

A.P. Ross

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The Emotional Appreciation of Nature: In Defense of the Arousal Model

Within the realm of environmental aesthetics, Allen Carlson's model of nature appreciation—"the natural environmental model"—has emerged as the most widely recognized model for aesthetically appreciating natural beauty. It is not, however, without its rivals. Most notably, Noël Carroll has presented an alternative to the natural environmental model, named the "arousal model". This essay focuses on the debate between Carroll and Carlson over the status of the arousal model. In particular, I consider a recent objection formulated by Patricia Matthews that the arousal model remains dependent upon Carlson's natural environmental model if it wishes to secure correct and complete aesthetic judgments. In defense of the arousal model, I raise two points in response to Matthews' criticism. First, I argue that the connection Matthews draws between the correctness and completeness of aesthetic judgments is spurious. Second, I argue that emotional responses to nature are capable of generating a phenomenological feeling of finality, where nothing more could be added to the experience. This feeling of finality, or so I argue, makes the emotional appreciation of nature immune to enrichment—especially, the type of enrichment offered by the natural environmental model.

Is the Arousal Model Self-Sufficient?

Before continuing it will be helpful to offer a brief overview of Carlson's natural environmental model (hereafter called the NEM). Carlson's primary inspiration for the

NEM is Kendall Walton's "Categories of Art". Briefly explaining Walton's position on the aesthetic appreciation of art will enable a better understanding of Carlson's position on the aesthetic appreciation of nature. According to Walton, aesthetically appreciating art requires one to have the correct knowledge of artistic traditions and styles (Carlson, *AE* 56). For example, in order to properly appreciate Picasso's *Guernica*, we need to know that *Guernica* falls under the category of Cubism and what to look for in a Cubist painting. If we mistakenly think that *Guernica* is an impressionist painting—rather than a Cubist painting—we might perceive it as “awkward” rather than “dynamic”. Furthermore, with the correct knowledge we can lend our judgments a certain degree of objectivity: if someone claims that *Guernica* is an awkward impressionist painting, we can point out that their evaluation is incorrect because it rests upon the wrong evaluative category (57).

Nature, according to Carlson, can be appreciated in much the same way that Walton suggests we should appreciate art. Appreciating nature is a matter of understanding nature under suitable scientific categories. The correct knowledge—scientific knowledge such as ecology and natural history—can transform and deepen our aesthetic evaluations of natural objects (62). If we perceive a whale as a fish it may appear bloated and grotesque, but with the correct scientific knowledge—that whales are very large mammals and not fish—the same whale may appear grandiose (62). Not only can knowledge of the correct scientific categories transform our aesthetic appraisals of natural objects, it can also lend our aesthetic evaluations of nature a degree of objectivity. If someone proclaims that a whale is a turgid fish, we can simply point out that their evaluation is incorrect because it rests on false knowledge. Thus, proper scientific

knowledge can both enhance our aesthetic appreciation of nature and lend our aesthetic judgments a degree of objectivity.

While Carlson's NEM offers an interesting account of the way in which we appreciate natural beauty, it is not without its critics. Many critics have responded that Carlson's model seems to be both overly demanding in the amount of knowledge it requires and overly exclusionary of other less cognitive forms of appreciation.¹ Most prominently, Noël Carroll has argued that in presenting the NEM as the paradigmatic form of nature appreciation, Carlson has excluded other very common forms of aesthetically appreciating nature (*BMN* 245). In particular, Carroll argues that Carlson fails to consider emotional responses to nature that are "of a less intellectual, more visceral sort", responses that we might refer to as 'being moved by nature'" (245).

Carroll presents an alternative model to the NEM—what he calls the "arousal model"—which takes account of our emotional responses to the natural world. Under the arousal model we may, for example, "find ourselves standing under a thundering waterfall and be excited by its grandeur" (245). This is, according to Carroll, a very ordinary and common way of aesthetically appreciating nature. Furthermore, being emotionally moved by the waterfall's grandeur "does not require any special scientific knowledge" (251). One can be moved to exhilaration at the waterfall's grandeur without knowing anything about its natural history or the scientific category that it falls under.

¹ See for example, Lintott, Shelia. "Adjudicating the Debate over Two Models of Nature Appreciation." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. 38 (2004):52-72.; Godlovitch, Stan. "Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics." *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* Eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2004. 108-126; Saito, Yuriko. "Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms." *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* Eds. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2004. 141-155.

To be clear, the arousal model is not purely visceral. The emotions, for Carroll, are cognitive phenomena in the sense that they involve certain beliefs. For example, the experience of being exhilarated by the grandeur of the waterfall rests on the belief that the waterfall is of a large scale. Furthermore, the cognitive nature of the emotions allows for third parties to judge emotional responses as either appropriate or inappropriate. An emotional response is appropriate when the beliefs that underwrite it can be considered objective. Being exhilarated at the sight of a waterfall can be considered appropriate, because other people can share in the belief that the waterfall is relatively large and generally speaking it is customary to be moved by “something that one believes to be of a large scale” (258). There are standards, in other words, according to which emotional responses can be deemed appropriate or inappropriate and thus possessing a certain degree of objectivity. Emotional responses, moreover, need not rely upon scientific knowledge to secure this level of objectivity. Accordingly, Carroll concludes that the arousal model stands as a legitimate model of nature appreciation, co-existing alongside Carlson’s NEM.

In response to Carroll, Carlson issues two criticisms of the arousal model: that emotional response to nature is a superficial form of aesthetic appreciation, and that the difference between the arousal model and the NEM is negligible. For present purposes, I will concentrate on the latter objection: that the arousal model is simply a different version of the NEM. More specifically, Carlson argues that the sort of knowledge required for cognitive appreciation is knowledge “provided by the natural sciences and their common sense predecessors and analogues” (NAK 398). In other words, the NEM is concerned with scientific knowledge *broadly construed*, including the type of knowledge

we employ in our emotional responses to nature. Scientific knowledge is simply a “finer grained and theoretically richer version of our common, everyday knowledge of [nature], and not something different in kind” (398). In this sense, the knowledge that a waterfall is falling water is the common sense predecessor to scientific knowledge that falls under the rubric of the NEM. Thus Carlson concludes that “the arousal model virtually collapses into the natural environmental model” (398).

Carroll responds to this objection by noting that while the cognitive aspect of the arousal model might seem to make it similar to the NEM, Carlson is surely exaggerating about what counts as scientific belief or even as a predecessor to scientific belief. It does not seem plausible, Carroll argues, to regard any old belief “as a nascent scientific belief, let alone scientific knowledge” (*EAN* 391). Why should we regard the simple belief that something is composed of water as a scientific or even quasi-scientific belief? Carroll illustrates the point with the following example. Suppose that when I perceive a waterfall I do not believe that what I am seeing is water but “the blood of the earth god” (390). Even in this case, the waterfall can still move me: I can be drawn to the rush of its onslaught and the power exhibited in its force. I can be emotionally moved by the waterfall, even if my belief is not that the waterfall is composed of water but of the blood of the earth god. Pointedly, the cognitive element within this example is not derived from natural history nor can it be considered a predecessor to basic scientific knowledge since there is nothing remotely scientific about the belief that the waterfall’s water is the blood of the earth god. Thus, the arousal model need not rely on any form of scientific or common sense knowledge and can remain a distinct alternative to the NEM.

Although Carlson has not responded to this last objection, Patricia Matthews—arguing on Carlson’s behalf—has done so. Matthews responds to Carroll by arguing that the arousal model remains dependent upon the NEM, if Carroll hopes for it to yield “correct and complete” aesthetic judgments (45). More specifically, if we want our aesthetic judgments to feel complete—in the sense that nothing more could be added to them—then we will want to insure that our aesthetic judgments are correct. In this sense, emotional judgments will feel *incomplete* because it remains an “open question” as to whether or not the belief underwriting the emotion is true or false (45). Moreover, in order to answer this open question—and thereby generate a sense of completeness—we will need to appeal to the NEM in order to insure that our initial “naïve” emotional judgments are in fact correct (45). By appealing to the NEM, we satisfy our desire for completeness by eliminating any apprehensiveness that we might hold towards our initial judgment. Thus, the arousal model remains dependent upon the NEM if we want our aesthetic judgments to be correct and complete aesthetic judgments.

Matthews acknowledges that appealing to the NEM may not correct our initial assessment. We may, in fact, find that supplementary scientific knowledge simply confirms our initial emotional assessment (45). However, if we hope to imbue our aesthetic experience with a sense of completeness—to know that nothing more could be added to the experience—then we will at least attempt to discover whether or not our initial assessment can be corrected or enhanced by appealing to scientific facts (45). Thus the arousal model remains dependent upon Carlson’s NEM if one seeks “correct and complete” aesthetics judgments.²

² Although Matthews does not define her use of the term “complete”, she uses it in such a way that it seems to be equivalent to “a sense of finality”. Whether or not Matthews is using this term in a phenomenological

Does Correctness Yield Completeness?

In response to Matthews' criticism, a skeptical point can be raised concerning the relationship between correctness and completeness. Matthews argues that we will find our aesthetic judgments complete by satisfying our desire for correctness. However, the desire for correctness that Matthews alludes to is certainly not present in every instance of our aesthetic experience. To return to Carroll's original example, if I am admiring the grandeur of a waterfall—and I am relatively sure that what I am perceiving is a natural waterfall and not something else—then a desire to correct or confirm my judgment with additional scientific knowledge would seem out of place given that I have no reason to be apprehensive about my initial judgment. Moreover, even if I confirmed my judgment of the waterfall by appealing to scientific knowledge, it is not obvious that doing so would yield a sense of completeness.

To be clear, the desire for correctness will certainly be present in some situations. For example, if I judge a sunset to be beautiful I might wonder whether or not the bright colors I am enjoying are natural or if they are caused by pollution. Or, as seems to be more common, I might be in doubt over whether the warm winter that I am appreciating stems from global warming or the natural cycle of the earth's temperature. In these cases, I might be right to suspect that additional knowledge will correct or confirm my aesthetic appreciation of both the sunset and the weather. Moreover, I might even desire such knowledge as I will feel apprehensive about my initial judgment without it. That said, it seems that this desire will be restricted to those cases where we are actually suspicious of our aesthetic judgments. In a situation where we are relatively sure of the belief

sense is unclear, but for present purposes it will suffice to say that "complete" aesthetic judgments are those for which nothing needs to be added.

underlying our emotional response, seeking further knowledge in order to correct or confirm our judgment will only serve to disrupt our experience. A desire to correct or confirm one's aesthetic judgment seems to be contingent upon whether or not there is room for doubt about one's initial assessment. Thus the arousal model need not appeal to the NEM in order to yield complete aesthetic experiences.

Emotional Closure: How Emotional Responses Resist Enhancement

Carlson and Matthews will object that the above response overlooks another sense in which the arousal model remains dependent upon the NEM. In particular, the objection can be reformulated to be an open question about enhancement. Complete aesthetic judgments are not simply those that are correct and confirmed, but those that have been sufficiently enhanced. Even if it is not an open question as to whether or not additional information will correct or confirm our initial emotional judgment, it still remains an open question as to whether or not additional information will *enhance* our initial assessment.

If we desire a complete aesthetic experience, then certainly we ought to determine whether or not such information will amplify our appreciation. Although we might not be curious about the correctness of our initial assessment, we will be curious as to whether or not we might augment our aesthetic appreciation with additional knowledge. Returning to the example of the waterfall, additional knowledge about the waterfall's geological origins may serve to increase our admiration of its grandeur; knowledge of its natural history may make it appear increasingly impressive. While such knowledge might not enhance our initial assessment, it *remains an open question* as to whether or not it will enrich our experience. As long as this question remains unanswered, our initial emotional

assessments will feel incomplete. In this way, the arousal model will remain dependent upon the NEM for enhanced and thereby more complete aesthetic experiences.

Can emotional responses preclude this desire for enhancement? It seems possible that emotional responses can be complete in such a way that even the desire for enrichment is absent. In order to illustrate this point, I want to more closely examine what it means to be moved to wonder at the sight of natural beauty. Being moved to wonder at nature's beauty can occur in two very different ways. Firstly, I can be moved to wonder in a manner similar to the experience of curiosity. The waterfall's grandeur can lead me to ask *how* it is that the waterfall came to be of such a large scale or *how* much water actually moves through it. These questions can generate a sense of wonder where I am moved to ask particular questions about the waterfall. If I am simply amazed at "the how" of the waterfall—how it came to be what it is, how it does what it does—then additional knowledge will certainly accentuate and increase my sense of wonder. I will refer to this first sense of wonder as how-wonder.

In contrast, Ludwig Wittgenstein alludes to a different sense of wonder in the *Tractatus*: "[I]t is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists" (TLP 6.44). Here Wittgenstein is alluding to a sense of wonder that is subtly different from the how-wonder presented above. More specifically, Wittgenstein's mystical wonder at the world's existence is not generated by particular features of the world, or from explanations of how it came into existence, but in *the sheer fact that there is a world at all*. In other words, the sort of wonder Wittgenstein is talking about is closer to acknowledging the fact that the world exists and expressing amazement at that fact.

This distinction generates a certain type of completeness in the sense that it wards off the desire for further explanations or additional facts. If one expresses a sense of amazement in acknowledging the fact of the world's existence, then one is not asking for causal explanations or additional facts about the world. More specifically, additional facts and causal explanations cannot accentuate this sense of wonder because it is rooted in the acknowledgement of the fact of the world's existence and not the particularities of the world's origin. Wittgenstein's sense of wonder generates a sense of finality because it is expressing amazement at a fact without asking for explanations. In this sense, this latter type of wonder is complete in such a way that it is *not* an open question as to whether or not it can be enriched, since it goes no further than the fact that it is concerned with. I will refer to this second sense of wonder as thatness-wonder.

But what is the relevance of this distinction for the topic at hand? To be clear, I do not wish to make the claim that Wittgenstein is making a point about environmental aesthetics; this particular remark refers to a way of expressing wonder at the world's existence.³⁴ However, although Wittgenstein is referring to a way of seeing the world as a whole, it remains possible that we can have a similar sort of experience in regards to particular objects or natural phenomena. The fact that a particular flower, waterfall, or tree seems beautiful can be enough to provoke such wonder.

An example might help to make the relevance of this distinction clear. To borrow one of Carroll's examples, suppose that I am "taken with the grace of a group of deer vaulting a stream" (*BMN* 260). While Carroll does not mention a particular emotion as

³ However, for a discussion on the relationship between this passage and Wittgenstein's views on aesthetics, see Tam, Thomas. "On Wonder, Appreciation, and the Tremendous in Wittgenstein's Aesthetics." *British Society of Aesthetics* 42 (2002):310-322.

underlying this example, I do not think it would be wrong to interpret being “taken with” the gracefulness of deer as being moved to “wonder” at the gracefulness of the deer. In light of the above distinction, it can be noted that there are two ways of experiencing wonder at the grace of deer. I may experience how-wonder at the sight of the deer, questioning how it is that deer are able to vault streams. If this is the case, then appealing to the NEM can be beneficial since there are scientific explanations of how deer come to be the sort of animals that they are. Evolutionary history can explain the way in which deer came to possess the ability to leap over brooks and streams. Anatomical information can explain how it is physically possible for deer to perform such feats. In this case, scientific knowledge can certainly enhance my emotional experience.

Notably, however, this type of wonder demands an explanation as to *how* the deer came to be graceful. But it is entirely possible that I can wonder at the grace of the deer without seeking any sort of explanation. In particular, we can make a distinction between the sheer fact *that* deer are graceful and explanations as to *how* deer possess such grace. Just as Wittgenstein expresses wonder at the fact of the world’s existence, so too can we express wonder at the fact that deer are quite graceful. In this sense, I can experience thatness-wonder by being amazed at the fact that the deer *just are* graceful. The experience of wonder, in this latter sense, might just be the thought: *how wonderful it is that deer are so graceful*.

How does thatness-wonder help the arousal model meet the re-formulation of Matthews’ criticism? Pointedly, experiencing thatness-wonder at the sight of the deer is complete because it is not the sort of emotional response that can be enhanced. The desire for additional information or causal explanations is absent because my emotional

response is the acknowledgement of a fact that I find to be wonderful rather than a demand for explanations. In this situation, anatomical information and evolutionary history will not accentuate the experience of wonder since my emotional response is rooted in the acknowledgement of the fact that deer are graceful and not the particularities of how the deer are capable of being graceful. The point is not simply that I might appeal to scientific information and find that it does not enhance my experience; rather, the point is that, in situations such as these, the desire for enhancement simply is not there.

It may be objected that thatness-wonder cannot fit into the arousal model. As previously noted, the emotions considered by Carroll are largely cognitive phenomena: they are judgments based upon reasonable or unreasonable beliefs. For example, if I respond to the grandeur of a waterfall with exhilaration, I can explain my emotional response by pointing out that it is grand because of its immense size (*BMN* 251). This provides a way in which to gauge the appropriateness of emotional reactions. My response to the waterfall is appropriate because of its size (252). In turn, the criterion of appropriateness grants the arousal model a certain degree of objectivity: if my belief that the waterfall is of a large scale is correct, then other people can recognize my reaction as a valid one (258). Moreover, the objective nature of such a response makes it reasonable for me to expect other people to share in my reaction. In pointing out relevant features of the waterfall, I can expect other people to be similarly moved by its grandeur.

Although thatness-wonder involves judgment about a particular object—the fact of this deer’s grace is amazing—it is not the sort of judgment that rests upon reasonable or unreasonable beliefs. While I can justify and explain the appropriateness of my

response to the waterfall to others by pointing to out its immense size, I cannot do so in the situation where I wonder at the sheer existence of natural phenomena. This makes it difficult to assess thatness-wonder as an appropriate or inappropriate emotion.

Furthermore, because it is not the sort of emotion that is grounded in reasonable beliefs, it loses the inter-subjective component characteristic of other emotional responses. While I can point out the large scale of the waterfall to someone else and expect them to share in my sense of exhilaration, it seems that I cannot similarly point out the fact that deer are graceful and expect them to be amazed in response to this fact. Thus one might object that thatness-wonder refers to an idiosyncratic response that fails to have standards of appropriateness and to be inter-subjectively available.

In response, it can be noted that, at the least, thatness-wonder is weakly cognitive: it is a judgment about a particular feature of a particular object—it is wonderful that these deer are so graceful. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that there are certain conditions under which one *ought* to experience thatness-wonder. It seems equally appropriate, for example, to be moved to how-wonder at the sight of the deer as it does thatness-wonder. However, we can still carve out standards of appropriateness by noting that there are certain situations where it might seem inappropriate to experience thatness-wonder. If someone beings to marvel at the fact of an oil spill on the beach, we can rightfully point out that it would be more appropriate to be moved to feel another emotion such as dismay, indignation, or sadness. Additionally, as previously mentioned, there may also be situations in which it is pertinent to ask after causal explanations—if I am in doubt over whether a sunset is caused by natural or unnatural factors. Thus there are at least certain

situations where it would be inappropriate to dwell upon the fact of something's existence.

It remains to be seen whether or not thatness-wonder be thought of as a widely available emotional response. Admittedly, there would be something very strange about drawing a normative connection between the acknowledgement of a fact and a corresponding sense of appreciation. However, it is worth questioning how strong we can actually take this feature to be for more common emotional responses. Carroll argues that if someone “denies being moved by the waterfall, but agrees that the waterfall is large scale and says nothing else, we are apt to suspect that his response, as well as any judgments issued on the basis of that response are inappropriate” (258).

But what exactly does inappropriateness amount to in this situation? It certainly does not mean that those who remain unmoved by the waterfall fail to perceive the relevant qualities or to hold the relevant beliefs necessary for the experience of exhilaration; rather they simply acknowledge that the waterfall is of a large scale but remain unmoved. In this sense, the inappropriateness of the waterfall-insensitive does not seem to be a failure of perception or even a failure of rationality. Alternatively, inappropriateness in this situation seems to be a matter of not experiencing something that is ordinarily or typically felt in the presence of large scale objects. Seen in this light, the less inter-subjective nature of thatness-wonder appears to be less of a short-coming. If I cannot readily expect someone to be moved to share in my thatness-wonder, this is not because such a response rests on irrational or overtly subjective beliefs. Rather, it is only because it is not an ordinary or typical response that it cannot be considered a readily available emotion. In this sense, I might not expect someone to share in my thatness-

wonder not because it is beyond their emotional capabilities, but because I recognize its occurrence to be rare.

In conclusion, this essay has examined the debate between two models of nature appreciation: Allen Carlson's natural environmental model and Noël Carroll's arousal model. I have argued that the arousal model stands as a legitimate alternative to the natural environmental model. In particular, I have argued against Patricia Matthews' criticism that the arousal model remains dependent upon Carlson's natural environmental model if it wishes to secure correct and complete aesthetic judgments. I have attempted to argue for the self-sufficiency of the arousal model by raising two points in response to Matthews' line of criticism. Firstly, I have argued that the desire for correct aesthetic judgments is restricted to cases in which we have reason to doubt the validity of our aesthetic judgments, making the connection that Matthews draws between correctness and completeness negligible. Secondly, I have argued that emotional responses are capable of generating a sense of completeness that dissolves the desire to enrich one's aesthetic experience. I have argued this point by more closely examining what is involved in being moved to wonder at natural beauty. In being moved to wonder, or so I have argued, our emotions can be directed towards natural objects in such a way that we feel absolved from the need to seek out causal explanations.

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