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Response to Brady, Phillips and Rolston

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ABSTRACT

A response to conference papers by Brady, Phillips, and Rolston on aesthetics and environmentalism, this essay argues that sound environmental policy might begin with basic questions about the purpose and extent of human life, for such policies shape human nature as they also shape the phenomenal world. Decisions based upon short-lived economic conditions cannot provide those long-term benefits necessary for the preservation of the environment. Aesthetic judgments, because they are reflective, help us anthropomorphise ourselves; along with scientific judgments, they might serve as foundational, rather than auxiliary, practices for determining the future of our finite planet.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, ethics, disinterestedness, life forms, environmentalism

These three papers on the relations between aesthetics, ethics, and the environment share some central concerns. Emily Brady argues that aesthetic values are not merely private and inchoate, but also both intersubjective and objective, and thus they might serve as a basis for public decisions about the environment. Aesthetic experiences, she argues, lead to a more particular sense of the world, sharpening our sense perceptions and imaginations, as they lend us heightened powers of creativity and emotional expression. She draws out the ways scientific theories themselves become convincing on the basis of those aesthetic qualities of variety, diversity and harmony that we appreciate in natural phenomena. Holmes Rolston questions how much the facts of science, which he sees as value-neutral, can form a foundation for ethical and aesthetic judgments regarding the environment. He looks to the history of Western religion, the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian doctrine particularly, for guidance as he searches for a

coincidence between universal justice and environmental sustainability. Dana Phillips analyses passages in the writings of Thoreau to argue that we should not be too quick to symbolise the meaning of nature: he points to the practical and sensual benefits of our encounters with nature and to the importance of scientific knowledge for informed judgments regarding environmental policy.

At a first glance, there seem to be some differences between the positions of Phillips and Brady regarding disinterestedness, yet perhaps, seen from my respondent's rear-view mirror, they are closer than they might appear. Phillips writes that he seeks a 'model of the engagement with the environment that encourages us to abandon the "disinterested" and distanced view of the natural world'. He thereby seems to criticise a Kantian aesthetics, which Brady herself mentions affirmatively as an aesthetic approach with 'non-instrumental value ... a "liking" associated with the aesthetic response, namely disinterested pleasure'. But Phillips is confusing proximity with interest, and confusing a Kantian notion of disinterestedness with something closer to indifference. Aesthetic experiences arise, according to Kant, from sense intuition: the immersion in the sensual that Phillips seeks is in fact a pre-requisite for aesthetic judgments. And the imagination in Kant's argument is not remote from experience, as unfortunately Coleridge, and then Thoreau, and now Phillips infer – it is a power of visual schematising that presents sensual phenomena to the categories of the understanding. In the experience of the beautiful, the imagination continues to draw on the sense impression, reconfiguring it. We might picture how one reconfigures a cloud or flame, in utter absorption with the play of changing impressions and never quite subsuming the changing form under the categorisations the mind offers as 'cloud' or 'flame' – at least so long as that free, inconclusive, play between the imagination and the understanding continues. In the end, Brady is more drawn to the everydayness and practicality of Dewey's adoption of Kant, but what she and Phillips and Rolston all share with traditional aesthetics is a sense of the long-term benefits of the 'non-instrumental'. Instrumentality is revealed here as a mode of selfishness when we take into account the disastrous effects an instrumental approach to nature today will have on the future of nature itself.

All three papers emphasise that aesthetic experience is not merely 'decorative' in considerations of environmental policy. Nevertheless, when one views all of the papers included in this volume, emphasising the centrality of aesthetics seems more and more to be a matter of wishful thinking – the aesthetic seems to set sail and disappear over the horizon while the sea of discussion churns beneath the winds of cost-benefit analyses. Over and over, sustaining the biodiversity of nature is put in conflict with the needs of economic development: efficiency and a certain form of blunt pragmatism (as if bluntness were a form of pragmatism) reign. Indeed, the selfishness of the instrumental comes into relief in its full impracticality: calculating our approach to natural resources as a matter merely of current economic pressures, acting within a framework of rationality that is in truth irrational when one takes the long view, valuing false needs as if they

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were vital to our existence all create an atmosphere of emergency that obscures the true unfolding disaster of our relation to nature's finitude.

The urgency of these papers focusing on aesthetics and the environment, however, rests solidly, if paradoxically, in their insistence upon taking time, appreciating, refusing to skip a step or fall into practices without consideration of their outcomes. Brady, Rolston and Phillips are united in their concern with the ways environmental policy shapes human nature as it shapes the phenomenal world. To this extent, they show that judgments about our relation to nature are at the heart of who and what we are.

The questions that most deeply inform the course of our lives – 'What is human life and what is its extent?' 'What is the purpose of such life; toward what ends do we strive and what actions should be valued?' 'To what degree will we pursue pleasure and the postponement of death?' – have an impact on all future generations and it is the task of each generation to continue to seek answers for them, answers that will in turn affect later generations. Environmental policies made only on the basis of present-centred costs and benefits pose a failure of imagination as well as a failure of ethics. To proceed to make such policies without questioning the value of terms regarding value, to proceed with no consideration of the farthest reaching consequences, is already to doom the quality of life on earth.

To make environmental policy decisions on the short leash of necessity continues an unfortunate pedantic habit of arguing ethics from the extreme case. It is dishonest to argue environmental policy from a situation of scarcity when in truth we are arguing from a situation of plenty. As Holmes Rolston's paper brings forward, 'economic' justifications are often a mask for profiteering when nature is seen merely as potential property. Environmental policy is not motivated only by emergencies; it is made on a daily basis by individuals, by communities, by states and confederations, and by a nexus of global forces. Such policies necessarily must balance the needs of the present against those of the future and the needs of individuals against those of collectivities. What is sufficient justification for action or inaction has to be determined with an eye to the largest possible 'common' in space and the farthest possible future in time. Making policies inductively, from local circumstances to global impact, at least has the integrity of following nature in its recognition of mutuality and interdependence.

Thoreau began *Walden* with a chapter on 'Economy', but by this term he had in mind the Greek *oikos*, or household sphere. How we will keep our house in order, how we will shelter and sustain human life, is not a matter of the development of more material goods, but rather a matter of the development, the very anthropomorphisation, of ourselves. As Thoreau envisioned it, the outcome of such development is an increased capacity of judgment and self-determination, including the judging of the very terms of development, the limits and uses of technology, the meaning of self-reliance and neighbourliness alike.

We have long found ourselves in an environmental crisis, but we seem to have failed to recognise that the crisis is one of self-knowledge as much as one of context. What kind of planet we will hand over to future generations is inexplicably bound up with what kind of human beings we will become. Over the more or less four billion years during which nature has developed into a living array of potential arrangements, human life has played its part that is only a part. Is it our function on earth to diminish that array? Now that we must confront the finitude of organic nature as we know it, an idea quite foreign to a figure as recent as Thoreau, will we simply continue to use nature's resources at the same rate? Is our (so far as we know) unique capacity to understand and imagine the terms of our existence meant to be exercised in the narrow sphere of the creation, consumption, and destruction of material forms? Central to the category of aesthetic objects is the idea that they are replete phenomena, phenomena whose intention goes far beyond our apprehension, whose status transcends their material form alone.

Art forms are imitations of nature, not only in the sense that they can take the form of representations of specific phenomena of nature. Rather, they are products of those creative forces that link us as making beings with other makers of the animal world. And, self-conscious makers that we are, we can find in the full array of nature all available models for our own transfiguration. Emily Brady mentions the *biophilia* hypothesis that poses the mutual attraction between living forms: making and receiving art works is only one of the ways that life models and sparks more life. A relentless drift to materialism and the unthinking development of technology have led us mistakenly to think that the 'normal' state of nature is lifeless and that life is the exception. In destroying the natural world we are making our own worst thinking come true.

I suspect that when Thoreau wanted to grab that woodchuck and eat it alive he was thinking very much as a woodchuck, or at least as the woodchuck aspect of himself that Freud reminded us to protect in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Thoreau explains that he already had plenty of fish for dinner that particular evening – it was the raw animal connection that he was after. Our aesthetic responses are natural responses, based in sense intuition. They are responses of attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain alike. It therefore should be clearer than ever that what is bad for the environment is inevitably bad for us. When we think kinds of development are good for us that in truth are bad for the environment, we have made a short-sighted, or just plain bad, judgment about what is good for us.

Kant uses Frederick the Great's poem on a sunset as one of his primary examples of the role of aesthetical ideas in our experience of the beautiful, and perhaps Thoreau's symbolic approach to sunsets is influenced by this passage. But surely we also find sunsets significant because we are diurnal and heliotropic beings. What happens under the sun happens to us: when we make poems or paintings or symphonies or other forms that have endings, we think of the end

of day as a model for what an ending can be. We are natural beings who must think our relation to nature – even thinking we are part of nature involves thinking about that relation.

Here, too, we see the importance of Kant's notion of disinterestedness. When, within the larger frame of the three critiques, we follow his requirement of the suspension of use or appetite and the suspension of already-existing categories of the understanding, we can see that he is arguing for an apprehension of aesthetic experiences in and for themselves that is inseparable from our respect for persons in and for themselves. Kant distinguished carefully between deliberative and reflective judgments. Deliberative judgments are driven by utility and outcome. In contrast, reflective judgments are open-ended, characterising scientific and aesthetic experience. In the case of science, they enable us to create new categories of the understanding, and in the case of aesthetics, they free us from outcomes and let us exercise our faculties for their own sake. In the course of all human existence, that exercise may have a biological and cognitive function. But what Kant emphasises throughout the third critique is aesthetic experience as a sphere or reserve in life that will not be subject to prescribed ends.

When Kant makes his way at the end of his analytic of the sublime to the place where our unknowable relation to the noumenal is nevertheless intuited by the sublimity of our own Reason, we come very close to the concern with mind as an immanent feature of matter that is central to most philosophies of life from the pre-socratics forward. Here I am less sanguine than Holmes Rolston about the role of religion in environmental policy. There certainly can be a continuity between ideas of the sacred and the noumenal as a reserve and resource for human life in all its forms – here we see the special status the wilderness holds in our reverence for nature. But religion is more often than not based on ritual sacrifices of many kinds, including the sacrifice of animal and even human life. There seems to me to be no particular purchase that religion can provide for environmental ethics, especially if such religion is other-worldly rather than based in lived experiences of nature. To call for 'sacrifice' in the interest of the environment, as politicians today so often do, is artificially to pit our interests against the interests of nature and future generations. Such language continues to perpetuate an idea of scarcity that is blind to the enormous waste of labour and resources that characterises our modernity.

We need not be spectators of the inert when we can place life and ourselves as living beings at the centre of those judgments pressing upon us. Our immediate intentions are inescapable, but they are not everything, and with any luck we will be able to let our intuition of the superfluity of life continue to be ahead of our need to grasp and control it.

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