Normativity in the Aesthetic Judgment of Art and Nature

SHARP, J. P. S.

Introduction

We make aesthetic judgments about nature just as often as we make aesthetic judgments about art. But whilst art is the product of human artifice, nature is not. And whilst the institution of art is the product of seemingly ever-changing social practices, nature exists irrespective of human interest. Given the disanalogies between art and nature, are the normative standards of correctness that govern our aesthetic judgments of art applicable in the case of nature?

Two influential accounts are offered by Malcolm Budd and Allen Carlson. Budd argues that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is characterised distinctively by a freedom and relativity absent from the aesthetic appreciation of art. Carlson, however, maintains that normativity in the aesthetic appreciation of nature is grounded just as strongly as in the artistic case. My view is that the two theories respectively make too much and too little of the disanalogies that exist between nature and art, and I argue for a middle ground.

I — Malcolm Budd: Freedom and Relativity

Budd maintains that there are standards of correctness in the appreciation of art which involve an artwork being seen in its appropriate art-historical category. This category is determined by the intentions of the artist. Such categories (such as cubism, Gothic architecture, impressionism) will serve to expose the true aesthetic properties of the
artwork (when seen under optimal conditions by a suitable observer). By contrast, the appreciation of natural items, ungoverned by the structures of style and intentional design, is endowed with a 'freedom denied to the appreciation of art' (Budd 2002: 147), which is an 'integral' feature and constitutes to nature's 'distinctive' appeal (148).

Budd's primary claim is that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature: "it must be integral to the rewarding (or displeasing) character of the experience offered by nature that its object is experienced as natural." (2) This distinguishes Budd's approach from other authors, such as Stephen Davies, who model the appreciation of nature on the appreciation of art (Davies 1991: 49). But nature is not art and treating nature as art is insufficient as a general model of the ways we do aesthetically appreciate nature. Art-model approaches are unattractive candidates, for delimiting nature as a domain of aesthetic interest would be unmotivated if its naturalness did not feature in the account of how to appreciate it.

However, Budd proposes no further constraints on the aesthetic appreciation of nature than that it be appreciated as nature. Even the kind of natural thing an object is need not be relevant: "it may well be aesthetically more rewarding... to contemplate it in abstraction... and focus on its shape, textures and colours" (2). As such, his position is a limited cognitivism: our aesthetic judgments are informed by knowledge, but only the knowledge that the item is natural. Reading Budd in this way is supported by his account of appreciating nature as nature. It is not just a negative condition which rules out as irrelevant those aesthetic qualities that would accrue to a natural item if it were a work of art. Rather, it is meant in a positive sense: one bases one's aesthetic judgment on the qualities it exhibits as natural. Whilst the former interpretation rules out considering the natural item as artefact, the latter interpretation demands that the object is considered under "the concept of nature itself or the concept of some particular kind of natural phenomenon" (10).

The aesthetic responses that the naturalness of an object alone can ground are limited, for natural objects all have in common only the fact
that they are not the product of human artifice. "This leaves only such a possibility as marvelling at the fact that something as beautiful, attractive, or remarkable as this — a rainbow or the exquisite fan-shaped leaf of a gingko, for example — is a product of nature." (16) To capture the extent and variety of our aesthetic experiences, Budd must accept that more than this features in our appreciation of natural items. Budd argues that it is features that accrue to natural items in virtue of their being of a certain kind. One can see blossoms not just as blossoms, with certain shapes and colours, but also within the context of their being part of the "growth" and "flourishing" of the living, developing tree: "...a manifestation and beautiful expression of the resurgence of life triggered by the arrival of spring." (17) Similarly, as sentient beings are capable of certain forms of movement, the flight of birds or the outstanding aerial manoeuvrability of dragonflies are parts of the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature. These features accrue to the natural item in virtue of it being that kind of natural item.

Budd claims, therefore, that we can bring to our aesthetic experience of nature a broader understanding of natural phenomena. However, it is not necessary that we do so: judgments based on a 'thin' level of understanding are no less correct than those based on a 'thick' level of understanding. But "if you have the right kind of understanding of nature, you can recruit to your perceptual experience of nature relevant thoughts, emotions and images unavailable to those who lack that understanding." (20) By 'the right kind of understanding' Budd means here only the sorts of understanding that will affect the aesthetic experience of a natural item considered as natural. So recognising that a cloud is a thunder cloud, for example, may transform our experience if it is informed by an awareness of the power and tumultuous forces acting within the cloud.

This stands in contrast with the aesthetic appreciation of art, where Budd sees the right kind of understanding as just that: the correct way to understand the work of art. Budd thus endorses a more demanding cognitivism about aesthetic judgments about art: not only can our understanding of the practices, conventions and standards of an artistic
category affect our aesthetic experience of an artwork (parallel to the nature case), but there is moreover a correct understanding in the artistic case that exposes the true aesthetic properties of the artwork. Budd's general claim is that the disanalogies between art and nature ground a distinctive and characteristic freedom in the appreciation of nature, absent in the case of art.

Budd rests the claim on the following disanalogies:

i) Artist's intention determines the correct category under which a work of art should be considered. Nature is free from design and not the product of social practices, hence no particular category can be said to reveal the natural item's true aesthetic properties.

ii) The category of an art object determines what we should appreciate and how we should appreciate it. For example, if something is understood as a painting, we exclude from aesthetic consideration what is on the reverse of the canvas. The category (e.g. painting) will tell us what mode of appreciation is correct (e.g. which sense-modality) and more specific determinations of that category (e.g. pointillist painting) will "prescribe the appropriate manner of artistic appreciation" (108) depending on the distinctive features of the category's style. But in the natural case, categories provide no guidance for what or how. In the general case, there is no prescribed sense-modality (e.g. how to attend to the sunrise, chill breeze and morning chorus), or perspective (e.g. look close-up / far away; from above / below) or scale (e.g. take one bird or the whole flock; one mountain or the whole range).

From this Budd concludes that a) there are no correct categories for the aesthetic appreciation of a natural item, and b) that the categories deployed do not determine the way in which the object should be appreciated. Hence there is a characteristic freedom about the information we
II — Does Budd Challenge the Objectivity of Judgments about Nature?

One way to construe Budd's position is as an attack on objectivity. Glenn Parsons takes this view, claiming that Budd presents epistemological worries for the possibility of objective aesthetic judgments about nature (Parsons 2006).

For Parsons, the hallmark of objectivity is a notion of 'genuine debate' featuring 'two judgments that express conflicting attitudes towards the same state of affairs' (Parsons 2006: 18). Parsons interprets Budd's argument against objectivity as follows: 1) an appreciator must have epistemologically accessible evidence to support his aesthetic judgments; 2) this evidence comes from 'perceptual surfaces' (what Budd calls 'aspects') of objects; 3) objects have many different perceptual surfaces (thanks to the freedom and relativity we have in appreciating nature); 4) different perceptual surfaces will not all exhibit the same aesthetic properties. Hence if the content of a debate is in fact two different aspects with different aesthetic properties, then the disagreement is not a genuine disagreement. However, Parsons asserts the converse: there are objective judgments about nature and genuine debate concerning them. Hence Budd's way of thinking must be flawed.

Parsons' presentation of Budd’s argument is not incompatible with his conclusion about genuine debate and objectivity of aesthetic judgments about nature. Parsons confuses two issues. Budd does claim that the overall aesthetic value of a natural item is 'indeterminate' and 'ill-defined', for two reasons. One, a natural item often undergoes flourishing and decline over time, with no optimal condition exposing its true aesthetic properties. Two, the characteristic freedom and relativity of the appreciation of nature ensure that aesthetic properties and appearances are 'indefinite' and 'open-ended'. However, this claim about overall aesthetic value is not the same as claiming that disagreement over individual judgments always fails to be objective: his view "does not
preclude there being certain kinds of aesthetic property the attribution of which to a particular natural thing or some aspect of it is 'objectively' true or false, not merely true or false relative to some specific mode of perception." (Budd 2006: 268, my emphasis) Budd continues: “even if, as I hold, the idea of the aesthetic value of a gazelle is indeterminate, I regard its bounding movement in flight as being 'objectively' graceful; and a bee-eater of nearly any species in good health is, for me, 'objectively' beautiful".

Budd’s phrasing is unfortunate, for it is unclear why a bee-eater beautiful for Budd should constitute objective beauty. But that apart, bearing in mind that judgments can be directed at some aspect of the natural item, then from all perspectives and modes that present an aspect which is the-bounding-of-a-gazelle, those aspects have the property of being graceful. Budd’s position thus admits of the meaningful debate that Parsons demands. Even though we may discuss different aspects, we nonetheless discuss the very same property of gracefulness which is exhibited by bounding-gazelle aspects.

III — Normativity in Art and the Role of Artist’s Intentions

Budd’s view of normativity in art requires the deployment of correct categories, which are those intended by the artist. However, Budd does not argue for this view and it is not shared by all philosophers. This section explains why intention is deemed necessary for grounding correctness. It then argues that a more satisfactory account can be given without recourse to intention, one which permits an additional class of aesthetic judgments that we would also intuitively take to afford standards of correctness.

The general account Budd follows is due to Kendall Walton (Walton 1970). Walton’s thesis has two parts. First, he makes the psychological claim that the art-historical category under which we see an object (or, as Budd puts it, ‘the description under which’), affects our experience of the aesthetic properties of that object. Every category has what Walton calls standard, variable and contra-standard properties.
A feature is standard for a category "just in case it is among those in virtue of which works in that category belong to that category". (Walton 1970: 339) Not to have that property would disqualify the work from belonging to that quality (for example, pointed arches are standard for Gothic architecture). Variable features are those which have nothing to do with an artwork's belonging to a category. Contra-standard features tend to disqualify an artwork from belonging to a category. Walton maintains that standard features do not affect the perceived aesthetic properties of an object: e.g. it is standard for a bust to be represented without a torso, but this does not suggest it represents or resembles a torso-less person. Contra-standard features are perceived as doing 'violence' to a category: we find these shocking or disconcerting. Variable properties tend to be the 'expressive aesthetically active' properties (348).

Two categories which differ in their standard and variable properties will differ in the aesthetic significance they bestow on an artwork. To demonstrate this point, consider the following artificial example. An alien civilisation develops an art-category called guernica. These guernicas are made by taking a copy of Picasso's Guernica and rendering it in a kind of bas-relief. The standard properties of guernicas so constructed include the colours on the canvas, whilst the variable properties include the contours of the canvas surface. Picasso's Guernica, viewed as an example of this alien category of guernica, would seem by its flatness to be lifeless, dull, or perhaps calm. Certainly it would not seem dynamic and disturbing, as it does when considered under the aesthetic category of cubist painting, where the paintwork is a variable category and the flatness of the canvas is standard. Seeing an artwork under different categories can thus affect our aesthetic experience.

Walton's second claim is that there is a correct category under which to see the artwork. Walton considers this important to "allow aesthetic judgments to be mistaken often enough" (355). Whilst Budd grounds this in the artist's intention, Walton has a broader set of criteria (357–8):
i) The artwork must have a relatively large number of features *standard* with respect to that category.

ii) "The correct way of perceiving a work is likely to be the way in which it comes off best." The correct category will tend to draw out the greatest aesthetic interest from the work.

iii) The artist intended the artwork to be perceived in that category.

iv) The category is well established in and recognised by the society in which the artwork was produced. ('Recognised', roughly, when the "category figures importantly in their way of classifying works of art").

Walton sees "no way of avoiding the conclusion" that (iii) and (iv) will be relevant for determining the correct category of an artwork. He claims that taking just (i) and (ii) alone would permit the invention of gerrymandered categories, which have a set of standard, variable and contra-standard features selected precisely to turn all negative aesthetic traits of an artwork into positive ones (359–360). Such categories turn any tenth-rate work of art into a masterpiece: a conclusion we must reject. Hence for Walton a historical condition like (iii) or (iv) must play a role.

Before considering this argument, let us turn to a rival account which downgrades the importance of intention. Stephen Davies maintains that artist’s intentions are subservient to the conventions of the style in which she is working. “Spectators do not intuit artist’s intentions, they read those intentions from artist’s uses of artistic conventions... We might concern ourselves not with what the artist meant by his artwork but rather with the meanings that might be put on the artwork (with regard to its historical context but, perhaps, without regard to its intended significance).” (Davies 1991: 194–5) This echoes comments made by Beardsley: as we do interpret works of art without knowledge of artists’ intentions, artists’ intentions can not be the primary means of determining artistic meaning. Davies’ view suggests that artistic conventions reveal intentions in the artistic case just as
linguistic conventions reveal intentions in the linguistic case: aesthetic focus is then on what interpretations this particular use of artistic conventions can sustain.

Someone who adopts Davies' view can argue, contra Walton, that criteria (iii) and (iv) are not always relevant. The artist produces art within a social, theory-driven institution and acts as observer on his own work with awareness of conventional stylistic constraints: this reveals to him the ways in which his work might be received. Thus the artist is in a position to be mistaken about those conventions, and thus mistaken about the category in which his artwork fits: if he fails to manifest the standard features of a style, his work may be judged of another style. (Henri Rousseau's artworks are categorised under the post-impressionist primitive or naïve style, but it is debatable whether he intended his artwork to be so considered.) Hence it can be argued that the artist's intention is not essential to the discernment of category.

As for criterion (iv), Walton admits that the category being well-established in an artistic community is not adequate to ground the notion of correctness. Walton discusses Schoenberg's first 12-tone compositions (361). As these were discontinuous with previous tradition, the category of dodecaphony was not operative at the time Schoenberg created these works. Walton's criterion (iv) is thus not adequate for an account of their correct categorisation. Walton maintains, however, that "in almost all cases at least one of the historical conditions, (iii) and (iv), is of crucial importance" (361). However, this claim is not defended and I believe it is false.

To see why, consider Walton's gerrymandered-category argument against the sufficiency of (i) and (ii). There are two responses. Davies argues that Walton confuses what it is to be an excellent example of a style with what it is to be a masterpiece. Building a style around the particular properties an artwork has may suffice to turn the artwork into an exemplar of that category, but it does not entail anything about our evaluation of that artwork. "Many exemplary members of the category 'classical symphony' are mediocre in their artistic value, whereas Mozart's Prague Symphony, which is a poor instance of a symphony in
containing only three movements, is an artistic masterpiece for all that." (201) Hence, it is not clear that our freedom to create styles also enables us to turn any artwork into a masterpiece.

Second, even if Davies' argument fails, the nature of art criticism as a social enterprise provides resistance to idiosyncratic categorisations. Someone may turn an artwork into a masterpiece with his gerrymandered category, but this category will not only be difficult to construct (as Walton notes), but difficult to communicate. If it is difficult to communicate, a shared understanding will be unlikely to evolve. Without a shared understanding, standards of correctness for its application and use will be lacking. Hence it will fail to gain traction in the art community as a serious category of art.

But just because it is difficult for idiosyncratic categories to gain a hold over artistic society, that does not mean artistic society is opposed to them. In fact, there may be cases where such a category is imposed on an artwork and does get taken up by the art community. For example, a group of artists mentally take an existing artwork out of its accepted category by focusing attention on only some variable features of the artwork that they find interesting. They then communicate this not by description but by creating new artworks that emphasise these variable aspects as standard aspects: i.e. they generate a new style out of variable features of the old artwork. If the original artwork appears favourably in this new style, the new style is correctly applied to the existing artwork. Walton would maintain that correctness in this case is picked up 'by default' by criterion (iv), such that the original category is correct, but without argument this is not obvious.

Even if Walton were defended on all the above points, I still think there are other examples in which we do impose onto an artwork other categories not intended by an artist: cases which are context and interest relative. A Cézanne painting is usually best considered as impressionist. However, imagine an exhibition of only Cézanne's works, arranged chronologically with accompanying descriptions of his personal life around the time of each painting. Given this information, we might see the paintings not as impressionist but as paintings by Cézanne.
If so, this might affect the aesthetic properties of the artworks: we might see the violent brush strokes as expressive of the tenacity he showed in overcoming the repressive attitudes of his father and his own self-doubt in his abilities as an artist.

Moreover, I think we would be correct to do so because the context invites this way of viewing the artwork: the contrast class offered is Cézanne's works, not a collection of impressionist works in general. The painting expresses tenacity in this context because the appreciation is interest-relative, relative to interest in the life of Cézanne: we are invited to bring this knowledge to the artworks, not knowledge of impressionism. Thus we can use criterion (ii) to claim that, given this information and contrast class, we are perfectly correct to see tenacity in the artwork — the situation merits it aesthetically. (That is not to say it is automatically wrong for someone to consider the painting as impressionist for he might have a photographic memory of a variety of impressionist oeuvres — but this is to invite a new context. In the biographical context, the qualities exposed are qualities informed by Cézanne's biography.) Hence Walton's worries are ill-founded, for we sometimes ought employ criteria (i) and (ii) alone with respect to context and interest.

I conclude that it is both possible to justify the correct attribution of aesthetic qualities to artworks without reference to artist intention and that there are standard cases in which we do so. Hence there is some freedom of aesthetic appreciation in artistic contexts, contrary to Budd's claims.

IV — Allen Carlson: Scientific Cognitivism

On the above view, an art object's aesthetic significance is given through a shared system of conventions which can support various interpretations. Perhaps normativity in the aesthetic appreciation of natural items can be established through parallel considerations: whilst the natural world is not a product of contrivance, we nonetheless impose a system upon natural phenomena which contains natural
categories and laws. Natural science thus forms a body of inter­subjective knowledge roughly analogous to art-historical information.

Allen Carlson proposes an argument that natural science must fulfil a parallel function for nature as art historical information does for art. First, he takes it to be the case that some aesthetic judgments about nature are 'appropriate, correct or perhaps simply true'. He then proposes that there is no significant difference between art and nature in terms of normativity of aesthetic judgment. Hence, having dismissed other weaker models, he concludes the only plausible contender for the cognitivist background is natural science.

Carlson contrasts his scientific cognitivist position with what he terms relativist positions. (Carlson 2000: 54) However, as was shown in the discussion of Budd, a 'relativist' position need not entail a challenge to the objectivity of aesthetic judgments — truth may need to be judged relative to a particular perceptual standpoint, but the properties appreciated in the natural item's perceptual surface may be common to different perceivers. Hence Carlson's opponent is not clearly defined. In fact, Carlson and Budd seem to agree on how to characterise the correctness of aesthetic judgment: Budd's insistence that the natural should be seen as natural echoes Carlson's insistence that we 'follow the lead of the object' (106), seeing the object for what it is (i.e. as a natural thing and not some other thing) and appreciating it for the natural properties that it has. But whereas Carlson develops a thoroughgoing cognitivism to ground the correctness of aesthetic judgment, parallel to the artistic case, Budd's cognitivism is more minimalist.

What can be said for a more thoroughgoing cognitivism? As Carlson notes, it must be the case that we do impose structure onto our natural environment: we do not find ourselves in a "blooming, buzzing confusion" (49). He maintains we do this through our scientific/common-sense knowledge of the world. The question is then how this knowledge informs our aesthetic judgments. Carlson gives certain straightforward cases: one cannot consider a cat as a corn field, for example, because cats do not share many perceptual features in common with corn fields (i.e. following Walton's criterion (i)). But Carlson
notes there are cases where perceptual features are not sufficient to
determine the correct categorisation. An example is whether one takes
an anemone to be a plant or an animal. The beautiful and mysterious
item, considered under the category *flower*, becomes quite disturbing
under the category *animal*: its petals become tendrils and the bloss­
som’s heart becomes a gaping maw. Carlson claims that the correctness
of the assertion that the object is an animal should underwrite a parallel
correctness in the aesthetic appreciation of it *as* an animal. Hence, more
generally: ‘if our appreciation is to be at a deeper level, if we are to make
aesthetic judgments that are likely to be true and to be able to deter­
mine whether or not they are true; then we must know something about
that which we appreciate.” (68)

Let us consider several objections Budd raises for Carlson’s posi­
tion. First, Budd claims that Carlson’s theory fails to explain *which*
things we know will be relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of a natural
item. Knowing the formation conditions for a rainbow, whilst not
knowing the formation conditions for supernumerary bows, for exam­
ple, does not impose a substantial difference between appreciation of
the former compared to the latter (Budd 2001: 22). But this objection is
not compelling, for it is equally unclear what grounds relevant back­
ground knowledge in art: knowing art-historical facts such as the birth
place of an artist may or may not significantly inform my aesthetic
appreciation of a painting.

However, *disanalogies* between art and nature will clearly ground
some differences. First, the natural category, as Budd claims, does not
generally determine the frame of the natural object nor the mode of
perception appropriate to it: there seems no reason to claim that the
anemone is correctly appreciated alone, as part of a group, within the
context of its environment, in its youth, in its later days, from up close
or far away. It is hard to see how Carlson could successfully claim that
deeper knowledge about anemones could ground any one of these situ­
tions as unveiling the natural items *true* aesthetic properties. Art­
historical categories, on the other hand, are distinctly *perceptual*
categories: it is partially their purpose to guide aesthetic appraisal.
Nature, meanwhile, remains indifferent to our aesthetic approaches and the categories of nature are not discovered by scientists with aesthetic appraisal in mind.

Secondly, Budd demonstrates that a natural item can sometimes be considered under both a more specific category and a less specific category, and that the aesthetic judgments of a natural item under the narrower category may well be contrary to judgments under the broader. This is also true in art. But in nature, unlike in art, Budd claims there is never reason to favour the narrower over the broader. Take a Clydesdale horse. Considered under the category horse, the Clydesdale is big (and thus grand or majestic). However, the Clydesdale considered under the category Clydesdale may well be rather small for its breed, and anything but majestic. In art, by contrast, Budd thinks the correct category is picked out by the artist's intention.

I argued in part III that there are some correct (interest-relative) category ascriptions applied irrespective of artist's intention. An analogous argument can be made in the case of nature, drawing upon Walton's criterion (ii) (as in the Cézanne case) in certain interest-relative contexts to generate what we can term correct ascriptions of categories. The analogy to the Cézanne case is as follows. If a Clydesdale and a Shetland are presented for aesthetic appreciation together, we ought to apply the category horse to the Clydesdale, for here is an opportunity to appreciate the substantial differences that exist between horse breeds. If, however, we attend a parade of Clydesdales at a working horse farm, complete with information about the distinctive features of Clydesdales that make them appropriate for being working horses, we ought apply the category Clydesdale to the parading horses, for here our attention is drawn to the subtle differences (in coat, mannerism and appearance) of the Clydesdale breed. The normative element is evidenced as follows: we would feel that the person who attended the parade and remarked only in general terms about how beautiful horses are, was missing out on a good opportunity to appreciate Clydesdales as Clydesdales. The context provides an excellent contrast class for that category, less so for horses in general (at least, insofar as aesthetic experience is concerned).
Whilst Carlson's cognitivism is too demanding overall, scientific knowledge is crucial in these cases. Someone with a sophisticated understanding of natural science will be in a stronger position to make interest-relative judgments, for only she will possess the background knowledge to understand what is aesthetically most interesting about particular contexts: this is so because natural categories are discovered by science (along with their standard, contra-standard and variable features) and in many cases employing a different category will have an effect on our aesthetic experience. Certain contexts will thus reward certain categories better than others. Only a scientifically-aware observer will be able to exploit this fact. Furthermore, as Walton's criterion (ii) suggests, exploiting the aesthetic potential of an object is important to our understanding of aesthetic normativity. Hence the normativity of interest-relative aesthetic judgments is a feature of both the appreciation of art and nature, and presupposes a greater role for scientific understanding in the latter than Budd admits.

Conclusion

Interest-relative considerations generate normativity in the natural case as well as in the artistic case. Carlson fails to appreciate that certain disanalogies between art and nature do affect the normativity governing the aesthetic appreciation of both. Budd, however, makes too much of the disanalogy regarding intention and exaggerates what he perceives to be the characteristic freedom in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Hence whilst normativity is less clearly grounded in the natural case than in the artistic case, there are situations where normative similarities exist.

Bibliography


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（シャープ，ジェームズ 法学部特任講師）