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AESTHETIC OBJECTIVISM’S “JOYOUS POSSESSION OF THE (NATURAL) WORLD,” TOWARDS A RELIGIOUSLY USEFUL APPRECIATION OF SUBLIMITY IN THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Maia Wellborn

Kant tells us that two things awe him most: the starry skies above and the moral law within. But, we might ask, is Kant mistaken in grounding the experience of sublimity in his moral philosophy as an “attempt to unify art and ethics?”¹ Appreciating the natural sublime in a way that seeks to understand the experience in an all-encompassing manner seems quite sensible in some approaches to environmental aesthetics. Understandably, then, scholars such as Allen Carlson and Noël Carroll seem to defend versions of aesthetic objectivism such that these connections are maintained. However, experiences in the natural world that are termed “sublime,” can be better understood through a specific kind of religious-aesthetic appreciation. In what follows, I argue that the natural sublime (sublimity as experienced in the natural world) is an experience that is closer to what Merold Westphal might call “religiously useful,” in that it inspires the sort of awe and celebration that connects us to the divine. Building on a view of the sublime which mirrors Emmanuel Levinas’s view of the ethical encounter with the Other, I contend that the natural sublime frustrates

¹ Julian Young, “Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime,” *Inquiry: an interdisciplinary journal of philosophy and the social sciences* Vol. 48, no. 2 (2005): 136.

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an aesthetic objectivist approach that requires truth values for our judgments of what is beautiful and sublime. I will suggest that since such objectivist accounts do not accurately capture the phenomenological subjectivity experienced in the natural sublime, postmodern religious thought can helpfully supplement the field of environmental aesthetics.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will describe what I take to be the aesthetic objectivist theories of Carlson and Carroll, showing why they are inadequate in describing our experience of the natural sublime. Next, I will show how a comparison of Levinas's ethical encounter and the natural sublime is relevant to the discussion in environmental aesthetics because it grounds the content of this experience. Moreover, it does so in a way that is "religiously useful" in ways similar to Westphal's description of the God of postmodern religious thought. I conclude that an aesthetic appreciation of the natural sublime should not reduce the subjective experience to the phenomenal object's properties and our judgments of it to true or false propositions. That problematic approach falsely delineates the sublime as merely an object in nature, thus erasing the existential essence of such experiences.

The debate regarding how we ought to appreciate nature is a much-discussed issue in contemporary environmental aesthetics. Allen Carlson notices the issues that arise in our attempts either to treat nature as art objects *or* reduce nature to picturesque landscapes. When we treat nature as an art object we take it out of its environmental context and when we reduce nature to picturesque landscapes we selectively and inappropriately choose from the whole of nature limited portions of it. As Ronald Rees points out, this latter view of reducing nature to the picturesque has "confirmed our anthropocentrism by suggesting that nature exists to please as well as to serve us. . . . It is an unfortunate lapse which allows us to abuse our local environments and venerate the Alps and the Rockies."² Finding

² Ronald Rees, "Mountain Scenery," *History Today* 25 (1975): 312. Quoted in Allen Carlson, "Aesthetic Appreciation of the Natural

both approaches problematic, Carlson attempts to understand nature in terms of its appropriate context, similar to how we make aesthetic judgments of works of art. He writes, writes:

If to appropriately aesthetically appreciate art we must have knowledge of art forms, classifications of works, and artistic traditions, then to appropriately aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different systems and elements within those environments... Thus, the natural and environmental sciences are central to appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature.³

In the same way in which knowledge of painting in the early twentieth century is necessary for appreciating the works of the Cubists, some knowledge of flora and fauna are necessary to appreciate a natural environment rich in flowers and plants.

Noël Carroll does not reject Carlson's account, but offers an alternative view in which he claims that some aesthetic judgments are emotional responses to nature, and that these are just as valid as judgments based upon an understanding of the natural sciences. What validates them is the appropriateness of the emotional response to the natural environment a person experiences. Carroll understands that a central question concerning the aesthetic appreciation of nature subsists in the overarching dichotomy between aesthetic relativism and aesthetic objectivism. The aesthetic relativist asserts that the aesthetic judgments about nature are absolutely subjective because they are entirely relative to those who make them. The aesthetic objectivist, alternatively, claims that judgments about nature are objectively true or false. In Carlson's view aesthetic

Environment," in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 161.

³ *Ibid.*, 166.

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judgments can be true if they are based on correct knowledge of the natural environment that one experiences. In Carroll's model, aesthetic judgments are true if the emotional response they convey is appropriate to the natural environment one is responding to.⁴ Both Carlson's and Carroll's models involve judgments that are true or false based on matters of fact concerning the aesthetic properties of some natural phenomena. They both presuppose aesthetic objectivism when it comes to the appreciation of nature. Specifically, they depend upon the existence of universal, aesthetic properties inherent in natural phenomena, while disagreeing about the location of such properties and how to access them.

Both Carlson and Carroll have insightful reasons for contending that aesthetic objectivism is preferable to aesthetic relativism regarding our judgments about the natural world. If it were not, it would seem impossible to characterize certain phenomena as beautiful, striking, visually appealing, and so on. Everything in the natural world would appear to us as a "blooming buzzing confusion,"⁵ as William James writes. In order to make sense of the world we make truth claims about the aesthetic properties of some perceptual object. In doing this, we pragmatically dissolve any epistemic limits to our cognition in an effort to communicate what is "appropriate, correct, or true."⁶ By comparing nature to art, Carlson thinks we achieve the method for making qualified judgments about nature. Because "the objectivity of aesthetic judgments of art depends upon identifying the correct category for the artwork in question,"⁷ by applying the comparable paradigm or standard to

⁴ Noël Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 177-78.

⁵ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 462. Quoted by Carlson, 164.

⁶ Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature," 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

natural phenomena we are able to make judgments which are either true or false about such phenomena—with the natural sciences serving as the standard for such judgments. Likewise, Carroll thinks that because we can objectively judge our emotional responses to what is experiences in nature as appropriate or not, they can give us accurate aesthetic judgments of nature.

The aesthetic objectivist views that Carlson and Carroll champion are problematic because they assume that objectively true judgments about phenomena in the natural environment are what we are looking for in our appreciation of it. However, I would argue that there are experiences in nature that are awe-inspiring in such a way that they problematize these types of objective judgments. They are grounded in an essentially subjective appreciation that is internal to a subject's unique relation to it. These are experiences of the natural sublime which in some way exceed our appreciation of nature as something beautiful.

The natural sublime is an experience in the natural world that overwhelms us. It might involve a feeling whereby the object of our perception throws us back on ourselves so that we feel our total insignificance in comparison with to nature. In some experiences with the natural world we ride the fine line between appreciating the imperial grandeur of a phenomenon and the displeasing anxiety that it can arouse in our relation to it. Sublimity in nature only makes sense when *I* attempt to make sense of myself in comparison to it. I notice the difference between what is out there in the world, and what I possess as someone who experiences the *out-there-ness*. Sandra Shapshay identifies this difference when she observes that, “what is sublime for Kant is not something in the world—some portion of the ‘real’ that we directly experience—but a feeling we have that is occasioned by certain sensory experiences.”⁸ In

⁸ Sandra Shapshay, “Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Neglect of the Sublime.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no.2 (2013).

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all of our attempts to describe the sublime we run into an epistemic limit that allows us to communicate such experiences only by appealing to subjective sentiments—*overwhelming, stunning, heart-palpitating*. How should we approach making judgments of an experience that necessarily involves a subject who is at stake in the experience?

Emmanuel Levinas's encounter with what he calls the 'Other' is a compelling place to start in thinking through the answer to this question. The natural sublime may occasion a kind of experience like the encounter with the Other, which is initially the interruption to my "unchecked desire," and my "unbridled self-interest."⁹ When I meet someone on the street who asks me for spare change, for example, I am suddenly interrupted by the Other who presents me with an ethical responsibility. Even if I don't think I should give them spare change, I am still confronted with the ethical question: should I or not? This ethical responsibility is brought about by an asymmetrical relationship with an Other that I cannot fully understand. For Levinas, this encounter is pre-ontological because it inaugurates selfhood as a response to the infinite demand upon us from each and every Other. This encounter with the Other is not a spacio-temporal phenomenon because it occurs in the realm of the ethical rather than in the domain of being. For this reason Levinas answers in the negative to the question "is ontology fundamental?" Instead, on his model, the ethical encounter itself cannot be totalized in either concept or being. This totality for Levinas, as Michael Morgan describes it, is "the domain circumscribed, encompassed, and to a degree constructed by the self of the agent, ... the domain of reason or mind or culture or theory."¹⁰ The infinity of such an encounter speaks to the inability of my understanding to completely grasp the Other, and my inability ever to fully eradicate my responsibility to the Other. In this ethical encounter, I concede my

⁹ Michael L. Morgan. *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

ability totally to grasp the world—my very identity becomes a response to the enigma that calls me into question and to selfhood. My subjectivity, therefore, is a response *to* a question—one that is entirely foreign to me. In this sense, Levinas asserts that subjectivity is not rooted in autonomy; it is ontologically conditioned by something exterior to it—a preceding alterity. I gain myself because of the Other—as such, I am never fully transparent to myself.

It follows that the experiences whereby my very selfhood is at stake are of a different sort than the experiences that I understand through reason alone. Being able to grasp the beauty of a landscape in terms of an objective metric concerns the aesthetic properties of the landscape (Carlson and Carroll). However, an experience in nature that inaugurates my being at stake in it is of another kind—it is the stuff of sublimity.

I imagine I am perceiving a landscape through a detailed knowledge of the natural environment, or from behind a camera lens at an overlook. Emotionally or cognitively, I respond to the objects of perception as they appear—*aesthetically* beautiful or complex. In doing so, I am totalizing these objects according to my conceptual judgment of them, as Levinas would say. I circumscribe, encompass, and construct the view. I view it in a way in which I can rationally comprehend it. I intend an aesthetic object whereby judgments of beauty, grandeur, etc. are of an objective quality because the judgments are made about the object alone. What changes, though, when I am 2000 ft. above ground on the side of a rock-face, where I hang from a solitary anchor while rock-climbing? The aesthetic appreciation we are likely to feel here (should we dare to be there) is an altogether a different appreciation—one that may make me aware of my finitude, shudder at the incalculable perspective, or attempt to tell myself that anxiety is useless and I am not in danger. Any judgment I make will necessarily be relevant to or informed by my own subjectivity—my own inability to remove the feeling from *my* experiencing of the sublime object. My experience with the natural sublime is one I cannot appreciate on a basis that removes my

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subjectivity from the judgments—making them objectively the case.

François Marty says that “totality is a matter for *reason* and its satisfaction. Seeking the point at which differences rest upon a ‘same,’ where the quest for unity is appeased, whereas infinity is a matter for *imagination*.”¹¹ Similarly, Matthew Sanderson explains how in Kant’s view reason fits into his view of the dynamical sublime. For Kant, the dynamical sublime “consists in the mental relationship between sensibility and reason that is excited by experiences of extremely powerful natural objects...”¹² In experiencing the dynamical sublime, first we are fearful of being overwhelmed by the natural event so that we become aware of our finitude. The event is something that very well could crush us with absolute indifference. However, the pleasure that we feel at the very next instant supersedes the fear because our intellect has the ability to reason. According to Julian Young, then, we stand in a sort of imaginative distance with the object of sublimity in nature and, thereby, feel this “*expansion* of the self, a flowing out of the ego and into totality of things,” which Freud calls an “oceanic feeling.”¹³

Because the sublime involves a subjective feeling which synthesizes pleasure and displeasure towards a phenomenon, it does not warrant that a common aesthetic appreciation for both the naturally beautiful and naturally sublime. Young argues that “for a proper interpretation of the sublime, we need a different metaphysics,”¹⁴ but must we embrace a blooming buzzing confusion as a result? I think not. Jane Forsey de-

¹¹ François Marty, “Height and the Sublime,” trans. by Jeffrey Bloechl, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20 no. 2, (1998), 357.

¹² Matthew Sanderson, “Kant and Schopenhauer on Death and the Religious Sublime.” *Contemporary Philosophy* 28 no.3, (2008), 35.

¹³ Julian Young, “Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime,” 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

scribes the epistemic issue with treating the sublime like an object whose value is in its aesthetic properties when she says,

The heart of the problem, then, is this: if we focus on the metaphysical status of the sublime object, our epistemology becomes problematic, but if we address instead the epistemological transcendence of a certain experience, we still seem forced to make *some* metaphysical claim about the object of that experience.¹⁵

In order even to cognize the natural sublime we must first have some idea about how to describe the phenomenon. Here we are not totally without words. There is in fact a horizon of meaning involved here just as there is in recognizing the Other in her alterity. If there were not any horizon by which we could account for such alterity, then the phenomena which “interrupt[s] our joyous possession of the world” would not interrupt because it could not be apprehended at all. Crucially, Levinas says that the Other “overflows” comprehension, not that the other is *incomprehensible*. In the same way, we can say that the natural sublime overflows our comprehension, not that it is incomprehensible. What is required, then, is an appreciation based on the tension between *totality*, because we *do* make judgments about the natural sublime, and *infinity*, because these judgments are always epistemically limited by subjectivity’s inability to grasp transcendence in absoluton.

What would it look like to engage with the excess of the natural sublime without totalizing the phenomenon? In *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, Merold Westphal considers a similar question but in relation to religious existence. For Westphal, this problem of expressing excess, while not eliminating the excess in the expression, occurs in the case of the metaphysical God which we have fully subsumed under our

¹⁵ Jane Forsey, “Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?” *JAC* 65 no.4, (2007), 383.

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own philosophical categories: “When we assume the adequacy of our concepts to the divine reality, we make ourselves the measure and master of that reality and convert it into the invisible mirror of our intellectual capacities.”¹⁶ Westphal warns, “when theology buys into this philosophical project, it renders the God of whom it speaks *religiously useless*.”¹⁷ In Martin Heidegger’s words, this is the God of philosophy and “man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”¹⁸ This reductionist tendency about which Westphal and Heidegger are both worried, is strikingly similar, I think, to an aesthetic objectivist appreciation of the natural sublime.

Westphal suggests that Levinas answers the question as to what God could come after postmodernism, saying, “We must think of God as the voice that exceeds vision so as to establish a relation irreducible to comprehension.” God construed this way is quite appropriately another name for the Other. Might we be more accurate in our judgments if we apprehend the sublime object in nature similarly? Though totalization is necessary, it is the burden of infinity imposed through subjectivity that gives it real value. In the same fashion, to totalize the experience of the sublime is to reduce the object of our gaze to its aesthetic properties—to value such experiences through a reductionism—characteristic of aesthetic objectivism. What if the natural sublime were rethought, then, in such a way as to allow for a suspension of objectivist epistemologies in order to more appropriately gauge the object of the natural sublime? What would this object be if not a phenomenon available in full presence to my totalizing schemes? Appropriating Westphal, I think the answer is that the natural sublime

¹⁶ Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: toward a postmodern Christian faith*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001): 269, my emphasis.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 72. Quoted by Westphal, 261.

becomes better understood as an invitation to existential reflection.

I do not mean to suggest that the natural sublime *is* the God of postmodernism, nor do I wish to equate the sublime experience or feeling to the Other or the infinity from which the Other calls forth. Rather, the paradigm is relevant because there are numerous examples in relation to which Kant, Schopenhauer, Burke, and others have struggled to communicate the essence of sublime experiences. How does one conceptualize transcendence, as such? The natural sublime is uniquely suitable to a phenomenologically religious discourse by means of a Levinasian frame because it highlights the existential traction of such an experience. It calls into question and at the same time reaffirms the existence of the self in relation to what is Other.

If, “the sublime is the experience of the excess of infinity over totality,”¹⁹ then the natural sublime takes on a new role—one that allows for an appreciation that judges such experiences not on their aesthetic properties, but their existential relevance. The natural sublime is not valuable because it is the activity of making life into an object of appreciation. Rather, it is *invaluable* as the activity of appreciating life as a subject living it. While the Other interrupts our “joyous possession of the world,” the sublime interrupts our joyous totalization of nature in the aesthetic objectivist attitude. The natural sublime understood as such may not lead us to God or replace our encounter with the Other, but it can provide us with an experience that inspires the awe and celebration that has traditionally been the province of the divine. The postmodern approach can help us better to understand and appreciate this existential dimension of the natural sublime—whether we are hanging off of the cliff or taking a picture of it from a distance.

¹⁹ Marty, “Height and the Sublime,” 362.

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