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Festschrift für Hartmut Lutz

Beyond Beauty

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1. Introduction

This volume is dedicated to Hartmut Lutz who contributed so much to the ongoing postcolonial discourse with many First Nation's authors and intellectuals on Turtle Island. Some time ago, Hartmut and I held two courses at Greifswald University about indigenous literature and environmental ethics. Moreover, we supervised the highly inspiring PhD project of Jeanette Armstrong (2009) in which the environmental ethics of the Okanagan-Syilx nation had been made explicit and had been critically compared with Western approaches. From these academic enterprises stems a common interest in postcolonial environmental discourse. Such discourse should include the mutual exchange of views and perspectives how natural environments are perceived in different cultures. Postcolonial discourses should not simply rest on the shame and the feeling of guilt for all the repugnant deeds of WASP's against indigenous people in both past and present, but it may also rest on some gifts we can offer from our less violent traditions. This might be true for environmental discourse as well (or so I hope).

Since I am neither an expert in North American Studies nor in cultural anthropology, I can only contribute to this volume by some philosophical and ethical thoughts which originate from within a Western tradition but may also be of interest for non-Western scholars. For this Festschrift, I have chosen the topic of aesthetical perception of nature. My reasons for this choice are the following: Mainstream

Western philosophy was biased in respect of aesthetic perception of nature. Philosophers even some decades ago claimed that a genuine aesthetic appreciation of nature could emerge only under modern Western societal conditions (Ritter 1963, p. 162). According to Joachim Ritter, aesthetic appreciation of nature as landscape supposes societal domination of nature. Ritter argued that the distinction between working hours and leisure time should be seen as a necessary precondition for genuine aesthetic perception of landscapes outside of the sphere of industrial production. Such aesthetic appreciation also serves as a residual for metaphysical ideas about nature which were overcome and outdated by modern science. Meanwhile, this highly Euro-centric opinion has been falsified by many studies in cultural anthropology. Aesthetic appreciation of nature seems to be pervasive throughout human cultures. There is high degree of likeliness that being human always entails a richly textured sensual perception of natural environments that is never devoid of aesthetic components. Such aesthetic appreciation might be a paradigm case of a biophilic disposition of humans (Wilson 1984).

Beyond such general anthropological layer there are clearly specific cultural and aesthetic traditions. Aesthetic appreciation of nature has played an important role in Germany since the days of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Alexander von Humboldt, and the Romantic movement.[1] Goetheans as well as Romantics saw the modernization of land-use systems in Germany throughout 19. century (overview in Blackbourn 2007) with highly critical eyes. From these traditions, there stems a conjunction between aesthetic appreciation of nature and the wish to preserve at least some parts of unspoiled nature with their high aesthetic appeal. Aesthetic arguments have a long tradition in the conservation of nature.[2]

Since the Romantic movement, peculiar fusions between aesthetic and spiritual attitudes toward nature were taken into account by poets, philosophers, and conservationists. Ernst Rudorff (1897, p. 50), one of the founding fathers of German nature conservation, argued that aesthetic appreciation of unspoiled nature sometimes comes close to a peculiar kind of revelation. In aesthetic appreciation, one can immerse into the infinite poetry of Godly revelations. In some moments of aesthetic appreciation, as Rudorff notes, nature seems to reveal itself as being something "more" than just beautiful a place or scenery. Rudorff referred to the Eichendorff whose poems entail such kind of experience.

[1] While Goethe and Humboldt conceived the relationship between natural sciences and aesthetics as mutual enrichment and enhancement, the Romantics conceived it as contrast. To the Romantics, the poets have deeper insights on nature than scientists.

[2] Conservationists argued throughout 19. century that beautiful sceneries should be protected by the state for the common good. There were even protests against damming river Rhine which relied on aesthetic arguments.

Such *trans-aesthetic experiences* (as I label them) occur even within modern societies but they could not find foothold within the modern framework of thought. Such fusions between beauty and something else (sacredness, holiness, revelation) were often seen as a deficit of pre-modern cultures which were not yet able to draw clear distinctions between something being beautiful and something being sacred (holy). To Habermas (1985) it belongs to the modern predicament to respect the boundaries between science, ethics, art, and religion. To my mind, we should address such boundary zones at least if we can rely on experiences that touch such zones.

In the following, I wish to focus borderlines between aesthetic appreciation of nature and more, say, spiritual encounter with nature. By hypothesis, this kind of encounter and attitude has remained alive in non-Western cultures. Revitalization from within the Western tradition could and should stimulate intercultural environmental dialogue.

2. Aesthetic Arguments in Environmental Ethics

In contemporary environmental ethics, it is widely accepted that something being beautiful should not be destroyed without sufficient reason. Nevertheless, aesthetic arguments turned out to be weak in environmental conflicts compared to economic interests since beauty was considered to be something highly "relative" and "subjective". Clearly, aesthetic arguments are anthropocentric ones since beauty is in the eye of the beholder and aesthetic judgments are based on the faculty called taste (as Immanuel Kant argued).

Aesthetic arguments belong to the category of so-called eudaimonistic arguments in environmental ethics (Ott 2010, ch. 4). Such arguments emphasize the role nature can (and should) play in an overall rich and flourishing human life. In his book "*Eine Ästhetik der Natur*" (1991), philosopher Martin Seel provides contemporary environmentalists with a sound argument that the protection and conservation of natural landscapes and beautiful sites belongs to a modern concept of ethics. According to the argument, society should protect nature out of respect for persons for which the appreciation of beautiful nature belongs to their concept of a good life. Seel restricts his argument to the beauty of nature and he warns his readers against metaphysical pitfalls which loom at the borderlines of aesthetic experience. The beauty of nature is nothing but beauty – period. There is nothing "behind" or "beyond" beauty.

Seel's warnings are clearly as rightful as Kant's warnings against embarking on the vast and foggy ocean of deception (Kant: "Ozean des Scheins"). To Kant, a small island of reason is surrounded by an ocean of intellectual deceptions, confusions, vain speculations, pseudo-philosophy, and the like. Such warnings against

metaphysical speculations intrinsically belong to modern philosophy. It is fair to say that the Western philosophical discourse since Kant is full of accusations against metaphysical thought. In the Vienna Circle, this attitude had been radicalized in order to purify philosophy from “Scheinprobleme” (R. Carnap). Prudent philosophers should try to avoid such time-consuming pseudo-problems and should focus on "real" philosophical problems in epistemology, logic, analytical semantics, metaethics, theory of rational choice, and mind-brain-relations.

Such suspicion against metaphysics, however, comes at a price because it may discourage us to consider seriously some kinds of (presumably deeper) experiences that don’t fit well into our modern conceptual frameworks. Such suspicion against metaphysics wishes to purify and to clean philosophy but it might end up in the sophisticated boredom of so-called analytical philosophy. Postcolonial environmental discourse should be different. Given this, I do not adopt Seel’s rigor against stronger readings of aesthetic experiences. If there might be a dilemma between two risks: the risk of being cut off of one's own experiences and the risk of becoming meta-physical, I grasp the second lemma. (Luther: "Peccate fortiter!") If this lemma might become all too thorny, the second lemma remains.

In a former article on the beauty of nature, I coined the term “trans-aesthetic experience” (Ott 1997). Hepburn (1996) in his fine article argued that the experience of beauty in nature sometimes seems to eclipse into a metaphysical, spiritual, or religious imagination. Hepburn argues rightfully that modern Western philosophy lacks clear language for such imagination. But, perhaps, they can try to explore language in order to find proper wordings. The experience that underlies the concept of transaesthetic experience might be put into the following preliminary wording:

Experiencing beauty in nature (sometimes) gives birth to the intuition that nature “is” both beautiful <u>and</u> “more” than just beautiful.

The “more” in the wording given is unspecified. Unspecified words do not count in modern philosophy. If so, we must add meaning or have to delete such empty wording. The intuition itself does not come on reflection but is immediately given as phenomenon by and within the experience itself. Since judgments of taste are not immediate transaesthetic experiences are not experienced as judgments of taste. If one has never had such kind of experience and this intuition, she has no problem of how to interpret them and might find all following considerations pointless and misleading right from the scratch.

I do not claim that all aesthetic experiences are of such transaesthetic kind. They are a (probably small) subset of aesthetic experiences. Such transaesthetic experiences are not freely chosen and not motivated by an intention or decision to have them. They happen or occur to individuals ("Widerfahrnisse"). I do not address the empirical question here whether such experiences are exceptional, rare or more

common than one may believe. At a recent conference on ethics, aesthetics and religion, many Western scholars and artists seriously confessed that they are well familiar with such trans-aesthetic experiences. I assume that many indigenous people are also familiar with such kinds of experiences in which, instantly, nature appears beautiful and presents itself as some"thing" more (else).

3. Eight Readings of Transaesthetic Experience

If one (even once in a lifetime) has had such experience and intuition, the question emerges of how to tell them to others and how to cope with them philosophically. I assume that human language in general is as rich, so that we can exchange stories in many different natural languages by which we can tell such experiences to each other beyond cultural borders. I don't wish give such personal stories here (of Philippine coral reefs, Nepalese mountains or Sibirian sunsets), but wish to address the question whether, and if so, how such experiences might deserve philosophical attention and credit at all. In this section, I offer eight lines of reasoning and, in the next section, some criteria by which these lines can be assessed. The first two lines of reasoning are strategies to explain transaesthetic experiences away.

3.1 The first reading is *critical*. The experienced intuition simply rests on a mistake. The "more" is nothing but a high degree of *intensity* of some aesthetic experiences. Highly intensively felt aesthetic experiences of nature are quite often experiences of the sublime. Experiencing the sublime might provoke other emotions and attitudes (as feeling small against the "majesty" of nature or as facing "Mother Nature" or the "living forces of the land") but such stimulation should be analyzed in a sober attitude.

The well-known problem of high intensity of emotions and perception had been debated in the poetic traditions since 18. century (Kleinschmidt 2004). Intensity comes in degrees, and high degrees of intensity with respect to the perceived beauty of nature might be overwhelming in a way that there seems to be something "more" at stake. High intensity might be deceptive to our minds. A quite typical pseudo-problem occurs because high intensity is erroneously confused with some strange and metaphysical "more/else".

Avoiding this mistake is coherent with a pattern of reasoning that such high intensity of aesthetic experience of nature should count as a sound rationale for protecting beautiful nature. High intensity can be taken seriously and can be respected as such without any metaphysical pitfalls, as in utilitarianism. Since Bentham, the intensity of pleasure and joy has to be accounted for in any utilitarian calculus. Probably, even

Martin Seel who is not a utilitarian ethicist would find this reading appealing. This critical reading is a first variant of a “nothing-but-ism”-argument. On reflection, one becomes aware that there is nothing more than just intensity of one's own feelings.

3.2 This experienced intuition might be the result of a subconscious interplay between specific neuronal brain structures, early experiences in childhood and some peculiar human disposition for so-called *peak experiences* which probably have a neuronal basis or might be induced by “psychedelic” drugs (LSD, “magic mushrooms”, mescal, and the like). Such mental states might be projected into nature from a first-person-perspective but should be better explained by neuronal science. In recent psychology of religion, religious and other ecstatic experiences are seen as something that occurs within the brain. Scientists can offer sound clinical explanations why such experiences may occur and may even be adaptive to humans. Probably, spiritual experiences provide humans with a specific strength to cope with life. As some neuronal scientists argue with the mind-brain-debate, the human brain might be highly deceptive to humans for the adaptive sake of humans. This is a second variant of a “nothing-but-ism”-argument since the “more” does not refer to nature (or something behind nature), but only refers to the proceedings of the brain, ultimately to some firing neurons.

3.3 The experienced intuition might or might not rest on mistakes or illusions but we all should better be silent at such points. Becoming silent is the proper attitude. We should simply smile but not talk. This “*ineffabile*”-solution can be warranted by Wittgenstein who argued in the "*Tractatus*" that all propositions must refer to some states of affair which are the case. To Wittgenstein, the "that" of being a world remains mystical. If so, the “more” can’t be clarified by propositional language. The “more” being experienced is and should remain *ineffabile* at least in philosophical language which must be conceptual and discursive. [3]

Some philosophers would claim that humans should generally shy away from attempts to specify the “more” by means of language because such attempts would destroy the immediacy of experience. We better should keep and store the “more”/"else" in the immediacy of experience gratefully and should not try to articulate it by means of language. This solution has always been unsatisfactory to me because, in effect, it comes close to the more positivistic strategy to purify philosophical thought.

[3] Perhaps, Adorno also came close to this solution because his dialectical philosophy pointed to something that always escapes discursive language (the "Nicht-Identische", see Adorno 1966).

If some x can't be captured adequately by propositional language it does not follow that x can't be expressed at all. Phenomenology of nature (Böhme 1997) might be helpful since such phenomenology enables us to describe such experiences as they are given to our minds. The language of phenomenology entails "thick" descriptions which are full of sensations, experiences, values, metaphors and analogies. Often, such language comes close to literature. Phenomenological descriptions often are "hybrids" between philosophy and art. Take, for instance, descriptions of atmospheres in nature, or simply how the odor of different ripe fruits mix to a specific "fruit-smell" in late summer. But how should we deal with such hybrids? Habermas (1985) proposed a quite strict division of labor at this point. Philosophers should better leave such fields completely to poets and to other artists (musicians, painters, landscape artists) for unconstrained expression. The peculiar hybrid nature of phenomenology better should be resolved toward art. If so, the "more/else" is to be expressed in works of art and such works of art enriches our perceptions of nature and our attitudes toward nature. The maxim, then, would be: "Leave it to the artists!" But finally, this solution may only shift the problem to the genre of art criticism. Art critics, then, are seen as experts of deciphering the meaning in works of art.

3.4 The experienced intuition should be taken as indicating that everything in nature can be perceived as being beautiful. Both Allen Carlson (1984) and Theodor W. Adorno in his "*Ästhetische Theorie*" (1970) proposed this claim. Carlson argued that his claim ("positive aesthetics of nature") could be substantiated by scientific ecology. Carlson's approach failed since scientific ecology is silent on such matters. To Adorno, all parts of nature can become beautiful (as if) they were glowing from the inside ("(…) von innen her leuchtend", 1970, p. 110). Adorno did not argue but he took such glowing as promise that there will be no final triumph of destruction, barbarism, and domination of nature. As I argued (2010, p. 90) this claim can be substantiated on aesthetic grounds. If so, the experienced "more/else" is properly represented by the logical quantifier "∀". While sometimes the beauty of nature seems to point to some "more/else" beyond beauty, there might be at least some reasons to hold that nothing in nature is ugly. Having experienced such "more/else", one can feel entitled to say in a paradox (riddle): "Everything in nature is beautiful irrespectively whether it appears beautiful or ugly (to me)."

3.5 This experienced intuition "more than just beauty" goes beyond the dichotomy between an experiencing individual as subject (I, self) and objects being experienced as beautiful by such subject. The experience refuses instantly the subject-object-distinction on which aesthetic experiences seem to rest. In such experience, we find ourselves as being thrown out there in a world (Heidegger: "Dasein in der Welt"). The

“more/else” refers not to nature itself but to some basic existential structure of human “Dasein” which “is” (ek-statically) *with/in* nature before it becomes a knowing subject, a moral person, and a culturally shaped individual. This primary “being human with/in nature” is like opening the eyes as children do. From within a more complex aesthetic experience that supposes an individual person with some preferences and with culturally shaped taste there occurs a "flashback" to a more elementary and brute experience in transaesthetic experiences. The experienced “more”/"else" falls within the human as a “less than”. In such experience the human touches a layer of being human on which she “is” less than a subject, less than a person, and less than an individual. The less of a subject and individual there is, the more there is of “more” in transaesthetic experience. More specifically, such experiences sometimes have more the character of a with*in* (being in natural environments) and sometimes more the character of *with*in (being together with natural beings). This *with*in can even take deontic meaning (see 3.7).

3.6 Another reading which is not identical with 3.5 stems from contemporary philosophies of nature. Aesthetic beauty in its usual sense can be seen as “first-level”-beauty. At a second level, however, the natural world in itself is full of beauties since natural evolution creates heterogeneity, complexity, novelties, emergent projects (as species), autotelic structured organisms, symbioses and the like. First-level-beauty relies on a series of preconditions that are by themselves products of evolutionary processes by which a richly structured world of living nature came into being that can be experienced by highly complex organisms which own eyes, ears, tongues, skins, noses, and the like. This reading can be dubbed as “Whiteheadian”. First-level-beauty is a catalyst into the more epistemic (ecological, evolutionary, "physio-logical") study of biospherical nature being full of beautiful achievements of many different kinds (Muraca 2010). First-level-beauty strongly indicates how full of wonders (Rolston 1988) biospheric nature is indeed. Transaesthetic experiences may well stimulate new approaches in philosophy of nature that go beyond epistemology of science. One might wish to claim that there are achievements as result of a prolific and projective nature. Such claim, of course, must be substantiated philosophically.

3.7 Transaesthetic experience are to be regarded as *deontic* (moral) experiences. In such deontic experience (Birch 1993) natural beings present themselves as intrinsically valuable and untouchable. They reveal their inherent moral value. Interesting enough, philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued in such way in his book “*Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*” (Habermas 1991). To Habermas, in specific transaesthetic experiences natural beings seem to reveal their inherent moral significance. In such experience we strongly feel the intuition that we should preserve them for their own sake and not just because they give pleasure, joy or

excitement to us. Habermas describes this aesthetic-deontic experience as if natural beings would instantly retreat in themselves *and*, by doing so, reveal their moral significance. Ultimately, Habermas leaves it open whether such revealing might be a kind of illusion.

Similar deontic experiences are well known in the history of environmental ethics. Albert Schweitzer, for instance, described the experience sitting on a boat that, slowly and carefully, moved at an African sunset through a sandy river within which, and close by, there was a herd of rhinos. As Schweitzer tells, suddenly there was the wording “reverence for life” as standing right before him, providing him with the supreme ethical principle he had been searching for long. Other deontic experiences are to be found in the writings of Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, and David Abram. (As I observed a beautiful horse closely and patiently, it happen to me that I suddenly seemed to face *with* the horse in a morally significant way, as facing among humans is (E. Levinas).)

If the “more/else” might refer to moral significance within nature, physiocentric solutions of the demarcation problem deserve ethical credit. Ultimately, I am not fully convinced that such transaesthetic experiences are clear-cut and univocal deontic experiences by which the demarcation problem can be resolved. As I argued elsewhere, deontic experiences as such might be contested, and there are other tools of reasonable problem resolution (Ott 2008). Nevertheless, transaesthetic experiences that have deontic significance should encourage us to debate the problem of inherent moral values in nature further.

3.8 The final reading does not shy away from religion. According to his reading, the beauty of nature points to a great mystery behind or within nature. The “more/else” really refers to some”thing” being holy (sacred) which might be conceived in different onto-theological concepts as “Deus sive Natura” (Spinoza), “natura naturans” (Schelling), “Creation”, “Creator vivificans”, "deep incarnation" and the like. Many Western and Non-western theologians have proposed ideas of how to conceive this line of thought. This line of reasoning has (from the Christian tradition) to be gone through by theologians which are able to free themselves from the clumsy web of metaphysical concepts which had been coiled in late Roman empire and in medieval scholastic systems.

4. Criteria, Readings, and Claims

These eight lines of reasoning are not mutually exclusive but allow for different combinations. None of them is completely unreasonable. But, as philosophers, we would not simply adopt them as equally promising. We would not simply like to say

that “anything goes”. Philosophers feel tempted to judge them according to some criteria. Criteria should fulfill the task to discriminate between approaches of how to interpret transaesthetic experiences. Epistemic criteria as ontological parsimony speak in favor of the first two lines. Ultimately and regretfully, all criteria might somehow be begging the question at stake. This might be true especially for criteria as “rationality” which strongly depend on definitions, and even for a criterion as “depth”, since the rhetoric of “deep ecology”, “deep incarnation”, “deep democracy”, “deep aesthetics” has become pervasive in recent years. There might be mere presumptions of depth which can not be substantiated. Thus, criteria are not very helpful in judging our lines of reasoning.

This experienced intuition that there “is” more/else than just beauty in nature can be interpreted with the distinction between *ontological* and *existential* categories (Heidegger 1927). This distinction should be acceptable even under a parsimony-criterion and it is compatible with the concept of science. If one favors an *existential interpretation* of this "more/else" experience, readings no. 5 gets some philosophical credit. The claims of positive aesthetics, of second-order-beauty in nature, and of deontic experiences with non-humans should not simply put aside but deserve philosophical attention. If one favors a concept of religion (the “holy”) which reduces ontological commitments as far as possible, even no. 8 remains within the scope of reason. After all things being considered, reasonable humans are not restricted to no. 1, no. 2, and no. 3[4] - and this is the point I wish to make.

5. Final Remarks

Some stimulating effects of transaesthetic experiences can't be denied. If so, an open intercultural dialogue of human experiences with and within nature should be on our philosophical agenda (Ott 2010). Contributions to such dialogue are not restricted to Western cultures. The many difficulties to express the “more/else” in propositional, conceptual, and discursive language can be taken as strong indication that there will always remain a gap between nature and language. By means of language, however, humans can and should try to bridge this gap. Scientific reference to natural objects and causal relations are only one specific way of bridging this gap. There are many other ways to express encounter with nature. Any single human language entails a specific worldview, but in living dialogues we can exchange our perspectives (W. von Humboldt). This might be true for trans-aesthetic experiences, too. The lines of reasoning no. 1 - 7 might be also interesting to non-Western persons, while Western people should not be biased against no. 8. It would be a subtle bias against non-Western cultures if we would restrict their experiences and claims to no. 8.

[4] Even if the "ineffabile"-solution no. 3 is rejected, we can keep some silent smile on our faces.

Probably, transaesthetic experiences have been expressed in many spiritualized ways in non-Western languages. Perhaps, Western people should look for wisdom in stories, songs, prayers and rituals of indigenous people if they wish to know better about such experiences. If so, indigenous people might be seen as keepers of knowledge which the West has passed away in the project of scientific enlightenment. In some Shaman traditions, the “more/else” will be expressed in a wording how clean and sacred the high mountains are where ordinary humans should not go. In First Nation approaches, the "more/else" might be perceived as some pervasive and prolific force of the land that is both spiritual and vital (Armstrong 2009). If, as I firmly believe, there is much for us Westerners to re-learn about nature, we can learn from indigenous people without passing away the achievements of enlightenment.

The adventures of human experiences within nature and the adventures of how to search and find modes of language by which they can be expressed, have been distorted and silenced by narrow concepts of rationality (as personal utility maximization or the efficient use of scarce means of production). If so, there are several tasks of environmental philosophy at the moment: The first task is to encourage people to express the many ways in which nature can be meaningful to humans. The second task is to provide a post-colonial platform by which undistorted communication might be enabled. The English, being *lingua franca* in our time, may serve as preliminary lingual media and turning-table for such exchange. Probably, every environmental philosopher should learn at least one non-Western language. The final task is to guard such unrestricted communication by some (modest) rules and standards of discourse, logic, and reason. The task is ambivalent: making room for expressions and guarding them by standards of reason. This ambivalence task isn't easy to perform. But, as Hartmut would say with reference to L.M. Silko's great novel "*Ceremony*": It won't be easy.

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