

# The Ugly Truth: Negative Aesthetics and Environment

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## 1. Introduction

In autumn 2009, BBC television ran a natural history series, 'Last Chance to See', with Stephen Fry and wildlife writer and photographer, Mark Carwardine, searching out endangered species. In one episode they retraced the steps Carwardine had taken in the 1980s with Douglas Adams, when they visited Madagascar in search of the aye-aye, a nocturnal lemur. Fry and Carwardine visited an aye-aye in captivity, and upon first setting eyes on the creature they found it rather ugly. After spending an hour or so in its company, Fry said he was completely 'under its spell'. A subsequent encounter with an aye-aye in the wild supported Fry's judgment of ugliness and fascination for the creature: 'The aye-aye is beguiling, certainly bizarre, for some even a little revolting. And I say, long may it continue being so.'<sup>1</sup>

Here, I explore some of the philosophical questions thrown up by this kind of experience. Ugliness has been theorized, not surprisingly, as a category of aesthetic value in opposition to the beautiful. It has been associated with qualities such as incoherence, disorder, disunity, and deformity and is said to cause negative feelings such as uneasiness, distaste, dislike, revulsion, but also fascination. Apart from discussions of tragedy and horror, contemporary aesthetics tends to neglect an exploration of potentially negative forms of aesthetic value. Work on aesthetics of nature and environmental aesthetics has also, on the whole, focused on positive aesthetic value.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Fry, video clip from 'Last Chance to See', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/species/Aye-aye#p004m3h9>. Accessed 27/6/10.

<sup>2</sup> An important exception is: Y. Saito, 'The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:2 (1998), 101–111. Also, Frank Sibley discusses mainly natural objects in his essay: 'Some Notes on Ugliness' in F. Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics*, ed. J. Benson, J. Roxbee Cox, B. Redfern (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 191–206. Umberto Eco has edited a fascinating book relating to ugliness and the arts: *On Ugliness*, trans. A. McEwen (London: Harvill Secker, 2007).

While positive aesthetic value is important to human life and significant in motivating action to protect and restore environments, we can learn a great deal from looking at negative aesthetic value in nature too. I will examine negative aesthetic value in the form of ugliness, and the place of ugliness in our aesthetic experience of environment.<sup>3</sup> In opposition to a thesis popular in environmental aesthetics, ‘positive aesthetics’, I will argue that ugliness in nature is real, and that ugliness is a type of negative aesthetic value. I then make moves toward answering a question that lies at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics: what reasons might we have for thinking that there is some kind of value, if not aesthetic value, in our experiences of ugliness?

## **2. Positive Aesthetics**

I object to a common approach which argues that ugliness is only apparent, and that what might seem to be ugly is in fact beautiful. This view holds that ugliness is really just a variety of beauty, and there is no negative aesthetic value in the world. This view has had a number of followers, including Augustine and, more recently, Stephen Pepper, John Dewey, and George Santayana.<sup>4</sup> In environmental aesthetics, this view takes the form of ‘positive aesthetics’, which has been developed by a number of philosophers, most notably, Allen Carlson.<sup>5</sup> As he puts it: ‘the natural environment, insofar as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is, for example, graceful, delicate, intense, unified, and orderly, rather than bland, dull, insipid, incoherent, and chaotic.’<sup>6</sup> Positive aesthetics can be analyzed into a set of stronger and weaker theses. The stronger theses include Carlson’s claim, above, and the views that: (1) All of the natural world is beautiful; and (2) All of virgin

<sup>3</sup> I will deal exclusively with cases of ugliness in natural environments, rather than ugliness in cultural landscapes, the built environment, or human impacts on environments, e.g. clear-cutting.

<sup>4</sup> For some discussion of these views see R. Moore, ‘Ugliness’, in M. Kelly, ed. *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 417–421.

<sup>5</sup> A. Carlson, ‘Nature and Positive Aesthetics’, *Environmental Ethics*, **6** (1984), 5–34. Other adherents include E. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984); H. Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 239ff. The position probably also has some roots in pre-Enlightenment theological views which held that one could not find ugliness as such in nature, since only beauty exists in God’s creations.

<sup>6</sup> Carlson, 1984, 5.

nature is essentially good. Two weaker theses are: (3) Being natural is connected, in an essential way, to positive aesthetic qualities; and (4) Nature which is not affected by humans has more aesthetic value than nature which is.<sup>7</sup>

Several objections can be raised against these different theses. What is wild nature and does such a conception have any real meaning today given widespread anthropogenic effects on the environment? The position appears to favour wild over cultivated nature, but this seems wrong-headed. What justifies this? There may well be cases of cultivated nature that are beautiful. More worryingly, while some comparative aesthetic judgments of wild nature are possible, these will lie on a scale of the more or less beautiful, with apparently no negative aesthetic value in wild nature.<sup>8</sup> I will focus on this problem in the position, arguing against it that ugliness in the natural world is, in fact, real. Let me clarify from the start what I mean by ugliness being 'real'. I will not be arguing for a strong form of aesthetic realism. I take aesthetic properties to be relational and response-dependent. My use of the term 'real' is intended to support the idea that our judgments of negative aesthetic value are justifiable and ugliness cannot be explained away or replaced by some other property in the ways various writers have attempted. As I see it, the negative aesthetic value we call 'ugliness' is anchored in some ways in the object's non-aesthetic perceptual properties, such as colours, textures, forms, arrangements of elements, sounds and smells.

Now, how exactly does positive aesthetics hold that all wild nature is beautiful? The central claim is that something which appears to be ugly is in fact judged to be beautiful when we adjust aesthetic appreciation through a more holistic scientific story. Holmes Rolston, for example, argues that the apparently repulsive experience of a

<sup>7</sup> Based on a discussion by J. A. Fisher, 'Environmental Aesthetics' in D. Jamieson, ed. *Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> For various discussions of positive aesthetics and its problems, see Saito, 1998; M. Budd, *Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); S. Godlovitch, 'Offending Against Nature', *Environmental Values*, 7 (1998), 131–150; N. Hettinger, 'Animal Beauty, Ethics, and Environmental Preservation', *Environmental Ethics*, 32 (2010); G. Parsons, 'Nature Appreciation, Science and Positive Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 42:3 (2002), 279–295. Budd points out the problems too in establishing the most 'ambitious' form of the position, which would appear to demand that everything in wild nature has roughly equal (positive) aesthetic value (Budd, 2002, 127).

rotting elk carcass teeming with maggots has positive aesthetic value when we grasp that this natural occurrence is a key part of the successful, healthy functioning of an ecosystem. He says: 'the ugly parts do not subtract from but rather enrich the whole. The ugliness is contained, overcome, and integrates into positive, complex beauty.'<sup>9</sup> So, ugliness becomes part of a complex holistic beauty when we take on board the bigger ecological picture.

There are a number of problems with this type of explanation. First, it begs the question. How do the qualities of decaying flesh and the deformity of the carcass become beautiful? What is identified now as beautiful is not the qualities of the carcass itself, but the healthy functioning of an ecosystem that we find in some greater narrative. For comparison, consider a scab on human skin. The scab is ugly, evidence of a wound, and although part of a healing process with positive value, this doesn't convert the scab itself into something beautiful. This sort of reply denies the existence of ugliness by reframing the aesthetic object into a whole and avoids the point in question, which is particular perceptual qualities rather than broader, holistic knowledge of some natural event or system. Saito also raises this objection, pointing out that it is no longer clear what constitutes the aesthetic object: 'Is it the entire ecosystem or an individual object (like the carcass)?'<sup>10</sup> And even if one were to agree with the holistic beauty of the carcass within an ecosystem, 'it does not follow that the beauty of the whole implies the beauty of its parts'.<sup>11</sup> Ugliness cannot be explained away by a holistic story unless that story can show how the relevant aesthetic qualities themselves are beautiful. In arguing against this reframing, I do not intend to set up a dichotomy between aesthetic experience and knowledge. Knowledge of all kinds will inform and potentially enrich aesthetic experience, however, I maintain a distinction between aesthetic and scientific appreciation. In light of this, we can see how the positive aesthetics claim represents some sort of slide from the aesthetic to the scientific.

Leading from this issue, Rolston's explanation is undermined by a second problem, one which also arises for the 'conversion theory', a theory offered in answer to the problem referred to as the paradox of tragedy.<sup>12</sup> The paradox of tragedy rests in what is seen to be the

<sup>9</sup> See Rolston, 1988, 241.

<sup>10</sup> Saito, 1998, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Saito, 1998, 104.

<sup>12</sup> According to Moore, the paradox of tragedy is the 'generic parent' of the paradox of ugliness (1998, 420). There's been a long debate, reaching as far back as Aristotle, about how to resolve the paradox of tragedy. Also, there

paradox of feeling pleasure in response to painful, tragic subject matter in artworks. As David Hume once put it, 'It seems an unacceptable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy? The more they are touched and affected, the more they are delighted with the spectacle...'.<sup>13</sup> The conversion theory – which some say Hume held – argues that our displeasure in response to painful content is converted into something pleasurable through pleasure taken in the representational or depictive aspects of the artwork.

We can put the elk carcass problem in terms of a paradox of ugliness: how is it that something seemingly ugly and repulsive turns out to be something that has positive aesthetic value for us; something we can admire? Rolston and others argue that scientific knowledge frames and supports appropriate aesthetic judgments of nature, and such knowledge, it appears, is responsible for converting apparent ugliness into something beautiful. Yet, we are given no explanation about how such a conversion or transformation takes place.

A possible explanation might be found in discussions of ugliness and the arts. The aesthetic theories of Aristotle, Kant and many others have argued that ugliness and repulsiveness can be rendered beautiful through artistic representation. Kant writes, 'Beautiful art displays its excellence precisely by describing beautifully things

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are a range of experiences and associated aesthetic qualities which fall into the category of what we might call 'difficult' or 'challenging' aesthetic experience or appreciation. In respect of both art and nature, and environments falling in between, several forms of appreciation can be included here, but perhaps most commonly: the sublime, tragedy and ugliness. In aesthetics, especially in the eighteenth century when these topics reached a pinnacle in philosophical debates, experiences falling into these categories were seen as difficult because they involve, commonly, a mixed response of negative and positive feelings, or just negative feeling, to qualities that are challenging or unattractive. The response to the sublime mixes liking, pleasure or delight with uneasiness, anxiety, fear, terror, and a feeling of being overwhelmed or overpowered (for example in accounts by Burke and Kant). Tragedy (as tragic drama) has been argued to involve a mix of negative and positive emotions, with negative or painful emotions such as fear or horror at the tragic events portrayed, and positive emotions in response to the artful representation of these events.

<sup>13</sup> D. Hume, 'Of Tragedy', in *Four Dissertations* (1757), reprinted in A. Neill and A. Ridley, ed., *Arguing About Art*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 198.

that in nature would be ugly and displeasing. The furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting.<sup>14</sup> So the argument would go that analogous to the way the representational and creative aspects of artworks are supposed to render unpleasant subject matter attractive, even beautiful, the ‘content’ of the aesthetic experience of the rotting elk carcass, that is, the putrefying flesh and feasting maggots, coupled with a rotting stench, are rendered beautiful and somehow pleasant through an ecological story. But it is difficult to grasp how such a transformation can take place through a scientific story rather than the imaginative, artistic one provided through a painterly representation, poem or fictional description. Instead of a second artistic object we have, rather, a live squirming phenomenon framed through an ecological context. It may be that we come to recognize how the rotting carcass represents the incredible life and death at work before our eyes, yet the sensuous qualities remain ugly.

My point here has also been made in relation to the conversion explanation in tragedy. The subject matter remains bleak and cannot be readily explained away, and the negative feelings evoked by tragedy are not converted at all, they remain negative. Of course, there may also be some pleasure, perhaps from the representational qualities of the artwork, but this does not obliterate the negative strand in our experience. Likewise, in the case of ugly nature, it remains ugly, even if our response is mixed, involving dislike but also curiosity, wonder or fascination rooted in the new knowledge we take on board. One of the main reasons such a conversion cannot take place is that to a great extent the concepts and knowledge of an ecological story just cannot penetrate the perceptual, sensuous experience of ugliness.

A further objection which supports real ugliness has been raised by Malcolm Budd. Essentially, he argues that all the scientific knowledge in the world cannot alter our judgments of negative aesthetic qualities in malformed nature: ‘grossly malformed living things will remain grotesque no matter how comprehensible science renders their malformation.’<sup>15</sup> For example, learning that a bulbous growth on a tree or loss of hair on some animal is due to disease

<sup>14</sup> See I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, P. Guyer and E. Matthews, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1790] 2000), §48, Ak. 312, 190. See also Aristotle, *Poetics* (1448b); Eco, 2007, 19.

<sup>15</sup> M. Budd, ‘The Aesthetics of Nature’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **100** (2000), 149.

may not render it less ugly. So, while knowledge acquired and fed into aesthetic appreciation can enrich our experience and enable us to see some qualities in a new light, it does not follow that knowledge will transform the ugly into the beautiful. Of course, it is also possible that the more knowledge we have the more ugly something becomes.

The aye-aye presents another type of case where knowledge does not shift perceptual qualities. Fry describes the lemur as looking ‘as if someone has tried to turn a bat into a cat... and then stuck a few extra gadgets on it for good measure’.<sup>16</sup> The aye-aye is all out of proportion: small eyes, huge ears, a baldish body with a scrappy, shaggy coat and sharp razor-like incisor teeth. We learn that it gets much of its food through ‘percussive foraging’, tapping tree trunks and then scooping out grubs from inside the tree, using its teeth and a long, narrow, creepy middle finger. The aye-aye’s calls have been described as ‘grunts, screams and whimpers, as well as eerie sounds that can only be described as “fuffs” and “hai-hais”’.<sup>17</sup> It is native only to Madagascar and endangered as a result of habitat destruction. According to local folklore the aye-aye is a harbinger of evil, and apparently so-named because it is what people cry out when they see one. The more knowledge one has, perhaps the more one reacts with mild revulsion. In Fry’s response, which is supported by both formal scientific knowledge and local knowledge, there is curiosity and wonder, but this does not discount or outweigh his negative reaction connected to the ugly mix of features.

To take another example, predation is a natural occurrence which enables mammals to exist and prosper. When we observe acts of predation they display positive aesthetic qualities such as the remarkable, graceful action of a cheetah chasing a gazelle. But the activity witnessed is also violent and bloody, leading to the death of another animal.<sup>18</sup> Explaining such activity only in positive aesthetic terms verges on a kind of aestheticization of nature (I have more to say about this below).

Some philosophers have taken a slightly different route to trying to explain ugliness in the world. Samuel Alexander has argued that ‘Ugliness...is an ingredient in aesthetic beauty, as the discords in music or the horrors of tragedy. When it becomes ugly as a kind of

<sup>16</sup> Reported by Mark Carwardine in, ‘Last Chance to see the aye-aye?’ BBC Earth News, 18/9/09 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth\\_news/newsid\\_8258000/8258569.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_8258000/8258569.stm). Accessed 2/11/09.

<sup>17</sup> M. Cawardine, ‘The aye-aye’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/lastchanceto-see/sites/animals/?set=ayeaye>. Accessed 27/6/10.

<sup>18</sup> See Hettinger, 2010.



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beauty it has been transmuted. Such ugliness is difficult beauty.<sup>19</sup> Although some forms of ugliness border on difficult beauty or overlap with terrible and horrible qualities in the sublime, I maintain that ugliness exists independently of other kinds of aesthetic value and disvalue. This needs teasing out.

First, the cheetah-gazelle chase and kill presents a case of something that has both beautiful and ugly elements: the grace of the chase and the bloody attack of the kill. But the beauty does not negate the ugliness that is found there. On my approach, it is judged as a beautiful chase with an ending causing revulsion, rather than something holistically beautiful, where beauty overcomes any other elements. This is of course from the human point of view – but that is my concern here: aesthetic judgments by humans of the rest of nature.

This suggests a similar type of case, where an unattractive thing, perhaps a tree or animal ravaged by disease, has beautiful aspects. Also, we often talk of the ‘inner beauty’ of things. What’s going on in these cases, I believe, is not a rejection or explaining away of the perceptual qualities of ugliness, but a recognition of *other* features that are appealing, perhaps beautiful actions of some kind. So, as Ron Moore points out: ‘an ugly thing may have its appealing, even beautiful aspects without thereby becoming “negatively beautiful” or “beautifully ugly”’.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude this section, two further, brief points provide additional support for my argument. Against views that attempt to explain away ugliness, we want to know what constitutes proper cases of negative value. Just as we want to understand what makes something beautiful, we want to understand what makes something ugly. It does not reflect our experiences of the world to identify only instances of terrible beauty, without recognizing that there are instances of true ugliness. Also, it is notable that Marcia Eaton, a philosopher who supports a cognitive approach to aesthetic appreciation of nature similar to views put forward by Carlson and Rolston, disagrees with the positive aesthetics thesis. While she believes that knowledge can enable shifts in perception, she also holds that cases of genuine ugliness remain. Eaton uses the example of an ugly

<sup>19</sup> S. Alexander, *Beauty and Other Forms of Value* (New York, 1968), as quoted in Moore, 1998, 418. Carolyn Korsmeyer argues for this kind of position in ‘Terrible Beauties’, in M. Kieran, ed. *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art* (Blackwell, 2005), 47–63.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, 1998, 418.



shell, the pen shell, described in shell guidebooks as unattractive and avoided by collectors.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. What is ugliness in nature?

If ugliness in nature cannot be explained away as some variety of beauty, then we need some kind of explanation of what ugliness is. What kind of substantive account can be given about ugliness in nature? To explore this issue, I begin with a few distinctions. Many theories of ugliness, importantly, distinguish it from the non-aesthetic reaction of *strong* repulsion or disgust.<sup>22</sup> Repulsion or disgust of a strong kind may be so overwhelming that attention to the object either never gets a foothold in the first place or is cut short. Because, as many would argue, the aesthetic response necessarily involves some kind of sustained perceptual attention, disgust must be classed as a more visceral sensory reaction. This is not to say that ugliness in a person or an animal, say, could not include repulsive qualities or that the aesthetic response might have elements of disgust in a weaker sense. My point refers to what lies at an extreme and at what point the response becomes non-aesthetic.

Another important point relates to how beauty and ugliness are related. We can view them as lying on a scale of positive and negative values. On the positive side of the scale are varieties of beauty, while varieties of ugliness lie on the negative side. The scale is intended to show that ugliness is something associated with objective qualities; that it can exist in greater or lesser degrees; and that the concept of ugliness is not simply an empty notion understood as the absence of beauty.<sup>23</sup> Some have argued that a zero point lies in the middle, suggesting a kind of aesthetic indifference, where one does not care one way or the other about the object. It could be that this represents some sort of aesthetic neutrality. Frank Sibley suggests that this neutrality is given content in terms of our use of certain aesthetic

<sup>21</sup> M. Eaton, 'Beauty and Ugliness In and Out of Context' in M. Kieran, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 48.

<sup>22</sup> On disgust, see D. Pole, 'Disgust and Other Forms of Aversion' in G. Roberts, ed., *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion* (London: Duckworth, 1983); C. Korsmeyer, 'The Delightful, Delicious and Disgusting', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:3 (2002), 217–225; W. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Moore, 1998, 419.

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concepts like ‘plain’, ‘ordinary’, or ‘undistinguished’.<sup>24</sup> These expressions are used in aesthetic judgments of things that are unremarkable. I think Sibley’s got it wrong here. Such judgments are not really neutral at all, but rather belong to aesthetic disvalue. To call a person plain-looking or ordinary is surely to make a negative judgment. The person does not exhibit any positive qualities, that is, there is an absence of attractive features. It makes more sense to describe unremarkable things as lying on the side of negative aesthetic value, although not synonymous with ugliness. Ugly things can be new and remarkable in our experience, invoking curiosity, as in the case of the aye-aye.

How might we unpack that negative side of the scale in relation to nature? Ugliness, like beauty, varies with objects, environments, etc., being more or less ugly. It is associated, certainly, with qualities like deformity, decay, disease, disfigurement, disorder, messiness, distortion, odd proportions, mutilation, grating sounds, being defiled, spoiled, defaced, brutal, wounded, dirty, muddy, slimy, greasy, foul, putrid, and so on.<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest a universal view of what ugliness consists in. Ugliness may be real but it is not reducible to one property or another, and we could not know that something is ugly without experiencing it firsthand for ourselves. Also, as noted earlier, qualities we associate with ugliness may exist alongside attractive ones, just as negative and positive aesthetic values can be associated with the same thing, for example an attractive bird with an ugly, grating call.

In thinking through ugliness, we ought to embrace a broad understanding as indicated by some of the terms just listed. Because beauty has been historically associated with order and harmony, many philosophers have identified ugliness with disorder and disharmony.<sup>26</sup> For example, Rudolf Arnheim describes ugliness as ‘a clash of uncoordinated orders...when each of its parts has an order of its own, but these orders do not fit together, and thus the whole is fractured.’<sup>27</sup> This captures the ugliness identified in the aye-aye’s odd features, but this view is both too formal and too narrow because it does not capture the more disgusting-type features of ugly things such as slimy textures, rotting stench or horrible sounds.

<sup>24</sup> Sibley, 2001, 192.

<sup>25</sup> See Sibley, 2001, and also Eco’s (2007) list, 16.

<sup>26</sup> See R. Lorand, ‘Beauty and Its Opposites’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52:4 (1994), 399–406.

<sup>27</sup> Lorand, 1994, 402.

Some philosophers have argued that ugliness in nature is essentially connected to deformity or malformation, where this counts as an aesthetic defect in some natural form or kind, usually of the organic variety.<sup>28</sup> Sibley rightly points out that only things capable of being deformed can be understood as such and thus ugly in this way. For example, while it might make sense to judge a tree to be ugly due to its deformity, he says it would be odd to describe a stone as deformed.<sup>29</sup> However, and in any case, ugliness is not always tied to deformity, and we need to understand ugliness more broadly as connected to a variety of qualities, like those mentioned above. A wolf fish may be judged as ugly in virtue of its odd features – bulgy eyes, widely spaced teeth, outsize mouth and dull grey colour – without being a case of a deformed fish. The aye-aye is ugly in virtue of having a discordant mix of features, especially, but not solely, when compared to the features of human beings.

So far I have been referring mainly to ugly qualities or properties. But judgments of ugliness are, in my view, importantly made by valuers ascribing negative value to things and having particular reactions such as shock, repugnance, aversion, and so on. In this respect, ugliness relates to both properties in objects and to the cognitive stock, imaginative associations, emotions and biases of individual valuers across communities and cultures. Ugliness, like other aesthetic properties, is response-dependent, depending upon a valuer valuing something. Undoubtedly, while we will find agreement on ugliness across cultures, ugliness will also vary culturally and historically, as Umberto Eco has shown so well in his recent anthology, *On Ugliness*.<sup>30</sup>

Let me take this analysis a step further by classifying ugliness, rather tentatively, into three types.<sup>31</sup> This will help to flesh out

<sup>28</sup> See Sibley, 2001; Glenn Parsons makes the claim that deformity only applies to organic nature, a point which he uses to support positive aesthetics in relation to inorganic nature. See: 'Natural Functions and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Inorganic Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **44**:1 (2004), 44–56; Cf. Budd, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> I'm not convinced that Sibley's second example is apt – a geologist tells me that we can understand deformity in rocks (particularly crystals) in terms of irregularities through malformation.

<sup>30</sup> Eco, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> For some other ways of classifying ugliness, see J. Stolnitz, 'On Ugliness in Art', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **11**:1 (1950), 1–24; P. Carmichael, 'The Sense of Ugliness', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **30**:4 (1972), 495–498.

some of the complexities that arise with ugliness as an aesthetic category.

(i) *Relative ugliness* is ugliness relative to some norm. Probably most cases of ugliness are of this type. For example, humans may find the faces of some other humans ugly because they are being compared to some ideal of human beauty. Or, a human may find a toad's face ugly relative to some norm of human facial beauty. It's not uncommon for humans – and possibly other species – to judge ugliness relative to norms set by their own species. Comparisons to such norms also explain differences between cultural norms and why some things may be judged as ugly in some cultures while not in others.

(ii) *Inherent ugliness* identifies something which is ugly in itself and not in relation to any norm. There may be fewer instances of this, but it is certainly the case that some things are just ugly. Some candidates frequently mentioned are eels, spiders, ticks, mosquitoes, mudflats, muddy rivers and burnt forests. The objection could be made here that these sorts of things aren't really ugly at all, rather there is some deep-seated or not so deep-seated bias operating on our judgment which makes them so. (I deal with this sort of problem below.)

(iii) *Apparent ugliness* identifies cases where things are considered in themselves, wholly apart from any comparisons to other things, and wholly apart from any knowledge or unfavourable associations; a purely formal appreciation, if you will. Considering toads in themselves or even a wound or bruise, we might in fact see these things as beautiful, whereas if we were to compare them to some ideal norm, for example, healthy, glowing skin, they would be ugly. We might have to sever a bruise from its extra-aesthetic context, say, the causes and pain related to the bruise to see it as beautiful. As Frances Hutcheson points out: 'there is no form which seems necessarily disagreeable of itself when we...compare it with nothing better of a kind...swine, serpents of all kinds, and some insects [are] really beautiful enough'.<sup>32</sup>

The category of apparent ugliness suggests another form of the argument which attempts to explain away ugliness if we take a certain kind of approach. In this case it is not the role played by knowledge, but rather, the role played by keen attention alone, and importantly, setting aside or backgrounding biases, cultural norms, comparisons, context, etc. In some cases it will be true that setting aside cultural or personal biases will enable us to appreciate the beauty of something. Snakes are a possible case in point. Yet, it does not necessarily follow

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Sibley, 2001, 205.

that things appreciated apart from negative associations and so on will be judged to be, after all, beautiful. This raises a similar problem for apparent ugliness, which I call the ‘familiarity effect’. There will be cases where the more familiar we become with something, the less ugly it will seem to us; the initial shock will have worn off. Perhaps the more time we spend with a toad, the greater aesthetic interest of a positive kind we might find. Yet, it will still be possible that it just remains ugly, and in fact, we may come to grasp better why we find its features so ugly. It does not follow from keen perceptual attention or repeated viewings that an aesthetic object gains in aesthetic value (or indeed, the other way around: a beautiful thing does not necessarily lose value after repeated experiences of it).

Some headway has been made in arguing for and substantiating the reality of ugliness in nature. Given the categories of ugliness set out above, I have suggested that most cases of ugliness will be relative to some norm, but there are also cases of inherent ugliness. I have challenged the ideas underlying the category of apparent ugliness, that is, keen and exclusive perceptual attention deal with all cases of apparent ugliness, and so ugliness is not always apparent. There is much that I have not been able to address here. Further work is needed, for example, in thinking through more finely grained distinctions between kinds of natural ugliness (e.g. grotesque, disgusting, disordered).

I have also set aside cultural issues and a discussion of moral issues involved in aesthetic appreciation of ugliness, for example, where ugliness is used to identify evil character, a view taken by the ancient philosopher, Plotinus, and others.<sup>33</sup> Another key issue in discussions of moral ugliness is the nature of our reactions to ugly things and how that reflects on our moral character, e.g. the problem of taking delight in the misfortune of deformed, mutilated, etc., nature, or treating ugliness as some sort of spectacle. These topics take us into the realm of moral philosophy, and I am not able to pursue those tricky issues here.

#### 4. Why care about ugliness?

In working toward a conclusion, I would like to suggest some ways that natural ugliness has significance in human lives. Given that ugliness is unpleasant and unattractive, if not entirely repulsive, why

<sup>33</sup> See Moore, 1998; Stolnitz’s (1950) discussion of Stephen Pepper’s position, 8ff; and K. Rosenkrantz’s study, *The Aesthetic of Ugliness* (1853).

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might it matter? In other words, what value, if not aesthetic value, does it have? To ask this question is not to explain ugliness away and assert its positive aesthetic value, but rather to ask what sort of place negative aesthetic value holds. The answer to my question is also significant in conservation terms. Natural beauty and its aesthetic value can provide one reason among others for conserving environments and species, but in the case of negative aesthetic value there is no obvious *aesthetic* reason to motivate conservation of ugly environments or species.

When ugliness is mixed with fascination and curiosity, this explains why we might be engaged by ugly things – as mentioned above, ugliness is not synonymous with being boring, dull or insignificant. There is no doubt that ugly things can capture our imagination in some ways, at least because of their novelty. Now, while this answer helps in understanding the significance of some forms of ugliness, it does not really address the difficult or challenging nature of ugliness, and it is this that especially interests me. In thinking through the place of ugliness in human lives, I want to avoid a strategy which relies exclusively upon a hedonic theory of value, that is, an approach where aesthetic experience is understood in terms of pleasurable responses, rather than also valuing the more nuanced responses or effects that arise from such experience. As we have seen, a common move is to try to explain away ugliness, to show that it is in fact a variety of beauty where the pleasant things in life, nature and so on, are always the case. In opposition to this, in response to why we engage with tragic art, Stephen Davies argues that we engage all the time in activities that are difficult, painful, challenging, and we come back for more. That's the kind of creatures we are.<sup>34</sup> Challenging experiences contribute to the worthwhile life; and they have value in ways unconnected to pleasure. I believe this is also the case with ugliness in nature.

In an effort to explain the paradox of ugliness, some approaches try to show 'how our experience of ugliness can be edifying, no matter how negative its inherent character.'<sup>35</sup> This connects to a long tradition in aesthetics which argues that negative emotions can be edifying in various ways.<sup>36</sup> Experiencing the full range of emotions can deepen our experience of other humans, other forms of life, and things unlike ourselves. These negative feelings in aesthetic

<sup>34</sup> S. Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 316–320.

<sup>35</sup> Moore, 1998, 420.

<sup>36</sup> See note 12; Korsmeyer, 2005.

experience can acquaint us with a range of feelings not available with easy beauty. This kind of exploration is also a feature of the sublime and the tragic, where we confront things that terrify or disturb us, though at some safe distance.

It is also a kind of exploration evident in various forms of avant-garde art and some forms of land and environmental art which challenge norms of beauty, art as beauty and the scenic. I have in mind, in particular, Robert Smithson's 'esthetics of disappointment', as he called it, his own artistic exploration of how both human and non-human forces of entropy and decay permeate our experience.<sup>37</sup> Aesthetic engagement of this kind can have the effect of discovering a capacity to apprehend ugliness beyond, or indeed, because of, ourselves and our own actions. Sheila Lintott, Jason Boaz Simus and Thom Heyd have argued that some environmental artworks remind us of the destructive forces wreaked by humans upon nature, functioning to raise environmental awareness.<sup>38</sup> In this vein, we might think of Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* or *Partially Buried Woodshed* – certainly not beautiful works – as evoking a sense of destruction and accompanying feelings of unease. In the non-artistic context, the contemplation of ugliness in nature caused by humans – aesthetic offences against nature as some philosophers have described them (graffiti in national parks; strip-mining, clear-cutting) – may also be explored, with these kinds of cases having the effect of an enhanced understanding of environmental harm.<sup>39</sup>

Proponents of positive aesthetics might object that connecting ugliness in nature with these edifying effects smacks of humanizing nature and failing to take it on its own terms, that is, bringing value somehow back to ourselves. The account of ugliness I have given here does not attempt to sidestep the cultural context we bring to our judgments of ugly nature. Positive aesthetics and scientific cognitivism together argue for the importance of taking nature on its own terms and getting past what might be seen as a shallow form of aesthetic valuing which ignores the deeper ecological story. What

<sup>37</sup> See various essays by and interviews with Smithson in, J. Flam (ed), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> S. Lintott, 'Ethically Evaluating Environmental Art: Is It Worth It', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 10:3 (2007), 263–277; J. Boaz Simus, 'Environmental Art and Ecological Citizenship', *Environmental Ethics*, 30:1 (2008); T. Heyd 'Reflections on Reclamation Through Art', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 10:3 (2007), 339–345.

<sup>39</sup> See Godlovitch, 1998; A. Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).



responses can be given to this type of concern? First, it can be argued that science is itself shaped by culture, and its categories are not necessarily the best ones through which to aesthetically value nature. Second, while positive aesthetics would appear to value nature in itself, on its 'own terms', it may be in danger of aestheticizing nature, that is, not fully grasping or taking on board negative aesthetic value and how this kind of value operates in human-nature relations.<sup>40</sup> While the environmental education implicit in positive aesthetics is laudable, especially in how it functions to move beyond personal and potentially distorting biases, fears, narrow norms or standards and in turn reassess previous negative aesthetic judgments, it would be naïve and idealistic to assume that this approach will always eliminate negative aesthetic value. Positive aesthetics is liable to present an incomplete theory of environmental aesthetics, risking an attitude which ignores the true diversity of characteristics possessed by a range of environments and animals. Ignoring ugliness potentially impoverishes this dimension of our experience of environments and creatures of all kinds that fall beyond the realm of comfortable aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> We might also find that experiences of ugliness fulfill some function in human and non-human lives, where disgust and revulsion play some key role in enabling survival.<sup>42</sup>

Ugliness expands our emotional range and widens our experience of challenging things, leading to a richer awareness of environments both familiar and strange. We might say that it increases our 'aesthetic intelligence' through developing engaged attention to the great diversity of aesthetic qualities. Through exploration of the negative side of aesthetic value, a more uneasy and distanced kind of relationship with nature emerges. Depending on the mix of reactions, curiosity and the charm of fascination can decrease the distance, but with no aesthetic attraction as such, the relationship is more strained. Our interactions with ugliness are potentially more complex than easy beauty, as the

<sup>40</sup> Parsons (2002) argues that although there can be a variety of aesthetic categories through which we can aesthetically appreciate nature, we ought to choose those as most appropriate via a beauty-making criterion, which gives us the best aesthetic value.

<sup>41</sup> See also Korsmeyer, 2005; and S. Lintott, 'Eco-Friendly Aesthetics' *Environmental Ethics*, 28 (2006), 56–76.

<sup>42</sup> In so far as there could be some biological advantage to negative values in nature, disgust, fear, aversion, and alienation from nature, for example, have been seen as functioning in ways that provide security, protection, and safety. See S. Kellert *Values of Life* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996).

## The Ugly Truth

peculiarities of nature become foregrounded in our experience. The edifying effects arising out of this aesthetic relationship can feed into attitudes of care and concern, and with additional values such as biodiversity and existence values, lead to the protection of the bizarre aye-aye or ugly toads. Life just wouldn't be the same without them.

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