Moral Values and the Arts in Environmental Education: Towards an Ethics of Aesthetic Appreciation

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There appear to be various respects in which the outdoor environment has been regarded as significant for education in general and moral education in particular. Whereas some educationalists have considered the environment to be an important site of character development, others have regarded attention to conservation and sustainable development as pressing moral educational concerns in a world of widespread human environmental abuse. The following paper argues that approaches to environmental education that proceed by way of character education or environmental ethics may yet fall short of the central goal of promoting intrinsic appreciation of nature and the outdoors, and explores an alternative strategy focused on exposure to the arts.

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wilderness? Let them be left,
O let them be left. Wilderness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
(‘Inversnaid’ by Gerard Manley Hopkins, in Gardner and Mackenzie, 1970, p. 89)

MORALITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT: SOME FALSE TRAILS

If it is true that education as such can hardly avoid the cultivation of values, this could not be less so of environmental education. From this viewpoint, since no environmental education worthy of the name could deal merely in the inculcation of facts or information, it would need to involve some promotion of, or initiation into, evaluative attitudes to nature and the outdoors. But what kinds of attitudes and/or values might these be? On the one hand, they might be thought to include attitudes of an aesthetic kind: we might want the environmentally educated to grow in appreciation of the environment—not just any old environment, of course, but environments that might be regarded as aesthetically pleasing,
attractive or as otherwise congenial to human sensibility. However, the values to be promoted through environmental education might also—indeed, perhaps in consequence—be expected to extend beyond the aesthetic to the moral: as well as wanting the environmentally educated to appreciate the outdoors (as passive spectators), we might also want them (as activists) to try to protect it from various kinds of industrial or commercial rape and pillage.

But this simple move from the aesthetic to the moral is already problematic. First, there is the plausible suspicion that moral values are more objective than aesthetic values. To whatever extent the objective basis of moral principles has been a time-honoured bone of contention, most major moral philosophers have nevertheless agreed in regarding moral principles as more than just personal constructs (as, for example, rules of public conduct) whereas aesthetic judgements have not infrequently been regarded as expressive of mere subjective taste. From this viewpoint, there is liable to be a degree of individual preference with regard to aesthetic values that is not rationally negotiable—which may, from an environmental perspective, mean that the tourist-friendly development you value is not the wilderness I value. Indeed, even on the view that aesthetic values are answerable to some objective standards (from which one might judge some tastes to be better than others), it would not follow that I was morally wrong to adhere to this (lower) rather than that (higher) set of values: thus, I seem free (as Wittgenstein suggested on another matter in his ‘Lecture on Ethics’ (1965)) to regard my appalling taste in music as no one else’s business in a way that I am not free to regard beating my wife as no one’s concern but my own.

But second, such problems are exacerbated by the observation that the principles upon which major philosophers have sought to construct morality have often been focused on the flourishing of one natural constituency—the human—to the exclusion, if not at the expense, of others. For Aristotelians, morality concerns the promotion of human flourishing via the development of self- and other-regarding virtues (Aristotle, 1925), for utilitarians its point is to increase general human happiness (Mill, 1970), for Kantians it is to observe one’s duty to others as autonomous members of the rational kingdom of ends (Kant, 1967) and so on. There seems to be nothing in such views that takes non-human nature to be a proper site of moral interest, and little beyond human need and convenience upon which any concern for animals or landscapes might be founded. Indeed, from this viewpoint, all disagreement between those who would want to preserve some piece of ground as virgin wilderness and those who would wish to develop it for human economic or recreational convenience would already seem to be decided in favour of the latter.

Prior to more recent innovative work on environmental ethics and education (see especially, Bonnett, 1999, 2000, 2003; also Cooper and Palmer, 1998) some such logical gap between the moral and aesthetic dimensions of any human commerce with the environment does seem to have coloured theory and policy making on the relationship of the environment to moral educational concerns. Some past thinking about the
place of the environment in moral education has, of course, been more or less instrumental. Following a line of thought that probably goes back to Plato (1961), not a few past educationalists and policy makers seem to have regarded the outdoors as an important training ground for character—not least for the morally disabled characters of certain inadequately socialised young people. From this viewpoint, the outdoors provides a context in which such youngsters might not only acquire the discipline missing from their own upbringing, but also learn the value of co-operation with others in circumstances in which one’s very survival could well depend on such mutual dependence. (For a useful recent survey and bibliographical guide to relevant literature in this field, see Fox and Avramidis, 2003.) Indeed, the current rash of televisual docu-soaps focused on outdoor endurance and survival testifies to the persistent popular appeal of some such picture of the relationship of moral character to environment.

A more reflective approach to education in or about the environment, however, might draw upon what is nowadays generally known as ‘environmental ethics’ (see, for example, Attfield, 1995; Elliot, 1991; Taylor, 1986). The primary focus of environmental ethics is, of course, less on the personal character developmental potential of the outdoors, and more upon principled attention to the kinds of environmental problems to which past and present human (mis)management of nature has given rise. Broadly, indeed, this approach to understanding the moral dimensions of environment, and/or any programme of environmental education that might be based upon it, would proceed by way of explicit philosophical exploration of problems of conservation, sustainable development and so on, in the light of various classical ethical theories. On more simplistic ‘applied ethics’ construals of this approach, to be sure, it might be supposed that the key task of environmental ethics is to reflect upon the possibly conflicting verdicts that the ethics of (Kantian or other) duty and utility might return to the question of whether an economic development that greatly benefits the poor in the Third World, but involves global degradation of the environment, should or should not be pursued as a matter of local or international policy.

Without denying that such questions are of considerable academic and practical significance and interest, it may be doubted whether they should be considered the be-all and end-all of environmental education. On the one hand, many of such questions are of some degree of generality and abstraction, and—current trends towards philosophy for children notwithstanding—Aristotle’s point that such questions cannot be profitably discussed until people have attained years of discretion (Aristotle, 1925, p. 3) might well have force. Indeed, if ‘years of discretion’ is here meant to indicate a need for moral judgement to be more grounded in practical experience, then one might be tempted to trace the inadequacy of much abstract ethical discussion of these and other questions precisely to the lack of such practical maturity on the part of not a few past philosophers. Be that as it may, it is still unclear to what extent, if any, such abstract ethical reflection might move us away from a basically agent-centred
perspective on environmental questions, and towards a view that appreciates or values the environment for its own sake.

VALUE, SENSIBILITY AND VIRTUE

That said, both approaches to understanding relations between the environment and morality—the character developmental conception and the environmental ethics conception—seem to enshrine key insights. The character-development view rightly emphasises direct personal experiential encounter with the natural environment and the importance of this for personal development: one benefit of exposure to the outdoors is that it might produce changes in the agent, in the light of which he or she could be said to be a better or improved person. Environmental ethics, on the other hand, precisely directs agents to questions and concerns about the environment that are importantly transcendent of individual self-interest: agents are invited to consider how the environment might be valued in ways that go beyond purely personal advantage. The trouble is that, in regarding the outdoors as merely instrumental to character development, the first approach may fail to engage with appreciation of the environment for its own sake (for presumably if an indoor context or activity yielded the same consequences it might be judged just as effective), and the second approach—though in principle more conducive to such intrinsic appreciation—may still fail to promote a regard for the environment that appropriately transcends the anthropocentric viewpoint.

In seeking an alternative perspective, however, we should first note that any crude conception of environmental ethics as the application of philosophically derived moral decision procedures to environmental issues and problems in the interests of their objective rational resolution would be open to a range of general recent objections to such conceptions of moral life and decision-making. For quite some time, any idea of moral practical reasoning as a matter of strict logical derivation of prescriptions from codifiable general norms—whether of obligation or utility—has been under attack from a variety of ethical and moral-theoretical perspectives. Leaving aside those non-cognitivists and perhaps more extreme care-ethicists who have all but denied that morality is any sort of rational business, various communitarians and virtue theorists have held that the normative and evaluative complexity of moral association requires moral reasoning and deliberation to be more a matter of context-sensitive judgement than of the application to particular cases of deontic or utilitarian generalities (see, for contemporary views of this sort: McDowell, 1998; Nussbaum, 1990; Taylor, 1993).

More to the present point (and meeting non-cognitivism some of the way) modern Aristotelian virtue ethicists have argued that effective moral reasoning is not an exclusively cognitive matter, and depends crucially upon the proper development of affective capacities and sensibilities. Thus, for Aristotle—for whom friendship was one of the most significant forms of moral association (Aristotle, 1925, Books 8 and 9)—moral
engagement with others is not primarily (if at all) a matter of treating others equally in accordance with some impartial rule, but of developing those affective states and dispositions apt for sensitive appreciation of their particular situation: moral treatment means getting to know people, getting to know them involves sensitive appreciation of their circumstances and such appreciation involves the cultivation of appropriately ordered feeling. Thus, although the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant might primarily be associated with the view that morality involves treating others as ends-in-themselves (Kant, 1967), it is arguably Aristotle who better shows us what this really requires in terms of the development of capacities to feel what others feel. Still, the key point of present concern is that Aristotelian moral virtue seems implicated in the cultivation of something like aesthetic sensibilities—specifically attachments to something beyond ourselves—as well as capacities for evaluative reason and judgement.

Such cultivation appears to point towards the sort of change in ourselves that also seems to be emphasised on character development approaches to environmental education—and, indeed, an ethics of virtue is often characterised as an (aretaic) ethics of character, more than a (deontic) ethics of principle. However, there would also appear to be key differences. Like the contemporary character education approach to moral education (Lickona, 1996)—with which virtue ethics is often crudely confused—the focus of at least some character-building views of environmental education may have been primarily compensatory or remedial: on this view, young people—particularly those suffering from poor parenting or socialisation—lack some of the qualities needed for effective civil association, and environmental challenges may be used as a means to helping them recognise the value of persistence or co-operation. Indeed, much recent as well as past reflection on moral, spiritual and citizenship education shows that it is ever tempting for those (quite properly) concerned with problems of social control—such as politicians, policemen and teachers—to be drawn to deficit models of personal development focused mainly on finding antidotes to the negative individual and social effects of lack of character. On this view, the main aim of character development programmes (environmental or otherwise) is not especially to forge evaluative attachments or sympathies to anything in particular—something which might even be regarded in conditions of liberal pluralism as inappropriate personal manipulation—but rather (more modestly) to deter any and all potential breaches of the harm principle.

At all events, insofar as Aristotelian virtue ethics holds that character development is a matter of education as much as prevention—the cultivation of positive human attachments as well as the inhibition of antisocial tendencies—it is arguably distinguishable from some contemporary moral educational approaches to character education (see Carr and Steutel, 1999). Indeed, to sum up the story so far, insofar as character development and environmental ethics approaches to environmental education have been identified as at least potentially different strategies, virtue ethics may first move beyond them in regarding rational moral capacities for
reflection on environmental problems as presupposed to any proper
development of self- and other-regarding character dispositions. But
virtue ethics also transcends any simple juxtaposition of these approaches
in regarding the rational capacities and dispositions of the genuine
moral character of virtue as in turn jointly implicated in the cultivation
of affective and aesthetic attitudes, values and sensibilities: before
we can really think rightly about or behave appropriately towards the
environment we must first care about it, and caring is no less a matter
of emotional attachment and aesthetic appreciation than of right reason
and conduct.

ETHICS, AESTHETICS AND ART

Hence, it so far seems not just that any defensible conception of
environmental education would have to be (broadly) a matter of the
promotion of reflective moral capacities and values, but that such moral
education would also need to be implicated in the cultivation of aesthetic
appreciation. But how might such aesthetic appreciation be promoted?
One fairly predictable answer is that such appreciation is fostered through
acquaintance with works of art. However, although I think—as I shall try
to show further on in this essay—that this answer is essentially on the right
lines, it further complicates matters by introducing yet another proble-
matic notion into the already complex equation of environmental
education (and of values education generally). For, first, if the relationship
of moral value to aesthetic appreciation is less than clear, the relationship
of art to morality is no more so—despite the widespread belief that these
notions are connected at least to the extent that artworks often (though not
always) have clear moral import.

But second, perhaps more surprisingly, although past philosophers and
art theorists have sometimes written as though the aesthetic and the artistic
are identical, it has been strongly denied that this is so (Best, 1985). On this
view, indeed, the aesthetic is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition
of the artistic, since there may be objects of considerable aesthetic quality
that are not works of art or of much artistic value, and works of art that
are neither objects of aesthetic value nor aesthetic objects. For example,
wallpaper may be aesthetically pleasing, but of little artistic value, and
some works of conceptual art may be of some artistic value, but of little or
no aesthetic worth (unless one trivialises the connection by stipulating that
every experienced thing must have some aesthetic value). I have argued
elsewhere (Carr, 1999) that this point is overstated, and probably rests on
an over-formalistic view of conceptual relations: thus, although it is true
that the concepts in question sometimes come apart in the ways indicated,
it may be harder to imagine a form of life in which the idea of the artistic
was never related to that of the aesthetic—and certainly any such form of
life would not be our form of life.

All the same, the artistic and the aesthetic may well fail to connect in
ways that do raise problems, not least for my earlier suggestion that works
of art can help to develop aesthetic appreciation. For even supposing that some kind of aesthetic content is mostly required for artistic value, it will still be true that aesthetic worth is not sufficient for artistic value: in short, an aesthetically pleasing sunset will have no particular artistic worth—since it is not a work of art. But in that case, far from artistic appreciation enabling aesthetic sensibility, the latter seems required for the former. In this light, although I might have a developed aesthetic appreciation of a sunset without knowing whether this picture of a sunset is good art, I could less easily know what made this a good piece of sunset art in the absence of some aesthetic sensibility to sunsets. That said, I shall proceed to argue that the connection we are here seeking to forge between moral attitudes and aesthetic sensibility to the environment is indeed best made through those forms of artistic endeavour and appreciation that aim to locate nature in a context of wider artistic, metaphysical and/or ethical concerns. The present task is therefore to sketch a brief account of the relationship between the aesthetic, the artistic and the moral or ethical that licenses this conclusion.

First, although aesthetic sensitivity to sunsets clearly falls short of artistic appreciation, it does not follow that aesthetic appreciation is a natural faculty that is entirely devoid of any and all conceptual content. On the contrary, it seems likely that any capacity for aesthetic appreciation is a culturally conditioned propensity, which rats, bats and cats do not share, and that it is thereby subject to social and cultural norms and conventions. Indeed, although some natural attraction to the sight or smell of flowers may underpin aesthetic pleasure in most if not all human cultures, the manner in which flowers are found to be pleasing when arranged in vases or repeated in wallpaper patterns may differ from culture to culture. Still, wallpaper and/or flower arranging—though pleasing or decorative—are clearly not art in the way that the paintings in the Sistine Chapel or the music of J. S. Bach are art. At this point, moreover, we may safely ignore any charges of cultural parochialism or elitism that this observation might attract from some quarters. On the one hand, any broad sense in which the paintings of Picasso and flower arranging in general might both be referred to as ‘art’ could only fudge the diverse cultural and social functional contexts and purposes of such arts. On the other, the more precise sense in which the paintings of Picasso and Japanese flower-arranging might both be referred to as art—insofar as both might be credited with higher metaphysical, spiritual and moral significance—serves only to reinforce rather than undermine that significant distinction between Japanese flower arranging and flower arranging at large that we are here concerned to observe.

Second, however, in observing some such distinction between the making of aesthetically pleasing designs and ‘high’ art we need not be committed to supposing that any hard and fast line can be drawn between these. In this light, one influential attempt to distinguish between the artistic and the aesthetic in terms of the ‘intentionality’ of the former—specifically its focus upon so-called ‘life issues’ (Best, 1985; McFee, 1992)—seems less than persuasive in view of such art forms as abstract...
painting and (what has been called) ‘music alone’ (Kivy, 1990), which certainly need not be concerned to express or address moral or other issues of human association or conduct. But although it may be a mistake to suppose that there is any simple distinction between creative wallpaper design and the abstractions of a Mondrian, we can yet recognise in the paintings of the latter a concern with problems—precisely with the formalisation of features of landscape—that serves well enough to distinguish art from mere craft. What is misleading about any life-issues conception of art is the idea that such artistic concerns would have to be ‘anthropocentric’ if not actually ethical. We have already noted that in finding a sunset aesthetically pleasing, I would not normally take it to be a work of art—even though any aesthetic perception of it may well be influenced by cultural conventions. However, in criticising someone’s painting of a sunset, an art teacher might maintain that the composition would have been better if the artist had placed the sheep here rather than there. Arguably, such judgement moves beyond the merely aesthetic to the artistic, but it still seems to fall short of any concern with life (let alone ethical) issues.

In this light, although a Cézanne or Mondrian abstract may hardly be expected to help those entirely devoid of aesthetic sense to appreciate the beauty of landscape, it may nevertheless do much to enhance, develop or transform existing appreciation by promoting imaginative reappraisal of it. At the same time, such artists need have no moral or even anthropocentric concern with their subjects—and, indeed, it may well be their aim to achieve some ‘phenomenological’ distance from such concerns. In short, the arts take on moral significance not with the transition from purely aesthetic to artistic concerns, but with the shift from one set of artistic concerns to another. Some great painters, musicians, poets and novelists have been exercised primarily by the re-description or ‘re-presentation’ of sense-perception to the end of achieving fresh or novel perspectives on experience: others, however, have been more concerned with relocating familiar perceptions and perspectives in wider metaphysical, spiritual and moral contexts. This may now be an appropriate moment to look more closely at these different levels of artistic aspiration as applied precisely to appreciation of the environment—with an ultimate view to recognising the potential of the arts for engaging with aesthetic, spiritual and moral aspects of environmental education.

THE ARTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

There can be no doubt that the natural environment has been a powerful source of inspiration to artists of all kinds from antiquity to the present—and, to be sure, whole schools of painters, musicians and poets have been drawn to ‘Arcadian’ or pastoral themes: indeed, we have noted that past and present concerns with the representation or expression of natural themes are not just confined to landscape painters, pastoral composers and nature poets, but have informed the modern abstract work of such visual
artists as Cézanne and Mondrian. In the remainder of this essay, however, we shall focus upon just two significant fields of artistic endeavour upon which educators might usefully draw for the purpose of further enhancing the environmental appreciation and sensitivity of students.

**Sculpture and the environment**

At first sight, sculpture might seem one of the more unlikely vehicles for environmental education. On the face of it, unlike painting or photography, sculpture is not obviously capable of visual representation of the environment, it is frequently found in the indoor contexts of gallery or museum, and much if not most traditional and modern sculpture also seems to have been primarily focused on human form. However, such first impressions may appear too quick off the mark when one reflects on the extent to which sculpture is also readily encountered in outdoor settings—in public parks and the grounds of stately homes—and upon the way in which it has traditionally been used to celebrate or personify nature via images of Demeter, Persephone, Artemis, Pan, Dionysus and other classical nature deities: indeed, it is hard to turn a corner in any British park or garden without running into such icons of ancestral nature worship.

Even in the case of modern figurative sculpture that does not deal in any such classical associations, however, one may not need to look far for quite explicit references to the natural environment. Indeed, one would be

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Figure 1. Henry Moore: Two Part Reclining Figure No. 2, 1960 (L H 458)

hard put to find a more striking locus of such references than the work of Henry Moore, whom many would regard as the most distinguished figurative sculptor of the twentieth century. First, interestingly, Moore’s earliest stone and wood sculptures of reclining figures were inspired by Mexican carvings of elemental deities (such as the rain god Chac Mool), but many of Moore’s subsequent reworkings of human form also draw explicitly upon his detailed explorations of the shapes and textures of bone, shell and other organic materials. However, final union between man and environment is ultimately consummated in Moore’s majestic multi-part reclining figures of the 1960s (see Figure 1) in which human form is once and for all metamorphosed into the rugged coastal landscape of the sculptor’s adopted Cornish home. It is also notable that many of Moore’s works were conceived and constructed for outdoor settings, and would seem quite out of place in indoor contexts: no-one having had first-hand experience of Moore’s king and queen in its commanding lochside position in Scotland’s remote Glen Kiln could have any doubts about the appropriateness of his work for environmental setting—or concerning

Figure 2. Andy Goldsworthy: ‘Slate Cone’ (Edinburgh Royal Botanic Gardens)
its extraordinary power to enhance and spiritualise any surrounding landscape.

In more recent times, however, non-figurative sculpture has taken a much more conspicuous outdoor turn in the work of artists explicitly concerned either with the aesthetics of environment or with making larger moral or political statements about issues of environmental conservation or development. Working with an extraordinary wide range of materials from sticks and stones to snow and ice, it is probably fair to identify the British environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy with a rather more aesthetic and less (at any rate up-front) political or social agenda, but his works have attracted wide attention and had an unassuming but significant educational effect on popular appreciation of the intrinsic properties and value of natural phenomena (see Figure 2). On the other hand, the work of such modern American exponents of so-called ‘Land Art’ as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and Walter de Maria seems characterised by a more metaphysically, ethically and/or politically

Figure 3. Himalayan land art (photograph courtesy of Dr Peter Allison)
up-front approach to outdoor art, which has also tended to work on a much larger environmental ‘canvas’. In this regard, de Maria’s ‘The Lightning Field’ constructed in the vast wilderness spaces of New Mexico is indicative of the rather darker, more apocalyptic implications of any and all human technological tampering with larger elemental forces. (For illustrations of such work, see Duvy and Daval, 1996). Figure 3 depicts some land art in a Himalayan setting.

The environment in poetry

Thus, of the visual arts, sculpture seems particularly well placed not only to bring human senses into direct contact with the actual aesthetic properties—the shapes, colours and textures—of both organic and inorganic nature, but also to take appreciation of the environment out of the indoor contexts of home, school and museum into outdoor spaces. All the same, if one is to ask for examples of artists who have significantly contributed to popular appreciation of the natural environment, it may be that poets will be mentioned before sculptors. For although nature features perhaps rather less frequently as a topic of poetic attention than often supposed, it is still true that some of the best-loved of past poets (for example, the English Romantics) have been nature poets, and that no other art can quite rival the power of poetry to express the sensual impact of nature with such immediacy. Indeed, some of the best loved of nature poetry seems precisely to deal in such sensory epiphany. Thus, apart from Wordsworth’s fine but well-thumbed lines in praise of daffodils—which probably do owe much of their lasting chocolate-box popularity to such immediacy—it would be hard to find a better illustration of such impact than the following lines from A. E. Housman’s ‘A Shropshire Lad’ (also hauntingly set to music by George Butterworth, among other British pastoral composers):

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bow,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.  
(A Shropshire Lad by A. E. Housman, 1977, p. 9)

Hence poetry, in the course of a few simple images, succeeds in conjuring up an entire landscape—together with an associated world of human feeling—precisely by means of that affectively charged focus on particular detail that we earlier associated with the perceptual judgements of Aristotle’s *phronesis*. In the ‘Marriage of Heaven and Hell’ the English visionary poet William Blake famously wrote that ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite’ (Ostriker, 1977, p. 188)—so that we might well come to see, as he also observes in his ‘Auguries of Innocence’, ‘a world in a grain of sand’ or ‘heaven in a wild flower’ (Ostriker, 1977, p. 506). There can also be little doubt that Blake regarded poetry and other arts as key imaginative
conduits to discernment of the universal through the particular: if properly perceived, the particular experience can yield a vision of eternity, but it takes the poetic (or other artistic) image to fasten our attention on that experience, as the camera fixes the image on the photographic negative. This very idea is hauntingly expressed in relation to experience of nature in the following lines of R. S. Thomas:

I have seen the sun break through to illuminate a small field for a while, and gone my way and forgotten it. But that was the pearl of great price, the one that had the treasure in it. I realise now that I must give all that I have to possess it. Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past. It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush, to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once, but is the eternity that awaits you. (‘The Bright Field’ by R. S. Thomas, 2000, p. 302, © Kunjana Thomas, 2001.)

However, from what has been said so far, the poetry or art of natural or other epiphany might appear to be primarily aesthetic or ‘existential’, and to fall to that extent somewhat short of actual comment on the relationship of man to that natural environment that men have so often shamefully exploited. But cleansing the doors of perception in such a way that we may come to see the world of nature sub species aeternitatis (rather than anthropocentrically)—or even as a window into eternity—would also seem a precondition of coming to appreciate the intrinsic value of the environment, and of putting any and all human designs on it into proper perspective. In this respect, philosophers and sages from the ancient Stoics and Epicureans onwards have often sought to deflate human pretensions by pointing to the indifference of nature to finite human concerns. But it seems again that art and poetry may be more effective in driving this lesson home, and it is in just this spirit that the novelist and poet Thomas Hardy contemplates the rugged grandeur of the Matterhorn—a peak so closely associated with human aspirations and ambitions—from a viewpoint of the mountain’s indifference to human or even divine interests:

Yet ages ere men topped thee, late and soon Thou didst behold the planets lift and lower; Saw’st, maybe, Joshua’s pausing sun and moon, And the betokening sky where Caesar’s power Approached its bloody end; yea even that Noon

When darkness filled the earth till the ninth hour.
(Thomas Hardy, ‘To the Matterhorn’, Hardy, 1976, p. 106)

On the other hand, another rather more accommodating perspective on the relationship of man to the environment focuses more on the continuity between human and other parts of nature. Although the idea that humanity is essentially continuous with the rest of creation is also clearly anticipated in ancient philosophies and theories, it has clearly gained much ground in modern times with wide acceptance of Darwinian evolutionary biology and behavioural science. The main drawback of philosophical or scientific endorsement of such continuity, however, lies in associated rejection of any and all religious or other dualisms of mind or soul and body that resist reduction to such evolutionary naturalism, and in concomitant dismissal of non-reductive or non-instrumental accounts of spiritual, aesthetic, moral and other human values. That said, modern attempts to make non-instrumental or non-reductive sense of such values in the context of otherwise naturalistic accounts of the world are evident in the so-called ‘pantheism’ of the seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict Spinoza, and also arguably in nineteenth-century Hegelian and other idealist conceptions of spirit as an emergent property of natural evolutionary processes. Once more, however, pantheistic and other views of fundamental human continuity with nature have probably been most powerfully expressed in the work of poets, not least in the work of those great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western European Romantic poets—of whom, again, Wordsworth would seem to provide the best example. Still, the work of the modern English poet and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine—inspired perhaps more by Blakean gnosticism than by any pantheism—expresses the continuity view about as well as one could wish:

Then the sky spoke to me in language clear,
familiar as the heart, than love more near.
The sky said to my soul, ‘You have what you desire!
Know now that you are born along with these
clouds, winds, and stars, and ever moving seas
and forest dwellers. This your nature is,
Lift up your heart again without fear,
sleep in the tomb, or breathe the living air,
this world you with the flower and with the tiger share.’
(‘Passion’ by Kathleen Raine, 1981, © Kathleen Raine)

In any treatment of nature poetry, however, William Wordsworth could hardly be denied his place in the sun as the nature poet par excellence, and Wordsworth’s own famous definition of poetry as ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ also testifies to the central place he gave to feeling in poetry. But in recalling his abiding impression of Wordsworth in terms of ‘the union of deep feeling with great thought’, Coleridge also draws our attention to the powerful and far-reaching metaphysical, moral and political ideas from which Wordsworth’s poetic reflections on nature
cannot be seriously disengaged. Hence, as well as appreciating the unity or continuity of man with nature, Wordsworth is as aware as any other of his great romantic contemporaries of the deeply disordered and discordant condition into which morally and politically fallen humanity has allowed its divine-natural innocence to lapse. In his 1798 ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’, for example, celebration of the peace and tranquility of nature is memorably mixed with lament for what ‘man has made of man’, and in the following later verses Wordsworth again seeks to capture the spiritual, moral and emotional impoverishment consequent on human neglect of nature for more material concerns:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
The sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours;  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.  
(‘Lines: 1807’ by William Wordsworth, in Nichol Smith, 1921, p. 146)

Wordsworth’s poetry generally makes much of the potential of poetry for moral and spiritual regeneration through imaginative attention to nature, holding that nothing can rival the power of poetic contemplation of nature to transform—through the cultivation and refinement of human sensibility—the hearts and souls of men. (For an insightful treatment of Wordsworth on imagination and feeling, see Warnock, 1976, 1994.)

CONCLUSION: THE REDEMPTIVE VALUE OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

There can be little doubt that many of the Romantic poets and artists of the Ages of Reason and Enlightenment were deeply influenced by the social, political and educational ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For Rousseau—nowadays widely regarded as the prime architect of modern progressive or child-centred education—the educational practices of his time were precisely reflective of man’s moral, social and political fall from grace, as a direct result of socio-economic transition from the pre-civil ‘state of nature’ to the deeply inequitable condition of civil society (Rousseau, 1973). Above all, Rousseau (1973, 1974) held that what passed for education in his day was little more than the amoral and self-interested pursuit of positional goods in which moral and spiritual bondage was liable to be the common lot of both winners and losers. In this respect, it is hard not to see Rousseau’s educational concerns reflected in contemporary critiques of present-day state education in such developed Western
economies as our own, in which spiritual and moral values also seem to have taken a back seat to more instrumental pre-occupations.

However, the road to redemption for Rousseau lay not (as he has sometimes been interpreted) in any unrealistic return to the state of nature, but in a re-education of human moral reason, imagination and sensibility of precisely the kind that he and others of his philosophical and literary heirs sought to develop. From this viewpoint, Rousseau and his various followers certainly looked to nature as a source of moral and spiritual regeneration: on the one hand, as a way of transcending the instrumental preoccupations of modern economic man with ‘getting and spending’; on the other, as a route to appreciation of such transcendent values as love of the created order and beauty for their own sakes. For the Romantic heirs of Rousseau, moreover, there could be no better path to such intrinsic appreciation than the cultivation of human imagination through the creative arts.

Ironically, however, Rousseau’s enduring mainstream philosophical influence was on the great rationalist philosopher Immanuel Kant who, although speaking of the two great sources of human awe as the ‘starry heavens above and the moral law within’ (Kant, 1968), went on to define the moral law in terms of a reason utterly divorced from (if not antipathetic to) sentiment or feeling. The Kantian view, which has exercised an enduring influence on modern (cognitivist) theories of moral and social education (see, especially, Kohlberg, 1984), is that the de-centring required for mature moral agency ultimately depends upon the development of affectively disengaged impartial judgement. For the Romantics, on the other hand, such de-centring—or any effective liberation from what Iris Murdoch has called ‘the fat relentless ego’ (Murdoch, 1970, p. 52)—depends rather upon proper attachment of human sentiments to something beyond ourselves: this may occur in the genuine love of one soul for another, or for the starry heavens above—but either love stands to be enhanced by feelingful engagement with poetry, painting or music. In their emphasis on the proper cultivation of sentiment and feeling as a mechanism of de-centring, then, the Romantics part company with Kant and his rationalist heirs—looking arguably both backwards to Aristotle’s affectively grounded view of moral virtue, and forwards to those contemporary critiques of moral cognitive developmentalism associated with the so-called ‘ethics of care’ (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

At all events, it is arguable that much modern educational theory, policy and practice has gone the way of affectively disengaged rather than engaged reason. Generally, to be sure, the official educational policy of developed Western liberal democracies seems to have been guided by an instrumental economic rationalism that is more utilitarian than Kantian, and more concerned with the production of producers and consumers than with the cultivation of self-transcendent contemplation of eternal verities. But although this has been widely noticed and deplored in wave after wave of compensatory initiatives on values, spiritual and citizenship education (see NCC, 1993; OFSTED, 1994; QCA, 1998;
SCAA, 1995), panaceas for the social dislocation and disaffection often consequent upon such economic instrumentalism have all too often been sought in the application of neo-Kantian and other rationalist moral and civic educational theories to a no less instrumentalist agenda of social control. Irrespective of particular differences of approach, the educational focus seems often to have been on getting socially disaffected youngsters to conform to rules of self-discipline and social conduct in a spirit of self- or other-regarding interest. There may be room for doubt, all the same, whether such rational appeals to either self- or other-regarding respect are likely to cut much ice with the more culturally disinherted, economically deprived and otherwise brutalised members of modern materialistic societies. Ironically, it may be that such appeals are likely to be most effective, in the general no less than the remedial case, where individuals have learned to value what lies beyond either self or social interest—or by reference to which such interests may be invested with wider moral and/or spiritual significance. If so, it seems hard to envisage a better route to such significance than that afforded by some judicious combination of environmental and arts education.

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REFERENCES


