Industry and Quiescence in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature

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Allen Carlson has argued that a science-based model of appreciation is most appropriate in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. While I find his model of appreciation coherent and valuable, I reject his argument that this model ought to be preferred to others, such as an emotion-based or a formalist model of appreciation. Carlson’s rejection of these other models is exclusionary and runs counter to pragmatist ideals. I argue for an alternative model, one which accommodates both cognitive (e.g., science-based) and noncognitive (e.g., emotion-based and formalist) models of appreciation, which I call the aesthetic-attention model of appreciation.

1. Introduction

In the aesthetic appreciation of nature, one may take either a cognitive or a noncognitive approach. A cognitive approach is knowledge-based and emphasizes deliberate and considered appreciative responses. A noncognitive approach is not knowledge-based and emphasizes responses which simply arise as an awareness in the appreciator. Often it is assumed that the noncognitive model holds in the appreciation of nature. A flower just is, without much thought, found beautiful.

Allen Carlson has challenged this assumption. He does not deny that one might have noncognitive, quiescent experiences of nature, but he thinks there is a better way to appreciate nature, one which is knowledge-based. In what follows I take issue with Carlson’s argument. While I find his model of aesthetic appreciation coherent and valuable, I reject the claim that this model ought to be preferred to other, noncognitive, models.

I then argue for an alternative model, one which accommodates both cognitive and noncognitive bases for appreciation which I call the aesthetic-attention model of appreciation. I begin by showing how Carlson’s model draws on John Dewey’s aesthetics. I conclude by showing how Carlson’s exclusionary position runs counter to broader pragmatist ideals.
2. Dewey’s Aesthetics

In *Art as Experience* Dewey opens with a picture of human existence as a matter of thriving and flourishing within given environments. The way in which humans go about such thriving and flourishing is by deliberately transforming these environments into progressively more satisfactory arrangements. Furthermore, this activity, when it is effective, is deeply satisfying. Human thriving, then, is a deliberate and creative undertaking which Dewey considered ‘artistic’. The overall satisfaction one feels with the resolution of artistic activity, he called aesthetic experience. In short, Dewey’s claim is that human thriving is *artistic* (deliberate and creative), and that there are moments of heightened *aesthetic* awareness of such activity.

In a mid-twentieth century commentary on Dewey, Milton Mayeroff argues that Dewey’s picture of human thriving as fundamentally an affair of doing and making, where thinking is employed primarily to resolve problems, depicts humans as nothing more than problem-solving creatures. This picture, Mayeroff thinks, neglects the “quiet dimension” of human existence. Humans also have experiences which are not so frankly ends-oriented or cases of problem solving (even broadly construed). For example, humans have experiences which are simply a “... responsive passivity in allowing life to reveal itself and bring about a deepened awareness”. For Mayeroff, then, humans have distinct sorts of experiences, not all of them having to do with “... resolving practical difficulties ... [hence] surely it is unduly narrow to think of man primarily in terms of problem-solving activity”. Mayeroff thinks that a complete picture of human thriving and flourishing must also represent quiet experiences.

In a riposte to Mayeroff, Beatrice Zedler argues that Mayeroff has overlooked Dewey’s proposal that there are moments in human thriving which involve a heightened (quiescent-like) awareness of one’s achievements. Human thriving is not aimless. It is ordered, cumulative, and directed toward a satisfying conclusion. This, Dewey referred to as an experience’s consummate end – perhaps best understood as its just end. While consummate experience is organically connected to ‘regular’ experience, it is qualitatively distinct. It involves a heightened awareness of and pleasure in a problem well-solved. It is what counts, on Dewey’s view, as an aesthetic experience. Moreover, Zedler thinks, consummate experience, wherein one grasps something in its “absorbing finality” and basks in the satisfaction of an effective solution, is very much like what Mayeroff calls a quiescent experience. Still, Mayeroff’s concern remains: not *all* experiences are occasioned by active, deliberate problem-solving, since there are experiences which are wholly quiet. Finding quiescence only at the peaks of the problem-solving process is to miss his point that there may be experiences which are from beginning to end quiet experiences, such as a heightened awareness of something as its own end, and not as a consummate end to a problem well-solved. Moreover, these are genuine experiences, not just nascent or undeveloped experiences.