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Offending Against Nature

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ABSTRACT: Some environmental views characterise the human abuse of nature as an offence against nature itself. What conception of nature would best fit that characterisation? To focus upon such a conception, aesthetic offences against nature are examined and distinguished at the outset from moral offences. Aesthetic offences are divided into those internal to our cultural outlook and external to it. The external outlook, conceiving nature as a thing wholly apart from us, is shown to be necessary to any view of nature being offended against. Central to the external outlook is a conception of nature as the victim of offence without ever being itself an offending agent. Best fitting this is the notion of nature as primordially innocent. Given this metaphorical extension, the awkward consequence arises that any human use of nature constitutes thereby an abuse of it from the external standpoint.

KEYWORDS: natural aesthetics, environmental ethics, nature, culture

Talk has ever been common about the nastiness humans visit upon one another. These days, we also talk about damage done to or harms inflicted upon nature by humans. The language is strong. Nature is exploited, denuded, degraded, despoiled, raped, pillaged, and plundered. All these are offences against nature. Such offences can be more or less severe and so more or less serious. Some seemingly slight offences, those concerning litter say, might be thought merely aesthetic, while heavier assaults, like the wanton destruction of whole species or ecosystems, might be considered properly moral. My interest here concerns the character of such offences and the concepts of nature appropriate to them. Specifically, I am interested in what one is committed to in regarding nature itself as a victim, as an offended party.

DISTINGUISHING AESTHETIC AND MORAL OFFENCES

No clean divide separates aesthetic and moral offences. Their appearing to fall along a continuum of severity or seriousness is unhelpful, however, because we

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seem already to build morality into our notion of severity; i.e., severity is none other than moral severity. Severity thus is not a fitting benchmark against which to distinguish moral from non-moral offences.¹ More accurately, such offences belong as subclasses of a general class of offences which also contains as subclasses breaches of etiquette, legal wrongs, and an unnamed host of all the unkindness, irritation, inconsiderateness, pettiness, and kindred small nastinesses we visit upon one another with tiresome regularity. Any given offence or type of offence may belong simultaneously to a number of subclasses. To some, killing a whale can offend morally and aesthetically; wrecking a statue may offend legally and aesthetically; robbing a bank may offend morally and legally, and so on.

What are the differentiae of such subclasses of offence? Distinctions between them may perhaps be drawn in terms of relative weightiness or seriousness; i.e., in terms of our degree of upset over them or the form retaliation against offenders takes. Again, aesthetic offences may be thought to be more subjective than moral ones just as legal offences may be thought more a matter of convention than moral ones. Here spectra may be pertinent. The identification of aesthetic offences may reflect merely and most prominently the tastes and irritations of those who happen, contingently, to appreciate nature aesthetically. Presumably, there is no external call upon any of us to take an aesthetic interest in nature, let alone anything, however empty a life this would betray. On the other hand, we are more comfortable with the supposition that no one can ignore forever the call to some measure of moral sensitivity.

A further distinction may be based on differences in the victims of offence. Acts identified as moral offences are offences against someone or other. But there are two distinct offended parties here; viz., the primary offended party or *victim* who suffers directly the moral offence (e.g., the person who is knifed or deceived or robbed) and the secondary offended party or *judge* who rues and condemns the offence.² Aesthetic offences may perhaps be distinguished from moral ones in collapsing the roles of victim and judge; i.e., in aesthetic offence the primary offended party is one and the same as he or she who judges an aesthetically offensive episode to have transpired.³ This is consistent with the view that aesthetic judgments reflect strongly upon one's personal circumstances. No imputations of aesthetic offence can properly be made on behalf of anyone other than the speaker because any aesthetic judgment is properly and exclusively *about* the pleasures or pains of the speaker.

Of course, much aesthetic judgment reflects a broader constituency than the speaker. To deplore the vandalism of a statue or a rock formation, one presumably puts oneself forward as representative (or at least speaks on behalf) of all those who would (or should) be similarly offended. The offence is, however, still one-sided compared with moral offence because it applies not to the vandalised object which has not itself suffered offence but only to actual and potential appreciators or judges of the object. And so we would suppose, for it makes no

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

obvious sense to imagine that the vandalised object has itself been offended against.

If judgments of aesthetic offence refer to no victim or if the only victims of aesthetic offence are those who judge that such offence has occurred, then aesthetic judgments definitely seem less weighty, less serious than judgments advanced as moral.⁴ But just as extreme subjectivism seems not to capture the full constituency represented and intended in some aesthetic judgments, so the judge-as-victim view itself seems insensitive to the recognition of a victim other than the judges themselves; i.e., nature itself.

Obviously, aesthetic judgments may be trivialised so as to undervalue aesthetic responses to nature. However, aesthetic response to nature may be quite inseparable from our moral regard. How can one dissociate the aesthetic weight of qualities typically appealed to as grounds for moral regard for nature; e.g., diversity, complexity, stability, unity, harmony, equilibrium, order, integrity, and so on?⁵ Far from being weightless such responses are arguably central to our moral attitudes to nature.⁶

All this aside, aesthetic complaints about the treatment of nature merit consideration because they are so prominent, because they rise so effortlessly, because they seem so untutored, honest. It is as if aesthetic regard comes, with some anyway, as part of native responsive equipment. We can learn much about moral regard by attending to aesthetic response. So it pays to investigate what aesthetic offences against nature are and how these reflect on a concept of nature which allows for it to be offended against.

AESTHETIC OFFENCES: GENERAL CONDITIONS

If there are aesthetic offences properly and directly against nature, how can we construe *nature itself* as the offended party? For surely, 'nature' is merely the name for an abstract idea or an abbreviation for the collection of everything that is the case. And how can an abstract conception or the largest pile of stuff be literally offended? Obviously, this prompts the question: What sort of conception of nature would support the conviction that nature as such can literally suffer offence?

To start, we should consider the principal marks of aesthetic offences generally; but, more importantly, whether aesthetic offences in the natural sphere are distinct from those in the cultural sphere besides obvious differences in target. Further, are there any qualities in common amongst the agents or causes of aesthetic offence?

I distinguish natural and cultural spheres principally by origin. Roughly, that which is the product of human hands and minds I include in the cultural sphere; otherwise it belongs to the natural sphere. Without humans, the world would have had quite a different inventory. That world would be without culture. Of

course, the history and fate of the natural and cultural have been intertwined so long that it becomes impossible to package each neatly and discretely. A domesticated species is hardly as natural as a purely wild one. Still, the very distribution of wild species has been influenced by human activity. A cathedral is hardly as natural as a cave. Still, a cave decorated by a neolithic painter is not just a hole in a mass of rock. 'Natural' and 'cultural' are both unavoidably vague. For my purpose, it is sufficient that we can agree upon uncontested unequivocal cases; e.g., Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* is a purely cultural entity while the Moon is purely natural. (One may reject the moral or aesthetic significance of the distinction without having to reject the distinction. Such is the option taken by those with an *internal* view of aesthetic offence, as is discussed below).

What then are the features of aesthetic offence? Are offences against nature distinctive? Consider these questions in terms of (a) taste, (b) intention, and (c) conflict.

(a) If moral offences are all marked by a knowing if not wilful insensitivity to the interests, welfare, or emotions of others, all aesthetic offences, whether in the cultural or natural spheres, typically display tastelessness in some measure. Cultural tastelessness is typically manifested in gaudiness or ugliness in human affairs generally. More locally, disrespect for finer art causes aesthetic offence. Tastelessness in the natural sphere often arises in the form of an objectionable intervention; when nature has been uninvitedly sullied or soiled by gratuitous human intrusions which bespeak interference, carelessness or indifference. The distinction rests on more than that which is offended against. Aesthetic offences against nature, unlike those in the cultural sphere, are coarse because necessarily they are unilateral intrusions, the most serious ones being violations of a sort of sanctity. Cultural aesthetic offence often arises from bilateral conflicts or clashes of taste, from a perceived violation of certain rules or proprieties.

(b) Aesthetic offences, in either the natural or cultural sphere, need not have been intentionally, wilfully or deliberately caused with a view to offend. (How was I to know how painful you find my neon green fence?) Further, such offences need not be intentional at all. They may come about accidentally. The can of indelible neon green paint I accidentally spilled on the sidewalk causes you the same aesthetic aggravation as if I had done it on purpose. In such cases, it is not clear that any such offence becomes aesthetically, if not morally, worse by the presence of malice. But to suggest that the severity of an aesthetic offence is unaffected by its history would suppose controversially that such offences reside entirely in their effect upon someone and not at all in their cause or motive. This is too sweeping a conclusion and one needing considerable qualification.

Suppose we deny, further, that human agency itself – wilful or not – is a necessary component of aesthetic offence. If so, we must allow that some aesthetic offences flow, in the lingo of the insurance business, from 'acts of God', i.e., liability-free and even agentless sources. Venetian floods which ruin Renaissance murals would fall into this category.

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

But this seems extreme. While the effects may be aesthetically painful, we should resist thinking them offensive. Why? Because to identify an offence is to establish, however harshly, a liability. Stereotypically, offences are visited upon the offended by offenders. And offenders are a focus of blame, however unwarranted. Offences need agents of some sort. Job may rightfully complain for he suffers the effects of proper agency. Venetian art lovers lack this outlet precisely because they are the victims of nothing more than bad luck.

Human victims of offence can, if offence derives from offenders, choose to retaliate, to become offenders themselves and return offence for offence. Here another divide dawns between offences against us – cultural offences – and those against nature. Retaliation is not universally available. Whereas any wilful human can cause aesthetic offence, nature cannot.⁷

(c) Aesthetic offence often results from and signals conflict. Offences within both the cultural and natural spheres – cultural and natural offences, henceforth – involve humans coming into conflict with each other or with nature. But the conflict itself is variable.

Cultural offence often arises, as indicated above, from a clash of conceptions and expressions of taste. My artful graffiti is your defacement; my stunning lawn gnomes your embarrassment; my magnificent drive-in rootbeer palace, your call to file with the Planning Development Appeal Board.

Unintentional or even fortuitous offences also signal conflict even if there may be no one immediately to blame or deride. There will, nonetheless, be something needing correction or reversal. The conflict in such cases is not clearly inter-personal, though those suffering offence may treat the circumstance as if there were some offender with deficient taste. Whatever the conflict, all cultural offence is purely *internal* to human affairs and involves only human victims and offenders.

Natural offence can be conceived in two ways; i.e., (1) *internally*, as a form of cultural offence involving our claim upon the natural sphere, or (2) *externally*, as an offence against nature as victim proper. The external view gives substance and unexpected complexity to the notion of offences against nature.

Natural aesthetic offences come in many forms from the mild (even incidental) to the brutal. Consider littering a beach, defacement of cliffs by climbers, tearing up of paths by mountain bikes, stripping hills for ski runs, all the way to larger environmental assaults like clear-cutting, strip-mining, river-damming, raw sewage disposal, decimation of species, and so on. Is the destruction of the ozone layer an aesthetic offence? Most clearly in the external sense, I would argue, and not so clearly in the internal sense.

Taking such offences internally, one treats everything whatever, including the natural sphere, as a common arena of what is essentially cultural impact. There are strictly no conflicts between humans and nature, no primordial bad blood. On this view, because conflicts arise purely between human groups, humans are the only ones who ultimately can cause and suffer aesthetic offence.

This internal perspective draws no significant distinction between, say, human litter in cities or in forests except perhaps as a matter of degree. Internalism undermines the distinctiveness of aesthetic offences against nature by assimilating such offences into the class of familiar cultural offences. Those who believe everything is nature and nature is everything reject the significance of any distinction between nature and culture (if they accept the distinction at all) and so, effectively, feel free to treat all aesthetic and moral matters internally. Nature on this view is a type of setting, a theatre, in which aesthetic conflicts between human 'valuers' emerge.

The internalist outlook consistently treats aesthetic qualities like messiness or sloppiness univocally so that forests or beaches can be judged messy or sloppy pretty much as one would judge gardens, musical performances, city centres, or arguments. With no nature-culture line drawn, nothing complicates appropriate corrective action in the face of offence. It becomes, on this view, as appropriate to tidy a beach of rotting kelp or jellyfish as it is to tidy it of plastic cartons or globs of oil. Should the kelp or jellyfish be left alone, that is not, on this view, because they are 'natural' and so not aesthetically offensive, but because they are judged, say, to contribute to a bigger aesthetic whole – e.g., the romanticised wild and windswept beach – which not only tolerates but demands their presence, much as an engaging piece of drama demands something ugly or even repulsive like a villain. By itself, ugliness constitutes an aesthetic offence; however, embedded and functionally understood, the villain is necessary for the aesthetic success of the whole. This internal functionalist view of whatever is naturally fitting or offensive from an aesthetic perspective constitutes an almost staged or canned conception of natural aesthetics.

Suppose, instead, that nature gains recognition as a *bona fide* offended party rather than a place where offences are committed by humans against each other or as chattels over which there is human disagreement; then natural offence proper can be viewed as *external*, i.e., outside the human sphere. Such offence results from a perceived incompatibility, a lack of fit, between nature and some expression of culture. But unlike offences internal to the human sphere, there are no matched and opposing champions of taste. The externalist views the aesthetic offence as against some aspect of nature and only incidentally against some human; e.g., as a side-effect. Nature is literally a party offended by certain human acts but a party without its own aesthetic view.

It may seem that 'internal/external' is just another name for the anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric distinction. The former, however, has a different emphasis. The call to a non-anthropocentric outlook arises principally in ethics as a reminder that what is important to us humans in our lives (a) does not exhaust whatever is important to any other life and (b) has no claim to moral exclusivity or even superiority. So long as we recognise that there are things of importance to nonhumans (which may not coincide with what is of importance to us), that recognition suffices to establish the moral weight of such matters of importance.

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

The non-anthropocentric outlook does not exclude matters of human importance; it just puts them in their place and often denies them pride of place.

The external outlook denies that nature finds a place on the same evaluative scale on which we include ourselves, and reminds us that there may be something so fundamentally different about nature that we are advised not to include it in our considerations as if its 'interests' were somehow comparable or commensurable with our own. I may know perfectly well why you find my littering a beach offensive, but that gets me no closer to articulating why there is some harm done to the beach *qua* natural. If I am obliged to take nature into consideration on its own terms, there is no sense, for example, in considering compromise solutions. Nature and I cannot come to a compromise any more than I can strike a deal with a species.

ARTICULATING OFFENCES AGAINST NATURE

However tidily the internal and external views present a parallel between types of offence by neatly distinguishing those offended against, it is difficult to clarify precisely the nature of the external offence. Conflicts internal to culture are just intra-specific squabbles. In any internal squabble, we can at least articulate the principles behind the disagreement. The parties in conflict can identify what it is that offends them and even why. We may even specify some remedy however reluctant the parties are to make amends. Offences externally viewed are distinct in that there can be no internal culturally-centred focus let alone solution to the offence. This is because culture itself, represented as a whole in human activity, constitutes the offence. As observers we may specify what bothers us in such cases but that is insufficient if we think a properly natural offence has occurred, one offensive to nature as such.

Further, there is obviously no possibility of mutual understanding or even misunderstanding. There is no mutuality because nature is not a respondent. With internal conflicts, we strictly only speak for ourselves. With external conflicts, we may only get as far as telling our side and yet be convinced that there remains untold another story faith in the existence of which forms the basis for a type of offence *sui generis* against nature.

Consider this simple illustration. Offence: candy bar wrapper on an otherwise pristine beach. Solution: remove it and dispose of it in that arch-cultural artefact, the garbage can. We solve this one by removing all culturally-derived entities from the immediate natural sphere. To recognise an external natural aesthetic offence is to acknowledge not just the offensive intrusion of a specific cultural product, but the offensiveness of culture through its representative in the context. It is irrelevant to the offence how precisely the litter came to be there or what exactly it is. It might have been carelessly or accidentally dropped. It might have been carefully disposed of miles away but retrieved by an enterprising gull

who dropped it from a great height. It might have been a priceless painting instead of a bit of commercial detritus. What is wrong is not just the looks of the setting, but that the way it looks which is made possible only by the existence of culture.

On this reading of externalism, culture cannot but intrude. Otherwise, we should be willing to accept as an alternative solution the introduction by the candy manufacturer of an environmentally respectful self-effacing chameleon wrapper, one which instantly blends indiscernibly with its disposal site be it the beach, the woods, the desert, or the sitting room. Imagine, further, that it unobtrusively disintegrates into its elements shortly after disposal. However much this 'biodegradability' may be a pragmatic solution to a problem of unsightliness, it fails to remove the external offence. Even if it is forever unnoticed, even if it actually satisfies the aesthetic taste of the passing observer, it remains an external aesthetic offence, an *intrusion* into the non-cultural sphere.

EXTERNALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

How does the external view make of the natural sphere an offended party, literally and directly? This parallels a central question in environmental ethics. How can moral harm be inflicted on nature itself as such? How can nature itself have interests or goods which may be morally violated?

Unsurprisingly, a concept of nature reflecting the external view is mirrored in environmental ethics. Environmental philosophy generally draws upon an externalist concept of nature.

Roughly, environmental ethics analyses moral harms against nature either by (a) making other living things the wronged parties or (b) revising the notion of moral concern to fit the new victim of abuse. Option (a) stays within and draws upon the morally relevant differences between the biotic and abiotic spheres. Alternative (b), taking seriously integration-oriented ecological or holistic or systems-based perspectives, minimises the centrality of the biotic/abiotic distinction, and opts instead for a comprehensive locus of concern – call it 'nature' – which, as a whole, is (as if) the bearer of whatever is sufficient to draw forth our moral respect. Option (a) is unsatisfactory because it threatens, however unintentionally, to leave humans as the inheritors of the earth; i.e., if sentience or some other psychological aspect counts fundamentally, then human interests must so count. When they do count, they tend to count for more because of the value placed in experiential complexity. Further, it simply cannot accommodate direct properly moral regard for ecosystems. By elimination, option (b) earns considerable sympathy.

Option (b) charges nature as a whole with organismic or even lifelike qualities, and is arguably a form of animism. But can we plausibly accept an environmental philosophy which calls back a form of animism? To appreciate further the lure and pitfalls of animism, a view which seems forced upon us by

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

the external viewpoint, it is helpful to explore a little further how animism connects with our moral regard for nature. This will contribute toward our clarifying aesthetic offences.

NATURE ANIMATED

To comprehend the violation of nature itself, it is tempting to adopt some broad personification of nature. This does not require us to think of nature as recognisably like us; however, one aspect is critical. Nature must be conceived as *active*, as if alive, at least, a quasi-agent – veritably Spinoza’s *natura naturans*. Activity or agency is a property of all active ingredients; but the activity of an acid or a seismic force is not recognisably anthropomorphic. The agency of animism is centred in things as if it were an emanation of will. As usual, we had best let the poet speak, no better a cluster of images alive than Dylan Thomas’s sense of ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower ... that blasts the roots of trees... that drives the water through the rocks ... that dries the mouthing streams ... that whirls the water in the pool ... that ropes the blowing wind’.

Many would resist this agency view of nature. But what exactly is objectionable about this neo-Gaian view that nature (or forces within nature) is as if alive and properly an agent or even a person which responds and suffers, which operates to sustain itself, flourish, and correct harmful imbalances, which has its own ‘point of view’, its own good? One hears it said that cultures, ancient or modern, which accept a personified view of nature are somehow closer to nature than non-animistic, mechanistically oriented cultures, or are at least more respectful of nature, closer to whatever environmentalists think a proper ethical regard for nature consists in.⁸

The resistance flows from our science which either cannot or will not accommodate or is not served by accommodating any animistic conceptions – and science speaks loudly. Many have noted the first mocking tones in the dismissal of the Aristotelian explanation of free-fall acceleration and later animistic expressions typical of Renaissance Naturalism.⁹ The lack of accommodation may flow from a firm methodological attachment to some principle of parsimony, or to the achievement of the pragmatic goals of prediction and control without invoking animism, or to a flat metaphysical rejection of neo-theistic teleological echoes. Just as we can appreciate Newton’s achievement without acknowledging any of his beliefs about having discovered the fundamental regulative ideas in God’s mind, so we can make sense of process in nature without regarding this order as reflecting the personal fortunes of a huge agent.

Some environmental philosophies are drawn to some such huge agent; however, they tend to defer to the scientific authority of ecology. Ecology, however, is an unreliable ally in that it is compatible with non-personalised, mechanistic conceptions of natural processes. Just as physiology has made of organic bodies complex functional chemical machines, ecology reveals yet more

machines with interconnecting seemingly functional parts, however lacking the organic cohesion and integrity attaching to single cells or organisms.¹⁰ Ecology's virtual machines are still machines.

Our culture as yet attaches no special moral regard to mere machines, however complex. True, genuine affectionate attachments are formed to musical instruments or cars – and androids may one day be accorded rights. These are incidental, however, to our case. Wilful damage to one's guitar is an affront against the owner, and the imaginary androids are so human-like in manner our spontaneous temptation is to regard them as relevantly intelligent. Nature remains outside these familiar extensions, even when conceived ecologically. So, environmentalism needs something further to respect in nature, some convincingly organismic or even soul-like presence. The alternative is to retreat to an anthropocentric solution.

Perhaps environmentalism should just bite the bullet and adopt animism or personification openly and so conceive of nature's activity as distinctively as ever Descartes did that of Mind. Why not say that whatever science investigates simply leaves out and over nature's deeper agency, and that, however successful scientific models and predictions, they simply fail to encompass nature's proper essence? Relatedly, why not say that scientific models are inadequate precisely because they fail to disclose nature as having its own moral and aesthetic worth?

Any resistance to the enriching complication of animism will be motivated by fears of being branded irrational, mystical, anti-scientific. This, after all, is spa-philosophy, mere poetry. Whatever nod may be paid to genuinely animistic cultures, science has convinced enough of us that they were basically wrong, ignorant or primitive in their conceptions, and that we, despite Newton's theism, have outgrown all this naive superstition. It seems inevitable that any view reserving a special place and regard for nature cannot count on drawing much support from the fundamentally mechanistic *spirit* of Western science however much it draws upon what it counts as the ecological *evidence* of offence against nature which that very science supplies.¹¹

AESTHETIC OFFENCES AND THEIR CULTURAL BASE

Embracing animism requires at least a controversial reassessment of modern science. A further problem with animism or personification is its compatibility with the view that, as nature can suffer, so too can it cause offence. This notion of nature offending works against another conception of nature as primitively the offended non-offender.

Can nature itself cause aesthetic offence? Can any species or natural event do so? Humans, obviously, can cause natural offence and so too their domesticated implants. This shows up in complaints about grazing rights in national parks even where species displacement arguments may not be very persuasive. Cattle

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

just do not fit in Capitol Reef's desert, however bereft of biomass it is. Since cultural intrusion is the culprit, any species expressive of it can be a source of offence. But since such species are themselves products of intense husbandry, one can scarcely consider nature the offender. We may find offensive deliberately or accidentally introduced non-domesticated species like Starlings or Russian Thistle, but, again, the real offence here is a perceived invasion of nature proper, a violation of natural integrity, of the sanctity of the body of nature, due exclusively to culpable human action, inaction, or ignorance.

One retaliatory response says that human activity is as much a natural occurrence as anything else, so, trivially, if humans can so offend, then nature offends against itself. The internal/external and, along with it, the nature/culture distinctions are thus said to collapse.

This response is, however, unhelpful. We have reasons for holding back on the claim that what we do is always natural because we have grounds for denying we are integrally part of nature. Without a nature/culture distinction, every serious explanation concerning human existence would have ultimately to be biological. But they are not. One primal biological force driving the development of life is evolution by natural selection. Much of genetics is subservient to that process, and thus too, the very biochemistry of life. But humans are not obviously subservient to that process. If we were, our standard histories would be massively deficient if not fairytales outright. Natural selection has not been much of an explanatory factor in human history. We conceive ourselves differently not so much because we're technologically and communicatively clever but because, somehow, we detached ourselves from natural selection and replaced that with internally driven self-selection which emerges as culture. Though cultural processes and evolution are scarcely rational, they are not quite as passive or blind as natural selective processes.¹² We experiment with our own cultural evolution, however clumsily, and reach results the best explanation of which requires an inference to the presence of cultural agency *sui generis*. Besides, we lack entirely any immediate sense of what it is like to survive under natural selective pressure, to live in the midst of and as creatures whose very existence and fortunes are ultimately due to selection. That is one strand in our irreversible alienation from nature. As for our ideals of harmony and oneness with nature, these are arguably mere *social* ideals grafted uncritically as if biological onto a world in which such notions lack any universal descriptive or explanatory application.

Of course, we are not beings utterly apart, but any living acquaintance we have of nature is probably confined to sudden and unrehearsed reversions or regressions which are largely visceral. Such acquaintance is primordially *felt*. Such reversions surface in occasional hard-wired fears – of the dark, of snakes, of heights, which seem to be genuinely biological residues – and certain rare moments of perception stripped involuntarily of as many overlays as we can shed without being mere unconscious sensory receivers. Some writers on the sublime

have tried to articulate such occasions.¹³ But there is nothing systematic about felt knowledge.

Are we forced to choose between just two alternatives; viz., everything is nature, which becomes artificially vacuous, or everything is human culture, which makes beaver culture – quite oblivious to our own – completely unintelligible? I think not. So long as we think ‘culture’ designates whatever cannot be accommodated within our most intelligible accounts of our very own natural heritage, and that moral arguments exist against what we describe as despoliation or exploitation, the nature/culture distinction earns its keep. Acknowledging the degradation of nature is intelligible only if we distinguish at least some of our enterprises from the natural sphere. To say ‘everything belongs to nature’ has about the same force as ‘everything exists in space’. Behind the unified vision fundamental distinctions just re-emerge.

CAN NATURE OFFEND?

Contrary to suggestions near the start, aesthetic offences against nature are unavoidably tagged by their causes, not just their effects. A planned military exercise or an unplanned munitions plant explosion may result in damage indistinguishable from the eruption of a Pinatubo. Only the former offends aesthetically against nature. Lacking any human presence, no natural offence is possible, however devastating from our perspective, or humanly tragic. This suggests that nature, unlike culture, cannot offend against itself.

Can nature offend against culture, against us? Inexorable natural forces wear down our cultural treasures and drive us to intervene. If we don’t, the Ozymandias syndrome says we lose. But, as the effects of Fortune, this inevitability is not so much an assault as it is merely a misfortune for us. There is no villain here nor anyone wronged. Our science tells us at least this: many things just happen because other things just happen. The forces of erosion do not discriminate between marble boulders and marble statues.

Earlier, I appealed to the almost primordial quality of aesthetic response to nature and took it to be a fair indicator of proper offence. But cases arise where we spontaneously feel just as offended by natural circumstances as we might by a direct gratuitous human intervention. This points to internalism as the primordial root. Very near my former home the redoubtable *Castor canadensis*, the beaver, has made a mighty comeback. Like us, beavers make themselves at home. They chop down trees, dam streams, build lodges, stash food, dig canals to reach more trees, dam more streams, build more lodges. They teach their kids how to do all of this too. With remarkable speed the beaver knock down all the mature poplar for food and strip the bank willow for dams and lodges. They flood out and turn to stagnant marsh what once were gentle streams lined with healthy mature trees. It is a wonder no less, but violates directly certain cherished stereotypes of natural beauty.

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

Humans take well aesthetically to certain natural environmental alterations. The sand cliffs pock-marked by bank swallows, even the guano spattered rock ledges of a kittiwake colony have a certain appeal, a certain fitting quality. Beaverworks, however, often look as raw as a clear-cut campaign and show as little concern for balance and scenic comeliness as any industrial operation, maybe even less. Unlike the fortuitous and spectacular effects of volcanoes and hurricanes, this is systematic, ongoing, deliberate, and preventable.

We may need to restrain our seemingly spontaneous responses. Nature offends here only if we adopt the internal perspective. What the beaver does to its environment is an aesthetic offence only against culturally internalised desiderata. Many of our natural aesthetic desiderata are cultural extrapolations, stretching thinly the film of the beautiful and the awe-inspiring beyond the limits of the artefactual. But, as extrapolations, they create artefacts which don't exist in or as nature at all.

Can we abandon our native internalist aesthetic perspective? Should we do so? No amount of ecological information about beaver ingenuity will make less of a mess out of the setting. No amount of appreciating the woodland 'economy' of beaver marshes restores what was once, for many, an aesthetically fetching locale which itself, given certain Panglossian strands in ecology, excelled in its very own splendid pre-beaver woodland 'economy'. Ecologically, we must just accept the displacement of one perfect bit of nature's own forestry management for another. Ecologically, there is nothing to prefer between these two manifestations of natural harmony, the ever-present *pax natura*.

Aesthetically, from the internal standpoint, there is every basis for preference. The best we can do, fighting our predictable attachment to internalism, is say to ourselves over and over: 'There are no messes in nature', while closing our eyes to the hard visual evidence to the contrary. For, to have any consistently conventional aesthetic sensibility at all, any internalist aesthetic driven by an urge for design, it is difficult not to see a mess.

EXTERNALISM AND POSITIVE NATURAL AESTHETICS

By rejecting internalism and accepting the aesthetically levelling verdict of ecological propriety in natural systems, we gain some ground for claiming that nature gives rise to no aesthetic offence and, accordingly, that nothing in nature is aesthetically offensive. Does this mean that externalism commits one to some version of so-called 'positive aesthetics', recently elaborated by Allen Carlson and Eugene Hargrove?¹⁴ Carlson defends the position that 'the natural world is essentially aesthetically good', while Hargrove argues that 'nature is beautiful and has no negative aesthetic qualities', that 'nature is always beautiful and never ugly'. More strongly, Hargrove claims that ugliness in nature is 'impossible'.

Such aesthetic largesse is absent in the art world where our responses are guided by considerations of artistic quality and merit often made explicit in

principles of taste. Positive aesthetics seems an understandable option in the natural sphere perhaps because there exists no deeply entrenched tradition of taste and connoisseurship regarding the natural world as there is for the world of art. Further, positive aesthetics seems consonant with other positive conceptions of nature; e.g., as an interlocking set of optimally self-adjusting self-regulating systems, or, less buoyantly, as a set of internally organised systems no one of which displays superior organisation to any other. This ensures that offence comes only from non-natural sources, and consists in creating disequilibrium and instability.

All considered, however, the externalist view does not involve positive aesthetics. This is because natural beauty typically conceived is the beauty of form or expression, and incorporates considerations of colour, composition, and movement. All these derive from our appreciation of art which is quintessentially cultural. Any such aesthetic judgments we make about nature are principally about that artefactual film we wrap things in to give us something intelligible to say to one another. The criteria of appraisal, too, are typically cultural. Bluntly, positive aesthetics says no more about nature than anyone has to say about art, and so exemplifies yet another internal stance.¹⁵ Even if positive aesthetics claims that nature beats us out in the aesthetic game because, unlike us, it never blunders, this too involves cultural assimilation. If nature wins our beauty contests, nature is thereby lost just by entering.¹⁶

The external view is neutral regarding natural beauty and ugliness. This neutrality derives from the inappropriateness of forcing the notions of aesthetic beauty and ugliness upon the natural. The external view possibly accepts the distinction drawn by Burke, Kant and Schopenhauer between the beautiful and the sublime.¹⁷ However, since natural sublimity is unquestionably a positive attribute and since, on such views, not all that is natural is sublime, the divide between the naturally sublime and the naturally commonplace just redraws in different words any distinction invoking the beautiful/ordinary contrast.¹⁸

PRIMORDIAL INNOCENCE : THE OFFENDED NON-OFFENDER

We seem to be flirting with conceptual problems. Nature can offend neither against itself nor against us because it is not an agent or person-like being of any culpable sort, nor the instrument of any person of any culpable sort. The external view identifies nature as unilaterally a victim of offence. Nature can be an offended party but is never itself culpable. We have awkwardly to view nature as more than a mere passive collection of things, and yet less than a potentially culpable agent. Only such an intermediate being can be hurt without hurting, and can erode without wrecking.

Suppose we reconsider the dichotomy between active and passive beings. Nature, odd to say, seems to be neither. That is, nature is neither the spiritless machine or cold chaos of science, nor is it the organic protector-provider-slayer

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

of animism or kindred Gaian and mother earth accounts. However ordered, it is neither like our tools and gadgets; nor is it like us, or our organisations. Unfortunately, when we conceive nature we seem to have to choose between the active or passive paradigm, much as we cannot hedge about whether a thing is animate or inanimate. Reference to *aspects* of nature will not help much here, any more than they help in talk about persons. Were a being purely passive, it could not be a person, however much persons may have both active and passive aspects. However, we may avoid having to choose between nature as active or passive much as Strawson avoided the conundrum of characterising persons fundamentally as mental or physical entities. Just as Strawson's persons are beings *sui generis* in exemplifying two radically distinct types of properties, so we might say that the natural world is precisely that entity which suffers loss at the hands of those outside it without causing loss to anyone.

Pure physical passivity will not do. Such passivity is pure inertness, and whatever is truly inert cannot be a target of offence. Unilateral victimisation rules out agency in nature. Another type of passivity, however, drawn by analogy from human conceptions may provide a conceptual guide. Suppose we identify the natural world as purely and primordially *innocent*. This might get us closer to appreciating the metaphorical tie between the *naturally pristine* and *guiltlessness* or *being without fault*, and thus the peculiar status of nature as an offended party unable to offend. The purely innocent cannot offend, but the innocent can suffer. Innocence here has no legal connotations. It is not a case of being innocent *of* an offence. Instead, it is taken as a global form of character, so to speak, as a way of existing. It suggests, broadly, not only a state of blamelessness, but, more positively, the state of being completely self-justifying. The way something is *qua* innocent calls for no accounting to some third party. Instead, to be thus innocent calls to account anyone who would interfere. This might explain why it is so hopeless to try to distinguish between ethical and aesthetic offences against nature considered this way.

AESTHETIC OFFENCE IS UNAVOIDABLE

If natural aesthetic offence results from an invasion of nature by cultural elements, there is scarcely anything cultural agents can do to nature which does not conflict aesthetically with it. Even restricting ourselves to the daily ways we play out our cultural ambitions and ignore blatant assaults of conquest upon nature, we cannot help leaving our intrusive mark. We cannot build or cultivate or travel without pushing nature aside. To counterbalance our intrusiveness, we create sanctuaries to spare nature and ourselves the common conflict but these too are merely the children of conflict.

Nature contains no boundaries, zones of jurisdiction, wilderness areas. The very notion of an area, a circumscribed space, belongs to the notion of property. The area set aside for preservation cannot be natural because it bears the stamp

of being ‘an area set aside for the purpose of preservation’, an ineradicably cultural property. What we conserve, then, is not nature but its cultural representative, so to speak. Designated natural areas are effectively open-air museums, galleries through which rivers run. Our aesthetic assessments of such areas are unavoidably internal precisely because these areas exist exclusively as expressions of cultural value. This points to an extreme conclusion: human culture as such *generally* constitutes the cause and content of aesthetic offences against nature. Externally viewed, culture cannot but offend.

LINKING AESTHETIC AND MORAL OFFENCES AGAINST NATURE

Above, I suggested that a picture of nature (or things natural) as primordially innocent provides a way of conceiving nature as principally neither machine-like nor agent-like and as something open to offence but incapable of offending. On this view, the tie between innocence and the natural blurs any distinction between aesthetic and moral offence if only because the violation of innocence is an injustice. Despite this, such a distinction provides some understanding of whatever the aesthetic contributes to our acknowledgement of offences against nature. Otherwise, aesthetic complaint is subsumed under the moral sphere, leaving it a weaker weapon in our moral campaign against wrongs done to nature.

What distinguishes an aesthetic invasion of nature? Most assaults upon nature which rouse moral qualms tend also to offend aesthetically. Often, what is morally wrong coincides precisely with what is aesthetically offensive. One may thus doubly rue the blights caused by forestry, mining, and development. More rarefied are condemnations of ecological imbalance and disharmony brought on by human dealings. Aesthetic offence regarding nature is displayed both in obvious formal violations of sensory appreciation and in subtle sub-sensory disruptions of environmental integrity.

However, some moral offences against nature are not necessarily aesthetically offensive if the latter appeals only to surface perceptual effects. Many morally reprehensible disruptions of nature do not fall within immediate sensory purview. Sometimes, the perceptual effects may take centuries to ripen. More awkwardly, aesthetic appeal may be *enhanced* despite or even because of degradation. Lakes sterilised by acid rain are strikingly serene. One’s aesthetic enjoyment is surely improved by the blessed absence of black flies and mosquitoes, even if they were eliminated by subtle spraying operations. The tranquillity, of course, is the offspring of unnatural causes, but it is tranquil no less – on the surface.

In principle, one may prefer aesthetically what one abhors morally. Otherwise, we could never understand any conflicts between art and morality. If, however, the aesthetic perspective runs below surface sensory appeal, and reacts to the very *unnatural* causes of the serenity or the absence of biting bugs, then

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

what strikes as a matter of aesthetic offence may be brought closer to one's moral unease.

Sophisticated conceptions of aesthetic response to nature require such sub-surface sensitivity. This has much in common with cultural aesthetics which trains us to regard perceptually undetectable forgery as aesthetically relevant, and with our common response to a person's beauty which can be massively checked by knowing the person's insides are rotten with disease. One can presumably take such qualifications of aesthetic response as responses to discoveries carrying *moral* force. Certainly, such broadening of aesthetically relevant factors generally minimises conflict with the moral perspective.

The absence of bugs can raise moral anguish. Rachel Carson taught us decades ago to see the devil in peacefulness. But can it ever be *aesthetically* offensive that one is not pestered by bugs? On the face of it, this seems to stretch aesthetic response beyond the customary unless one likens it to the aesthetic letdown at not being terrified by a horror movie. But the cases differ. Whereas we seek out the safe terror of a film as an aesthetic goal, I know no one who seeks out mosquitoes as part of any aesthetic delights in the wild. And yet, the external aesthetic view makes this absence an affront easily as monumental as the flooding of Glen Canyon. At this level, the moral and the aesthetic merge. Disparity between them when applied to nature can only arise from the internal perspective.

THE ABSURDITY OF NATURAL AESTHETICS

But, the extreme external account suggests that the merest appropriation, the slightest alteration, of the natural in the pursuit or as an effect of human purposes must be an intrusion because any such appropriation thereby undermines the natural, sullies the innocent. Taken full strength, this view lumps footprints in the sand together with the most callous irreversible acts of environmental degradation.¹⁹ Once we appear and begin to act, however timorously and respectfully, the rot starts, the offence is planted. But this must be absurd, for, if it were not, there would be no escape from offending against nature short of avoiding nature altogether.

Here's the trouble: any short-cuts to the extreme external view slide quickly into an internal perspective. Any internal perspective absorbs nature within culture and so forsakes any natural aesthetic proper. So, natural aesthetics proper is either absurd or not natural aesthetics at all. This is most awkward.²⁰

NOTES

¹ A parallel with validity suggests itself if used to distinguish between the weakness and strength of arguments where that is meant to span the inductive-deductive range. Inductive arguments are no more weakly valid than aesthetic offences lack full severity.

² I ignore the possibility that there may be two separate offences here and two separate victims. This would provide any publicised offence with an inordinate number of victims. It would, besides, be odd to suppose that a wrong already committed becomes increasingly worse as more people who think it wrong come to know about it. If coming to know can lead to and constitute an offence, and if feeling offended is a negative state, the adverse consequences of a wrong may either be adjusted just by suppressing information about it, or be uncontrollable and potentially immense so long as information about it continues to draw disapproval. The one seems too facile and the other too unforgiving. My account is sympathetic towards some variant on Humean moral psychology which takes moral judgment to be in part and unavoidably affectively reactive. For those who believe moral judgments to be purely and impersonally descriptive of moral qualities, my concerns about 'double-effect' will not be convincing.

³ I simplify here. You can be the victim of an aesthetic offence which I judge to be so; e.g., if you have been subjected to a painfully bad recital. Of course, if you have actually enjoyed the recital, you cannot be victim to an aesthetic offence in quite the same way that I might justifiably think you a victim of a moral offence without your seeing yourself as a victim. You can be duped and manipulated morally in ways that you cannot possibly be duped aesthetically. There is no convincing analogue in aesthetics for alienation and other forms of moral self-deception. There is no clear analogue in aesthetic awareness to moral liberation. The point, however, is that for me to judge the recital painfully bad I need to have experienced pain at hearing it. For me to judge an assault as morally wrong does not require me to have been assaulted.

⁴ That said, to find something aesthetically offensive is not a condemnation of last resort if one fails to find anything morally wrong with it.

⁵ The aesthetic ground is laid by Leopold 1949: 224-5 whose land ethic rests on a consideration of 'integrity, stability, and beauty' and who explicitly directs us to examine our behaviour regarding nature 'in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right'. See also Rodman 1983 for a larger list of 'value-giving characteristics'. Many such features sit well with traditional objectivist accounts of aesthetic value; e.g., Beardsley 1981.

⁶ See Godlovitch 1989 and 1994. The spontaneous drift between the aesthetic and the moral is nicely captured in the comparison between a person paving over his lawn and garden and heavy strip mining operations in Hill 1983.

⁷ I will avoid consideration of offences against works of art which I take to be elliptical for offences against artists and art consumers. For the record, if artworks can be violated, so too can they themselves cause offence. I suspect any offence caused by an artwork is itself elliptical for an offence caused by the artist. At any rate, we've enough to distinguish our relation with artworks and with nature.

⁸ Some anthropologists cast doubt on this as simple Western romanticising. See Kolig 1988 and also Keesing 1989.

⁹ For example, see Dijksterhuis 1961 and Westfall 1977.

¹⁰ The ecologicist pull starts prominently with Leopold 1949 and plays more self-consciously through such writers as James Lovelock, Christopher Stone, John Rodman, J. Baird Callicott, Paul Taylor, Arne Naess, Murray Bookchin, and others.

OFFENDING AGAINST NATURE

¹¹ I do not suggest that scientists are, as scientists, aesthetically insensitive to nature. Quite the contrary; e.g., see Wilson 1984. Further, at least one philosopher regards natural history as necessary for proper aesthetic appreciation of nature. See Carlson 1979. Carlson's view is criticised in Godlovitch 1994 and Carroll 1993.

¹² Karl Popper has argued that all creatures to some extent alter the course of their own selection merely by virtue of adapting their immediate environment to suit their needs. Despite the fact that the ability to undertake environmental alteration is itself to be explained by selective pressures, once any crucial environmental pressures have thereby been minimised, it would appear that the relevant effects of environmental pressure recede into the background. This is part of a general critique of selectionism. While it may affect claims about the uniqueness of human culture, it also shifts the boundaries of the notion of culture considerably, drawing into that ambit a greater sector of the biosphere.

¹³ See the study by Sircello 1993. Elaborating such themes, see Godlovitch 1995.

¹⁴ See Carlson 1984; also, Hargrove 1989: 177, 184.

¹⁵ The theme that art is a primary influence in our aesthetic regard for nature runs through S. Kemal and I. Gaskell (eds) 1993. See for example the contributions by Diffey 1993 and Crawford 1993. For the stronger view that nature as such is just another 'cultural artifact', see Berleant 1992 and Berleant 1993.

¹⁶ The contest is pretty tough. Here at least we get honourable mention:

Mr Brady, why do you deny the *one* faculty which lifts man above all other creatures on the earth: the power of his brain to reason. What other merit have we?
The elephant is larger, the horse is stronger and swifter, the butterfly more beautiful, the mosquito more prolific, even the simple sponge is more durable!

'Colonel' Henry Drummond to 'Colonel' Matthew Harrison Brady from Lawrence and Lee 1955: Act III.

¹⁷ The classical works are Burke 1759, Kant 1790, and Schopenhauer 1818.

¹⁸ At times, one gets the impression that the difference for eighteenth century writers is in our reaction and not in the object itself. This makes the contrast between beauty and sublimity merely psychological. That Kant should include the pyramids as sources of the experience of the sublime suggests that nature's role in such experiences is contingent, or at least replaceable.

¹⁹ Though introduced in a different context, the spirit of the stance is present in Leopold 1949. Leopold, of course, thinks of human activities as part of the great ecological web, and has no difficulty with hunting – 'gathering meat from God' (p. 166) – or the big game adventures of Teddy Roosevelt about whom Leopold speaks admiringly. In the essay 'Conservation Esthetic' (pp. 165-77), Leopold is concerned with human impact upon nature and speaks of our urge to collect 'trophies', in which category are included, as if identical in significance, the bear that has been shot and killed and the bear that has been photographed. Notwithstanding Leopold's concern for land use and the public invasion of wild places, the casual grouping of shooting bears and shooting film is grotesque.

²⁰ Versions of this paper were read at the American Society for Aesthetics, Pacific Division, and at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Thanks to Allen Carlson, Ron Moore, and to an anonymous *Environmental Values* referee for helpful comments.

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