Theragāthā model is one path that must be pursued, if one is to experience nature in a way compatible with human flourishing.

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Endnotes

ⁱ I am rendering Buddhist technical terms in Romanized Sanskrit, rather than the less familiar Pali or the less accurate English.

ⁱⁱ The standard way to cite Pali scripture is to list the abbreviated title, volume, and page number from the Romanized Pali edition produced by the Pali Text Society (1881). By this standard, this passage from the Theragāthā is Thag I.13. However, pagination from Pali Text Society is not as common in reprints of Buddhist scripture as, say, the use of Stephanus or Bekker numbers for Plato and Aristotle, and the Pali Text Society's editions are themselves enormous, rarely stocked by libraries, and inscrutable to most aestheticians. Fortunately accesstoinsight.org offers lucid translations of much of the Pali canon for free on line (Bullitt 1993–2006). This verse, translated by Bhikku Thanissaro,

is from that collection (verse 13). Hereafter I will cite Pali scripture by giving the full title, the location in the Pali Text Society edition, the location in Access to Insight, and the translator.

ⁱⁱⁱ Digha Nikaya; ii 156; DN 16, part 6 verse 8; Sister Vajira and Francis Story.

^{iv} Therigāthā; XIV.I; vv. 366–399; Bhikkhu Thanissaro

^v Theragāthā; X.2; vv. 537–546; Andrew Olendzki.