

Practicing Positive Aesthetics¹

Tom Greaves

University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. Email: T.Greaves@uea.ac.uk

This paper rethinks positive aesthetics as a group of aesthetic practices rather than a set of doctrines or judgments. The paper begins by setting out a general approach to aesthetic practices based on Pierre Hadot's notion of philosophical 'spiritual exercises.' Three practices of positive aesthetics are then described: focusing the beauty of each thing; envisioning the beauty of everything; and allowing the beauty of all things. The paper warns against possible dangers to which each practice may fall prey, dangers that divert the practice from its perception cultivating and enhancing potential. The paper ends by drawing out key implications of this way of considering positive aesthetics for our understanding of beauty, negativity and artificiality.

1. Introduction

Almost 40 years ago Allen Carlson initiated an ongoing interest in the idea of positive aesthetics, an idea he initially summarised as the claim that, 'all the natural world is beautiful.'² Positive aesthetics has since undergone sustained critical attention from those who find it simply implausible that every natural kind is beautiful in itself, with various counterexamples suggested,³ together with those who add that natural relationships, events and processes, such as disease, decay, predation, parasitism, and death all make what might perhaps be considered beautiful at some ideal moment less that beautiful in the

¹ I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for *Environmental Philosophy* whose thoughtful and penetrating critical comments helped me to improve this paper.

² Allen Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 1 (1984): 5.

³ Emily Brady mentions 'eels, spiders, ticks, mosquitoes, mudflats, muddy rivers and burnt forests', "The Ugly Truth: Negative Aesthetics and Environment," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 69 (2011): 83–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246111000221>, 94.

long run.⁴ In response advocates of positive aesthetics have significantly qualified the initial idea. Glenn Parsons first suggested that the claim should be for the 'on balance' overall beauty of any natural object.⁵ Carlson and Parsons later qualified positive aesthetics by arguing that it only strictly applies to inorganic nature, since organic nature is subject to dysfunction in ways that inorganic nature is not.⁶ Nevertheless, Ned Hettinger has recently maintained that it is possible to defend a qualified version of positive aesthetics: '... nature—to the extent it is not influenced by humans—is specially and predominantly beautiful,' so long as we make room to account for clear instances of negative aesthetic value in nature.⁷

In this paper I want to begin to rethink positive aesthetics by considering it as a set of practices rather than a set of doctrines or judgments. There has always been an ambiguity at the heart of discussions of positive aesthetics. On the one hand, positive aesthetics is presented as a set of claims, judgments or doctrines concerning the beauty of nature and the facts of experience. On the other hand, while elaborating and defending positive aesthetics its proponents have, more or less explicitly, presented it as a practice, or set of practices, aimed at enhancing our aesthetic experience.

I propose a twofold response to this ambiguity. Firstly, I will suggest that we should understand the practices of cultivation and enhancement as primary and fundamental. Judgments and doctrines have a secondary and derivative status as formulations of possible aims for these practices and as elements of their techniques. It is not simply a question of eliminating the ambiguity between doctrine and practice, but of developing a different understanding of the proper relation between the two. Secondly, positive aesthetics can then be seen as consisting of a variety of related practices that can be mixed and blended for different purposes and in response to different situations.

⁴ Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 126-127.

⁵ 'I take positive aesthetics to be, roughly, the claim that any natural object, appropriately aesthetically appreciated, is on balance aesthetically good.' Glenn Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science, and Positive Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42, no. 3 (2002): 288.

⁶ Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 130-7.

⁷ Ned Hettinger, "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51, no. 3 (2017): 26.

Positive aesthetics has not been simply posited as a stand-alone thesis. Its proponents and detractors have defended or criticised it as a component or consequence of specific conceptions of environmental aesthetics as a whole. Modern positive aesthetics has been linked, following Carlson and Parsons, primarily to scientific cognitivism, the view that the only appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature is grounded on natural scientific knowledge. Although I will discuss a number of specific arguments regarding positive aesthetics in this context, it is not my aim here to directly refute arguments for or against scientific cognitivism or the alternative views of environmental aesthetics that have been proposed. Rather, my aim is to begin to set out a different view of how positive aesthetics might be understood, a view which, I will try to show, can incorporate some significant elements of the arguments for positive aesthetics that have been offered. As I will set out in the next section, this alternative view of positive aesthetics is grounded in a different approach to environmental aesthetics, and ultimately to philosophy itself, a view that puts discourse and argument in the context and the service of practices of self-cultivation. I will not be able to offer any conclusive arguments in favour of this context for understanding positive aesthetics or against other views, but I do think that considering positive aesthetics in this context will begin to highlight some of the advantages of this general approach.

I will sketch three practices of positive aesthetics, each of which I take to be a mode of cultivating a specific attunement to the beauty of nature, rather than a complete description of anyone's actual practice. I do not claim that these three modes of practice are exhaustive of all possible positive aesthetics, although they do incorporate, and to some extent go beyond, the prominent ideas that can be derived from the literature. The three practices are i) focusing on the beauty of each thing; ii) envisioning the beauty of everything; and iii) allowing the beauty of all things. Each of the three has its own techniques for cultivating experience and its own ideals of aesthetic positivity. Each also has its own dangers and potential perversions. I will explore the advantages and disadvantages of these three types of positive aesthetics in turn. Ultimately my aim will not be to show that any one of these practices is better or worse than the others, let alone the only 'appropriate' practice. However, I will suggest that the third practice is in an important sense more basic to environmental aesthetics than the others, in that its aim is to return us to the pervasive beauty of nature as it appears in the perceptual field.

2. Aesthetic Practices, Spiritual Exercises and Positive Aesthetics

Before describing the three practices of positive aesthetics I have identified, let me say a little more about the notion of aesthetic practices and their potential for helping us rethink positive aesthetics. By aesthetic practice I understand coherent and co-ordinated sets of exercises that shape, guide and alter perception *qua* perception with a view to cultivation and enhancement. By 'perception *qua* perception' I do not mean perception as an isolated capacity, which would be, strictly speaking, perception *per se*, i.e., perception abstracted from the whole of lived experience. I mean rather perception as lived experience, entwined with capacities of imagination, memory and thought, but not subordinated to any other capacity or activity as its aim, e.g., perception *qua* perception might inform judgment, but it is no longer perception *qua* perception when it becomes part of an investigation the sole aim of which is to inform judgment.

The things we do to shape our perception are many and varied, ranging from often unnoticed and everyday activities like climbing a hill or looking through lenses, to more extreme and unusual activities like sky diving or taking psychedelics. To the extent that these activities are organised into a set of customs and evolving traditions that are, at least in part, aimed at enhancing and cultivating perception *qua* perception, they form what I call an aesthetic practice.

This very broad characterisation of an aesthetic practice will be rejected by some as insufficiently 'aesthetic,' in the sense that it does not identify what is special about, or proper to, an *aesthetic mode* of perception or the *aesthetic pleasure* that we take in it. More generally it may be objected that 'enhancement and cultivation' are insufficiently precise to afford us normative criteria for the appraisal of the success or failure of aesthetic practices. Since the broad conception of aesthetic practices allows for a whole range of such practices with different methods, styles and aims, the meaning of enhancement and cultivation can only be filled out by descriptions of specific practices. Therefore, rather than respond directly to this concern I will confine myself in this section to refining the sense of aesthetic practice that I will be focusing on. The descriptions of aesthetic practices that

follow should go some way to supporting the broad conception of aesthetic practice I have just proposed. Positive aesthetics, as I understand it here, comprises a tradition of related exercises and practices, but these are by no means the only practices of environmental aesthetics, let alone aesthetics in general. Enhancement and cultivation are the normative elements of aesthetics understood in this way, but they will only gain concrete and specific meaning in the context of concrete and specific practices. Furthermore, any appraisal of the success or failure of a practice to enhance and cultivate perception *qua* perception will be in large part internal the practice itself, other than a general assessment of whether the practice does indeed aim to enhance and cultivate perception *qua* perception, or whether it ends up subordinating perception to some other capacity.

If aesthetic practices are broadly characterised in the way I have indicated, there are two kinds of relation that philosophy has to such practices. On the one hand, philosophical aesthetics forms part of an effort to understand such practices, alongside anthropology, sociology, history and related disciplines. On the other hand, philosophy can itself involve engagement in such practices. These are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing aspects of philosophical activity.

Pierre Hadot has called attention to the key role that engaging in what he calls ‘spiritual exercises’ played in ancient philosophy.⁸ Taking a lead from Hadot, this conception of philosophy as involving not only rational argumentation, but a range of spiritual exercises to cultivate ways of seeing, experiencing, engaging and acting has recently been rediscovered in a neglected tradition of philosophising ranging from a Hellenistic philosophy to Foucault, as well as non-western traditions.⁹ There is currently an attempt to revive what has become known as ‘philosophy as a way of life’ as a living tradition. This article can be understood in

⁸ Since Hadot’s notion of spiritual exercises is an interpretation of how ancient philosophers developed and cultivated the virtues it is not a surprise that one of the reviewers of this paper found significant parallels between virtue ethics and the approach to aesthetics developed here. One might fruitfully continue to develop some of the notions implicit in my account in terms of specific aesthetic virtues and vices, which would also help to develop the response to worries about normative criteria in aesthetic practices that I have briefly outlined in the preceding paragraphs.

⁹ See for example Michael Ure and Matthew Sharpe, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: From Antiquity to Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); James M. Ambury, Tushar Irani, and Kathleen Wallace, eds., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Historical, Contemporary, and Pedagogical Perspectives* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2021); Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, eds., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns. Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

part as a contribution to that effort. From this perspective practicing philosophy involves meditations, each a 'rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take extremely varied forms.'¹⁰ Some of these exercises are explicitly aesthetic, part of 'a method of training to live and look at the world in a new way.'¹¹

Importantly for our purposes, Hadot identifies ancient precedents for exercises in positive aesthetics. For example, in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* III, 2, Marcus finds beauty in very ripe olives, close to decay, together with '[...] ripe ears of corn which bend towards the ground; with the lion's wrinkled forehead; with the foam spuming forth for the mouths of wild pigs, and many other such things [...]' In this passage, Hadot remarks: 'Marcus expresses his belief that nature is beautiful in *all* its aspects.'¹² Hadot emphasises the meditative exercises needed to maintain an attentive attitude that does not allow prejudices to lead us to disengage or disregard these parts of nature. In the light of this analysis one might say that Marcus expresses a belief in the beauty of all aspects of nature as part of an exercise designed to find the beauty in what would usually be seen as ugly or insignificant.

A complete account of Hadot's engagement with precedents for positive aesthetics in terms of spiritual exercises would require another paper. The sketch above should be enough to show that it will be worthwhile to reappraise the modern notion of positive aesthetics found in the environmental philosophy literature in these terms. Contemporary

¹⁰ Pierre Hadot, 'Spiritual Exercises' in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 59. In this passage Hadot goes on to contrast Eastern corporeal attitudes to Western intellectual exercises, a contrast which I think ultimately untenable. For Hadot inspired comparisons between Eastern and Western traditions of spiritual exercises see the essays by Kapstein and Ganeri in Chase, Clark, and McGhee (eds.) and essays by Moore, Liu and Sin in Ambury, Irani, and Wallace (eds.).

¹¹ Hadot, 107.

¹² 'Marcus Aurelius' in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 189. Hadot goes on to claim that we see in this and similar passages in Marcus an 'aesthetic revolution': 'In place of an idealistic aesthetics, which considers as beautiful only that which is rational and functional, manifesting beautiful proportions and an ideal form, there appears a realistic aesthetics that finds beauty in things just the way they are, in everything that lives and exists.' 190. This is an intriguing and surprising claim, given the common assumptions that stoic philosophy finds beauty in nature only because it is rational and functional. Hadot returns to this passage at various other points in his writings, 'The Sage and the World' in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 251.; Pierre Hadot, 'Physics as Spiritual Exercise' in *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, trans. Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 221-2.; Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 168-70.

environmental aesthetics tends not to frame itself explicitly in terms of aesthetic practices or spiritual exercises. One reason for that is a concern that any such practices or exercises would distort our perception and appreciation of nature as it really is. I hope to begin to show that this need not be the case. Enhancing and cultivating our perception of nature can involve exercises that aim to open us to aspects of nature that we tend neglect and draw out things to appreciate. Furthermore, the last set of exercises I will describe are designed precisely to help us let go of the ingrained enculturation that shapes our perception and aesthetics ideas.

Despite these kinds of concerns, the possibility of a practice-based environmental aesthetics has sometimes been intimated. For example, Emily Brady, herself a sceptic when it comes to positive aesthetics, has sketched out the significant roles that aesthetic values play in practices that help cultivate ethical attitudes towards the environment, scientific understanding of nature and the restoration human well-being in engagement with nature.¹³ Amongst the advocates of positive aesthetics, Ned Hettinger comes closest to formulating it as a practice as well as a doctrine:

The idea that all nature is beautiful is a useful starting point for those beginning to develop the skills needed for a better aesthetic appreciation of nature. P[ositive]A[esthetics] is a principle of charity for the appreciation of nature and perhaps a hidden assumption for many of the naturalists teaching nature appreciation.¹⁴

My suggestion is that we understand positive aesthetics as more than a useful starting point, a principle charity or a set of values that feed into our practices. Positive aesthetics is a related group of practices in their own right, each with their own guiding principles and techniques, aimed at enhancing and cultivating our positive perception of nature. These practices have a broad scope and can include the nature appreciation of naturalists, as well

¹³ Emily Brady, "Aesthetics in Practice: Valuing the Natural World," *Environmental Values* 15, no. 3 (2006): 277–91. For Brady's criticisms of positive aesthetics see, Emily Brady, "The Ugly Truth : Negative Aesthetics and Environment," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 69 (2011): 83–99.

¹⁴ Hettinger, "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics," 27

as much art practice and philosophical spiritual exercises of the kind identified by Hadot. I will now offer a sketch of three such practices of positive aesthetics.

3. Focusing the Beauty of Each Thing

The first group of practices all involve attempts to focus attention on a particular natural thing or occurrence. One focuses on the presence of the thing, so as to draw out the singular beauty of *this* being on *this* occasion.¹⁵ I will briefly describe two such practices, although I don't preclude the possibility of others or of further variations on those described. I will then suggest that these focusing practices need to be carefully pursued so as to avoid the common errors of focusing on the practice more than the thing and isolating the focal being from the wider field of perception.

The first practice involves simply naming what we encounter. This is something that we all do constantly in one way or another. Anyone can point out a 'bird,' even if they have no idea what kind of bird it is. In fact almost everyone has a large and complex set of categories and names that they continuously deploy, more or less consciously, as they perceive the world around them.

So naming is something we do anyway, whether or not we make it into an aesthetic practice. To make it into a practice we need to cultivate our categories, work on the range and depth of names we have at our disposal and our capacity to deploy them in ways that help us to focus on what is presented to us on each occasion. Again, this practice can be quite simple and need not involve any specialist knowledge. For example, I learn to distinguish a blackbird from a starling. The next time a blackbird arrives in the garden I point out its striking yellow beak and yellow ring around the eye that flash in front of us as it hops a step, then tilts its head. When a starling arrives I point out its funny trotting walk as it parades its iridescent purples and greens with whites sparkles, before tilting its head similarly to the blackbird. I may or may not know that they are both tilting their heads in

¹⁵ Singularity has been recognised as characteristic of aesthetic experience at least since Kant insisted that it is a key feature of a judgment of taste, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 165.

that way to listen for food moving in the wet earth. Either way, naming can help us to focus on the beauty of those distinctive colors set against the predominantly dark body shapes of these birds, in each case drawn out for us by their distinctive movements.¹⁶ These things can always be seen and might well be seen simply as the moving color of this wonderful ‘bird,’ but naming can help us to focus on what can be seen.

Naming as an aesthetic practice is not identical with categorisation or identification. Cognitivist advocates of positive aesthetics argue that scientifically informed categorisation is the only appropriate way to appreciate what is ‘really there.’ In his early writings on the topic Carlson claims that our scientific categories are created with certain aesthetically positive features built into them.¹⁷ This argument has been criticised for equivocation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic meanings of the relevant qualifying terms, such as ‘balance’ and ‘grace.’¹⁸ Yet there is also a less ambitious and more straightforward practice of concept application in some of Carlson’s examples. He cites Paul Ziff’s claim that, ‘It helps in viewing a gator to view it as a gator and not as a crocodile.’ Amongst other things, ‘Gators have shorter broader heads and more obtuse snouts.’¹⁹ We should note that if naming of this kind helps draw out aesthetically positive features it is not because it is simply correct, but insofar as, for each viewer on each occasion, it helps us to focus them on what is there. For someone newly arrived in the Everglades from Tanzania, and very familiar with crocodiles, the dictum may be of great aesthetic use. For someone entirely unfamiliar with either gators or crocs, far less so. One might even go so far as to say the circumstances determine the extent to which we are willing to call these categorisations ‘correct.’ If I saw nothing but a floating log and my companion cries out, ‘Wait, it’s a crocodile!’ that remark will focus my attention on many relevant features previously overlooked, and since the gator is after all a Crocodylian, this is surely more correct than to see it as a log.

¹⁶ For approaches to animal aesthetics that highlight movement see Tom Greaves, “Movement, Wildness and Animal Aesthetics,” *Environmental Values* 28, no. 4 (2019): 449–70, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327119X15576762300703> and Samantha Vice, “The Ethics of Animal Beauty,” *Environmental Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2017): 75–96.

¹⁷ Carlson, “Nature and Positive Aesthetics.”

¹⁸ Roger Paden, Laurlyn K. Harmon, and Charles R. Milling, “Ecology, Evolution, and Aesthetics: Towards an Evolutionary Aesthetics of Nature,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no. 2 (2012): 126–27 <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ays001>.

¹⁹ Paul Ziff, “Reasons in Art Criticism”, as cited in Carlson, “Nature and Positive Aesthetics,” 26

Parsons takes this practice of positive categorisation a step further. For him positive aesthetics should be seen as an *a priori* principle that guides us to apply those concepts that make what we perceive seem beautiful. His example is of a Venus fly-trap, which may seem grotesque or ugly when simply seen as a plant, but which seems functionally beautiful when seen as a ‘carnivorous plant.’ Here positive aesthetics is not simply a question of naming what is there, but a specific taxonomic practice. Even within the remit of scientific cognitivism we might ask of Parsons’s practice whether it always goes in one direction. Will more precise specification always draw out the more pleasing features of what we encounter? Presumably naming this plant a Venus fly-trap (*Dionaea muscipula*) will give me a more precise sense of what I am looking at than simply identifying it as a carnivorous plant (of the Family *Droseraceae*). Yet simply seeing it as a carnivorous plant would seem to alleviate Parson’s concerns about its ‘grotesque’ features and allow us to focus on this plant right here. Further, it doesn’t seem inconceivable that on some occasions a less specific classification might draw our attention away from features that are initially thought less pleasing. Perhaps a particular Catfish does not seem a typical example of its kind—it is so aqua-dynamic. If that is upsetting my aesthetic enjoyment I might try simply looking at it as a fish! Is a positive taxonomic practice always one of finding the greatest possible specificity, or the freer practice of finding that level of specificity that draws out the most pleasing features on each occasion? Another set of questions would take us back to the level of concept creation. Contemporary cladistics, drawing on the results of genetic analysis, frequently suggests significant revisions to earlier taxonomies that relied more heavily on observed characteristics. Is scientific cognitivism committed to categorising using these revised taxonomies? Does it seem plausible that doing so would result in experiences that are always more pleasing than those deploying more observation-based taxonomies?

It is not my intention to pursue these difficulties here, although I think they will ultimately call into question some basic commitments of scientific cognitivism. Rather, what I want to highlight is that, despite all such difficulties, these influential arguments already contain significant steps towards the idea of positive aesthetics as a set of naming practices. We need to take our lead from those hints towards aesthetic practice, which include a variety of naming practices, rather than confining them to taxonomic positivism.

If we consider again what the practice of naming is actually like in the field I think we will see that the focus that naming facilitates does not depend on the successful application of a single correct category from any one system of categorisation. Firstly, as I have already noted, one does not need detailed knowledge of taxonomy for simple acts of naming to draw out differences and similarities, as well as details *singular to this occasion* which might have otherwise gone unnoticed. The blackbird has a yellow beak and eye ring different to the starling, but tilts its head like the starling does, and on this occasion tilts its head so that its eye ring winks in and out of view in an especially striking manner. Secondly, regardless of the ways of naming one has been brought up with or educated into, regardless of how expert one is in their use, the act of naming 'in the field' is far from universally successful. It is very often *not knowing* what one is perceiving, in the context of a practice of wondering what one is perceiving, that focuses attention most effectively. When one does not know which details are salient one needs to stay open to all potentially salient details. The uncertainty here may be of various kinds and various degrees. I may simply not have a clue what this strange new bird is that has landed in the garden. Or I may be finding it difficult to decide whether this dark brown speckled thrush is an adult female or a juvenile blackbird. Or some feature might be seen as a feature of *this* bird when I don't know if it is a typical feature of its kind or not. Is that white patch an identifying feature of this kind, or a unique leutistic pattern? In each case it is often the inability to confidently name, in a context where one might like to name now or in the future, that focuses our attention on what is right there. Thirdly, not all naming is categorisation. In fact there are many practices of naming. We also frequently call individuals by name, especially animals. I might name the leutistic blackbird that frequently visits my garden 'Pied-bird.' Researchers might name individual Bewick swans by their individual bill markings. In these cases naming individuals is usually a sign of significant familiarity. Still, on each occasion one will need to focus to recognise who it is that has just arrived, and recognition will lead to a further attentive focus – will Pied-bird take a bath in the puddle that formed last night? Or go straight to the food I put out as usual? Further, categorisation and proper names are not the only, nor necessary aesthetically most helpful naming practices. Tim Ingold relates some of the complex animal naming practices of the Koyukon of Alaska, who name animals with short descriptions of movement and behavior, e.g., 'flutters around the shore' (sandpiper); 'bites things in water' (mink). The Koyukon also name animals in ways that connect to stories of origin and

adventure in the world, and offer riddles that connect animal movement to human experience, 'I drag my shovel along the trail' (beaver).²⁰ None of these names place the animal in a species and genus taxonomy, but they help us to focus experience and perception, often far better than taxonomies, drawing out the intricate, delicate, ephemeral and beautiful lives of living things as encountered on each occasion.

In the field all these different practices of naming can be brought into play. As *aesthetic* practices their success does not depend on the success of the naming practice itself, whatever that might be deemed to be. My research might, for example, rely on my being able to recognise individual swans. On this occasion one was too far away and the winter sun too bright and low. I look intently but can't quite make out the bill markings. After a while I give up and sit back for a moment to enjoy the sun shining a diffuse yellow off the swan's body in contrast to the sharp blue reflections from the surrounding icy water. My intense focus on the bill has expanded, but the new view carries some of the intensity of the search for recognition in the bill markings.

That last example brings me to a second set of focussing practices, those that can be grouped under the heading of 'frame-finding.' This is far from a new idea in environmental aesthetics. Some of the earliest works in the field discuss the idea that aesthetic appreciation of nature may involve various acts of framing.²¹ There have been significant

²⁰ Tim Ingold, "Naming as Storytelling: Speaking of Animals among the Koyukon of Alaska," in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 165–76.

²¹ Ronald Hepburn developed the idea of the frame in the 1966 essay widely regarded as initiating the modern field of environmental aesthetics, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984) 9-35. There Hepburn argues that natural objects are 'frameless,' in contrast to many art objects. According to Hepburn, this comes with aesthetics compensations, in that it allows for flexible integration of surprise elements into our experience of nature. The opposite was argued earlier by R. G. Collingwood (whose mature philosophy of art as expression Hepburn blamed in part for the neglect of nature beauty in 20th Century aesthetics). In 1927 Collingwood developed almost exactly the same notion of 'frame' in the wider sense as Hepburn, in order to argue that framing is essential for the appreciation of natural beauty, "Aesthetic and the Mind," *Collingwood Studies* 3 (1996): 194–215. In the 21st Century Emily Brady tends to follow Hepburn, although she seeks a middle ground: 'We can frame and select through perceptual attention, but nature comes without frames, and it may seem impossible to frame through mere perception.' *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 64. In this article I seek another kind of middle ground. I don't think it makes sense to claim that nature itself is either frameless or framed when it comes to aesthetic appreciation. We can and do perceive nature spontaneously both as framed and as unframed. As Noël Carroll helpfully puts it, some natural expanses have natural frames or 'natural closure' and some have 'natural saliences' that draw our attention.

debates about the necessity and legitimacy of framing amongst environmental aestheticians, with Carlson objecting to framing on a number of grounds based on the thought that framing is an artistic activity modelled on viewing nature in the manner of landscape painting. So, for example, he objects that: ‘one cannot be engaged in the appropriate active, involved appreciation [of nature] while maintaining the static, external point of view required for framing.’ The frame itself is also understood as a static *imposition* on nature. This seems to me to be a needlessly narrow view of what framing necessarily involves.²² The sense of frame-finding I use here includes all kinds of demarcation of an area or duration in the perceptual field. It can involve one or more of the senses and be spatial and/or temporal. The demarcation can also be more or less clear. So, for example, a view of a magnificent pine can be framed by stepping to one side, so as to get a more direct view between two other trees. The song of one bird amongst others might be framed by stopping to listen out for a number of phrases to repeat and then moving on when those phrases are complete. I call such practices ‘frame-finding’ rather than ‘framing,’ to make clear that I have in mind is not the imposition of an arbitrary boundary, but finding a focus area through cultivated appreciation of the various frames that an occasion affords.

Like naming, frame-finding is an activity that occurs more or less spontaneously in our everyday perception. I do not think, as some have suggested,²³ that framing is an essential ingredient in all aesthetic perception of nature. Sometimes, for example, I might climb a hill precisely to get an ‘unframed’ open view of the landscape. But as that example itself suggests, frame-finding is a significant part of our everyday perception of nature, and so of our aesthetic appreciation, and often we need to take specific steps if we want to undo familiar frames. Frames, again like names, are complex functions of our cultural inheritance

“On being moved by nature” in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 251. Framing and unframing both have their aesthetic advantages and disadvantages, varying by occasion, and positive aesthetics should include practices for recognising, creating and undoing frames.

²² See for example Edward S. Casey’s appraisal of the historical connections between landscape painting and the view of the world as picture. For Casey framing *can* lead to the kind of static impositions that Carlson is concerned about, but when done with attention to the ‘overflow’ and connectedness of place it can cultivate just the kind of engaged involvement and also ‘genuine openness’ that Carlson thinks only unframed environments allow us. Casey considers John Constable’s seascapes as the result of perception exemplary of this kind of genuine openness. *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 133-161.

²³ See note 20 above.

in live interaction with the natural world. That world itself often suggests frames to us, such as the view of the pine that is better framed by the other trees if I step to the side. Again like names, frames are formed more or less spontaneously, but they become part of the practice of positive aesthetics when we work on cultivating our ability to find frames that draw out positive focal features of each occasion. Frame-finding practices might involve simply adjusting one's position or posture, all the way through to complex artistic activity such as taking photographs, making sound recordings or even creating frames in the landscape as part of land art. Once developed, a particular frame-finding activity can gradually be absorbed into one's more spontaneous framing activity.

I will finish this section by briefly describing three possible concerns involving misuses or 'perversions' of focusing practices. Firstly, in response to the idea of frame-finding (and perhaps also naming) as practices of positive aesthetics, it might be said that this very idea shows that we clearly do not encounter everything in nature as beautiful and that in cultivating these practices we do not set out to encounter nature as it is or on its own terms. On the contrary, it might be said, frame-finding recognises ugliness or negativity in nature and sets out to hide it from view. I will discuss the recognition of negativity further in section 6. My initial response to this concern is that hiding what is considered ugly, unpleasant or negative is indeed a frequent misuse of this practice, one that we need to guard against. The practice should at its best involve focusing attention in ways that draw out the positive in what appears. Obviously this will always involve letting some things recede into the background, placing some outside the focusing frame and so forth. We do this with a view to drawing out the beauty of the focal phenomena, not to suppressing the ugliness of others. It may be that appreciation of beauty involves seeing what is reclusive, hard to perceive and requires patience, luck or skill to draw it out. Nature loves to hide its beauty, but we should not be in the business of covering over its perceived flaws.

Secondly, these kinds of aesthetic practice are subject to a perversion when the practices themselves become the entire focus of attention. This is a potential problem for all practices of positive aesthetics, and many other aesthetic practices, although there may be some very self-reflexive practices for which this would not be a problem. In the practices of positive aesthetics the point is to draw out the beauty of nature, not to get entirely bound up in

perfecting the activities of the practice itself. In the case of naming, this perversion arises in the familiar case of box-ticking and filling identification lists, when those activities override the practice of drawing out beauty and become a simple process of identification.

Thirdly, a concern specific to focussing practices is that they are liable to de-contextualise the focal phenomenon, cut it off and isolate it from its environment. This is another real danger that needs to be guarded against when cultivating these practices. If a phenomenon is cut off from its context to a significant degree by a focusing practice (there are reasons to think that only a very contrived practice can really isolate a phenomenon perceived in nature), then it not only becomes less itself, since natural phenomena appear in relation to one another, but it is also less likely to show its own singular beauty as it appears on this occasion. The practice needs to focus without isolating. It may then be thought that the context of appearance that a really appropriate appreciation of the beauty of each thing requires goes far beyond what appears in the perceptual field on any one occasion. Don't we need to appreciate all the relations that a natural phenomenon has within nature as a whole? To appreciate the beauty of each thing don't we ultimately need to appreciate the beauty of everything? I now turn to a set of practices that move us in that direction.

4. Envisioning the Beauty of Everything

In the first set of practices we considered the aim was to draw out the beauty of each thing, event or phenomenon on each singular occasion of perception. In this second set of practices the aim is to perceive the beauty of everything at once, that is, to cultivate a 'holistic' attitude towards the beauty of nature. Hettinger has distinguished individualism from holism as doctrines of positive aesthetics.²⁴ The difference lies in different interpretations of the thought that 'all nature is beautiful,' whether it is taken to mean each natural phenomenon, or nature taken as a whole. In practice advocates of positive aesthetics tend not to draw a sharp distinction between the two, as is demonstrated by Hettinger's championing of Holmes Rolston's eclectic and integrating approach. Those like Carlson and Parsons, whom Hettinger considers 'individualists,' in fact try to demonstrate

²⁴ Hettinger, "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics."

the beauty of each individual thing with reference to its place in a wider whole, with Carlson initially suggesting that we see individuals as beautiful when we see them as part of ecological systems that themselves display positive aesthetic qualities, and Carlson and Parsons later bringing positive aesthetics (with significant qualifications) under their wider theory of functional beauty.²⁵

All advocates of positive aesthetics thus have some sense that the beauty of any one thing in nature cannot be isolated from the beauty of the wider nature it is related to and manifest within. If we focus explicitly on positive aesthetics as a set of practices developed to draw out the beauty of each phenomenon within that wider whole, then we will see that different senses of the 'whole' in question are expressed in the pursuit of different practices. It is not a question of demonstrating that one of these senses is the correct one, but of appreciating the different ways in which the beauty of nature 'as a whole' can be made manifest by way of those practices. The pursuit of each practice also comes up against obstacles and limitations to our ability to perceive the beauty nature as a whole. In pushing the meaning of the 'whole' further and further we are challenged to enlarge and expand our sense of the nature we can perceive. Ultimately these holistic practices, at least for most of us most of the time, come up against limits beyond which we move from the perception of nature and into pure theory, speculation or presumption.

Visions of the whole of nature that guide aesthetic practices of this kind are multiple and varied. Some are inspired by aesthetic theories (such as Functional Aesthetics), others by theories of ecological science (early Carlson), others by mythical narrative, theological and metaphysical speculation, or a combination of some or all of these.²⁶ To count as practices of positive aesthetics they need to envision the whole as beautiful and help us to integrate that vision into our perceptual experience. I use the notion of 'envisioning' here to invoke an apprehension that is projected beyond the immediate field of perception, yet remains connected to perception. The vision is informed by an expansive and integrating perception, and in turn induces a further expansion and integration.

²⁵ Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics."; Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 130-36.

²⁶ Thomas Heyd, "Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories about Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, no. 2 (2001): 125–37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/41.2.125>.

Such visions of the whole and the positive aesthetic practices that invoke them often come as responses to apparent ugliness not of natural kinds, but of relations and processes. These are the kinds of ugliness pointed out by Malcolm Budd.²⁷ Disease, disability, dismemberment, disfigurement, distress and any number of other apparent dysfunctions and dissonances feature in one way or another, and to some degree, on almost all occasions of perceiving nature.

There are two levels at which one can pitch this kind of objection against a doctrine of positive aesthetics. On the first level, one can point to instances of all these kinds of apparent ugliness. The kind of practice now under consideration has various exercises and techniques at its disposal when faced with such instances. The aim is to perceive what is going on in a wider context and in so doing to perceive the beauty of the greater whole. Some instances will be far easier than others of course. If I see a lapwing flapping around a field with one limp wing, calling out and apparently attempting the take flight and falling back to the ground, some rudimentary natural history might suggest that it is trying to call the attention of a predator away from its young with a 'feigned' broken wing. I don't need any more systematic knowledge than that, e.g. statistics on how often this kind of behavior succeeds in distracting the predator, in order for my sense of what I'm watching to be transformed. What if, on another occasion, I see a bird that has really broken its wing? I may be more practiced at seeing the opportunity of a predator as part of this wider scene. This doesn't remove the distress of the injured bird, but it might make me consider the alternative distress of a scavenger who can't find food. These kinds of exercise feature significantly in the work of thinkers such as Holmes Rolston,²⁸ and predation has been seen as a key test case for positive aesthetics.²⁹

I think the key to this kind of exercise is to learn to see the beauty of the encounter between these living creatures, even as we follow along with one or more of them, perhaps feeling

²⁷ Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 100.

²⁸ Holmes Rolston, "Beauty and the Beast: Aesthetic Experience of Wildlife," in *Valuing Wildlife: Economic and Social Perspectives* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987), 187–96.

²⁹ Ned Hettinger, "Animal Beauty, Ethics, and Environmental Preservation," *Environmental Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2010): 115–34.

some of their distress or elation. There are perhaps even harder cases that deserve further attention. Parasitism provides cases that can cause us spontaneous distress and disgust, especially when it involves the disease and disfigurement of mammals and creatures that we spontaneously sympathise with. There are other cases where we more easily admire and delight in perceiving a parasitic relationship, such as the bloom of a bright fungus from a tree trunk. In the harder cases, it seems to me, most of us would not consider as worthwhile an aesthetic practice that aimed at eliminating our sympathy, empathy and expressive connection with the creatures involved. Rather, it is possible to cultivate a practice that allows us to see things in multiple ways at once. I see the relationships unfolding and can be both impressed and distressed.³⁰ There will likely be cases where my distress becomes overriding, and in such cases it is up to us to decide whether we have reached a limit beyond which this particular exercise is no longer worthwhile. When positive aesthetics is viewed as a set of aesthetic practices, rather than a doctrine that might be proved true or false, determining the limits of an exercise is an option that is open for each practitioner on each occasion.

The second level at which this kind of objection can be made is one which points not to specific dissonances within an unfolding scene, but structural dissonances in a vision of the whole of nature itself. This is the objection made by Paden et al, who claim that a truly scientifically informed environmental aesthetics should take evolutionary theory, rather than an outdated 'holistic' ecology of balance, as its guide and model.³¹ This is clearly not the claim that we will find nothing but ugliness and negativity in living nature. Rather, the claim is that the struggle and dissonance that are built into the evolutionary history of life should rightly manifest in our perception of dissonance as well as harmony and fit. Paden has developed this critique of the aesthetics of ecological holistic harmony into an

³⁰ This kind of ambiguity allows for what Hettinger has called the 'terrible beauty' of predation, Hettinger "Animal Beauty, Ethics, and Environmental Preservation," 133.; and more generally what T. J. Diffey calls the 'difficult beauty' of nature that varies historically according to what we immediately perceive as pleasing. T. J. Diffey, "Natural Beauty without Metaphysics," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49.

³¹ Paden, Harmon, and Milling, "Ecology, Evolution, and Aesthetics: Towards an Evolutionary Aesthetics of Nature."

evolutionary aesthetics that deploys tragedy as an artistic model for engagement with nature.³²

That last idea can be developed so that we take art and art practice not only as a model for practices of ‘envisioning’ nature as a whole, but as very often composed of those very practices. Bryan Bannon interpreted the sculpture of Andy Goldsworthy as just such a practice.³³ Goldsworthy’s sculpture, Bannon shows, is a practice of opening the sculptor and those who appreciate the sculpture to the transience of nature, cultivating non-dominating participation and collaboration in the processes and unfolding of natural phenomena. This sculptural practice is the ongoing envisioning of a nature as transient and fragile, and of our own attempts to work within nature as always open to danger, failure and error.³⁴ At the same time the practice envisions the beauty of transient and fragile nature.

There are questions to be asked here about both the scientific and artistic envisioning of nature as a whole and how such visions relate to experience. The question I want to raise here is about the nature of the vision of the whole that is offered both by the evolutionary critics of positive aesthetics and some of its proponents. Interestingly, in the background of these disputes we find a set of theological concerns. Carlson originally claimed that positive aesthetics is a child of the scientific revolution, when scientific attention allowed us to positively appreciate what had earlier been given a negative valance by theological concerns.³⁵ Paden *et al*, on the contrary, claim that positive aesthetics based on ‘holistic ecology’ inherits a Panglossian theology, whilst the Darwinian view of nature shows us dissonance where theologians and holistic ecologists saw only harmony.³⁶ In a significant addition to this debate Phemister and Strickland argue that Leibniz was one of the strongest historical advocates of positive aesthetics, showing that it may not be necessary to pitch a

³² Roger Paden, “Nature, Disorder, and Tragedy,” *Environmental Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2015): 45–66, <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20153319>.

³³ Bryan E. Bannon, “Re-Envisioning Nature: The Role of Aesthetics in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 33, no. 4 (2011): 415–36, <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics201133445>.

³⁴ Bannon, 431.

³⁵ Carlson, “Nature and Positive Aesthetics,” 17-21. For a view that adds further complexities to the theological history here see, J. Haldane, “Admiring the High Mountains: The Aesthetics of Environment,” *Environmental Values* 3, no. 2 (1994): 97–106, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327194776679746>.

³⁶ Paden, Harmon, and Milling, “Ecology, Evolution, and Aesthetics: Towards an Evolutionary Aesthetics of Nature,” 130-31.

scientific model against a theological model of nature as a whole, but instead view theology as a guide for and completion of a scientific view.³⁷ The conclusion of these debates should perhaps be that there is no such thing as *the* 'scientific' or *the* 'theological' view of nature, but a complex set of historically intertwined, contrasting and complementary views.

I do not wish to advocate for any one version of this history or promote any one vision of nature as a whole. Instead, in keeping with the view of positive aesthetics as practice that I'm advocating here, I suggest that all these visions of the whole have something to offer as potential guides to positive experience. Aesthetic perception may or may not be theory-laden, but it can certainly be vision-guided in a way that does not necessary commit us to a single theory. As practitioners of positive aesthetics I think the line we need to walk here is between taking these visions of the whole as our guides and setting them up as an immovable framework for perception. So, Mateusz Tokarski can reasonably describe Rolston's aesthetic practice, including some of the exercises described above, as aesthetic 'theodicy' without committing him to any theologically determinate view of the world or theological guarantee that the 'right' view will always be available and always give us undiluted aesthetic positivity.³⁸ Something similar holds for all visions of the whole, whether scientific, mythological, artistic, or some combination of those and others. Aesthetic practice takes such visions as guides, not schemes or frameworks.

Such a vision is an intimation of what the whole may be, not a grasp of the whole as such. To retain its connection to perception, and thus to aesthetic experience, the vision continually seeks a holistic attitude, but must do without the perceived presence of the whole as such, since that is something quite beyond perception. To think otherwise is to fall into a second perversion of positive aesthetics, assuming the presence of a complete and perfect whole, and the unambiguous positive beauty of all things when seen aright. Such an assumption ultimately negates the need for any practice of positive aesthetics, any cultivation of perception qua perception, other than faith in the beauty of the complete whole. Practices of positive aesthetics, on the other hand, need to work at envisioning an

³⁷ Pauline Phemister and Lloyd Strickland, "Leibniz's Monadological Positive Aesthetics," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23, no. 6 (2015): 1214–34.

³⁸ Mateusz Tokarski, *Hermeneutics of Human-Animal Relations in the Wake of Rewilding: The Ethical Guide to Ecological Discomforts*, vol. 30 (Cham: Springer, 2019), 157-61.

open-ended natural world in ways that draw out the beauty that it considers always possible, rather than always already present.

5. Allowing for the Beauty of All Things

And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the finest of painters.

There is no object so foul that intense light will not make it beautiful.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

The final set of practices that I want to sketch are perhaps rather more surprising than those described so far. These practices involve letting go of aesthetic practice and trying to undo some of the ingrained habits of perception that mean we tend not to take in the beauty the natural phenomena as they manifest and depart, unfold and unwind, in the perceptual field. This kind of practice may seem strange and even paradoxical, a practice of non-practice, but it is similar to practices familiar from diverse philosophical traditions, including the Daoist practice of *wu-wei* (unforced action or responsive attunement) and Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* (releasement or letting-be).³⁹

These exercises can again be quite simple and take place in the context of some of those already described. So, for example, I mentioned above that when engaged in naming one might well reach a moment of indeterminacy and uncertainty. At such a moment it is open to us to continue the naming exercise and try to determine what or who is there, or to

³⁹ Numerous authors have connected these notions and Heidegger was clearly inspired in part by Daoist thought, see, Eric Sean Nelson, "Responding to Heaven and Earth," *Environmental Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2004): 65–74, <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil2004127>.; Casey Rentmeester, *Heidegger and the Environment* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). Nelson has recently connected Daoist practice to Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises to form a set of Daoist 'bio-spiritual exercises', including *wu-wei* as 'responsive attunement', Eric S. Nelson, *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy, Daoism and Environmental Philosophy* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 6. There has been some debate concerning the adequacy of an environmental ethic based on *Gelassenheit* in recent years, see, e.g.,: Vincent Blok, "Reconnecting with Nature in the Age of Technology," *Environmental Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2014): 307–32, <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil20149913>. Brendan Mahoney, "The Virtue of Burden and Limits of *Gelassenheit*," *Environmental Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2016): 269–98, <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil201610339>.; Kalpita Bhar Paul, "Beyond Technological Nihilism: Reinterpreting Heidegger in Environmental Philosophy," *Environmental Ethics* 39, no. 3 (2018): 321–39, <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics201739323>. It seems to me there is clearly no single 'adequate' basis for environmental thought and practice. Allowing or letting-be as responsive attunement can be a significant element of ethical and aesthetic practice, but it is not itself a 'saving-power,' and I'm not convinced that any practice could be.

linger with that indeterminacy and allow space for free play in the presentation. Free play has of course, since Kant, been associated with the very experience of beauty itself.⁴⁰ We find perceptual free play in moments of indeterminacy. It is not simply a question of our failure to determine what is perceived, or even our own choice not to determine it. Often we are presented with indeterminacy and responsive attunement allows for such indeterminacy. I think most naturalists would agree that this is especially often the case in our encounters with the natural world. There can be both a free play of our modes of presenting the thing and free play in the indeterminacy of the presentation itself, and these two dimensions of play can intensify one another.

Allowing free play in the presentation of all things as they appear on each occasion can be about more than allowing for indeterminacy. At its most powerful it can also be a practice of allowing the perceptual relations between things to intensify. By perceptual relations I mean all those relations that make a perceptual difference to the scene, soundscape, or complete sensory experience of this occasion. Those kinds of relations are of a different order to functional or causal relations. Only some of the functional and causal relations will make a perceptual difference on each occasion. The encounter of a pollinating wasp and a flowering orchid might form a focal and consolidating joining at the heart of the perceptual field. The function of bacteria in the soil is likely to go unnoticed and to make no perceptual difference on most occasions. Many perceptual relations are neither causal nor functional, but compositional, like the flight of two birds that cross at a point that draws out the distinctive colors of movements of each in contrast, and forms an arch over the ground when the flight paths are traced by the eye. That arch might suggest a focussing 'frame' for the scene, or it might be allowed to fade as quickly as it arose. The birds themselves need not meet or respond to one another. Perceptual relations are very often, if not always, a matter of something happening to re-compose the scene. So in the epigraph to this section Emerson claims that nothing is so foul that intense light will not make it beautiful. We can think of intense sunlight bursting through the clouds to highlight the crests of the wavelets on a pond that a moment before only offered us a dark conglomeration of tangled weeds. The sparkling and shimmering wavelets shine beautifully in the sunlight, but the dark weeds

⁴⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 102.

also form part of the beauty of that event. It is not any uniform intensity of light (such as might be achieved by a fluorescent strip light) that draws out the beauty of all things in the scene, but the event that intensifies the light. Sun beams bursting through clouds or dark clouds racing across the face of the moon are iconic of natural beauty for precisely this reason. The composing eye as it is allowed free play across the scene and these events of perceptual re-composition, what we might call ephemeral events, play off against one another to allow the beautiful manifestation of all things in the scene and all things that might unfold from or intrude into the scene.

Taken to an extreme such practices of allowing the free play of the composing eye and recomposing events can affect the compositional powers of the 'eye' itself, that is, our whole embodied capacity to see and synaesthetically open ourselves to the scene. This would be something like what Ronald Hepburn called the 'naturizing' of the human observer, which is, he writes, 'to allow that otherness [of nature] free play in modifying one's sense of one's own being.'⁴¹ Significantly, one needs to allow this to take place. I am suggesting that such allowing is not simply a question of carrying on our perceptual relationship with the natural world as normal, but of developing practices of allowing free play of our senses and the sensory. If we become accomplished practitioners of allowing nature's free play, Hepburn goes on to suggest, nature so perceived may not seem so 'foreign', but, 'that may be because we have ourselves become foreign to our everyday, unexamined notion of ourselves, and not through any assimilation of nature to pre-existent notions, images or perceptions.'⁴²

That brings me to my final consideration of how practices of positive aesthetics might go astray. In this case, potential problems are of a rather different kind to those in the first two cases, and discerning them perhaps requires a subtler sensibility, since these are practices not of actively engaging, but of the responsive attunement of allowing. In the first two cases of practice gone awry, focussing practices ceased to work on perception and became ends in themselves and envisioning practices took us beyond perception to theorised models of nature as a complete whole. All the practices under consideration begin with everyday

⁴¹ Hepburn, *Wonder and Other Essays*, 20.

⁴² Hepburn, 21.

perception. Focusing takes its cue from everyday spontaneous habits of perception and works on them to identify, determine and frame natural phenomena, drawing out the singular beauty of each thing. Envisioning again takes its cue from everyday expansive and encompassing capacities of perception, developing a vision that continually seeks to incorporate the beauty of everything. Allowing begins in the everyday unfolding and manifestation of things as they appear in the perceptual field. The aim is to reinhabit the perceptual field and allow what transpires free play with our perceptual capacities. Problems arise for focusing and envisioning when they cease to enhance perception and take us beyond perception. Problems arise for allowing when staying with perception ceases to enhance or cultivate our attunement to natural beauty. For example, I decide to get out into nature and simply let my experience unfold, to let nature show itself to me. Each day I take the same route around the lake at the same time. I notice the familiar trees and plants, birds and animals. I notice the rain and the sun, then the changing of the seasons. Occasionally I'm surprised by an unfamiliar creature or the unseasonal conditions. Yet, however careful my attention, everything unfolds against a tightly woven background of perceptual expectation. Even a small change, such as walking the other way around the lake, can significantly loosen that habitual expectation, really allowing the familiar to manifest itself to me anew.

Hepburn, in a later essay, gives us a sense of what we should be aiming for and what might go wrong: 'The maximising of aesthetic reward in nature is dependent on the extent to which one learns to shift attention flexibly from aspect to aspect of the natural objects before one, to shift focus from close to long-shot, from textured detail to overall atmospheric haze or radiance; to overcome stereotyped grouping and clichéd ways of seeing.'⁴³ Woven into that highly condensed description are potential cues for all of the practices I have been describing. Hepburn argues that engagement with art, and also, one might assume, engaging in artistic practice, helps us to develop the necessary perceptual flexibility and openness. Yet in practices where openness is developed in allowing free play, the danger is that one will fall back into normal, normalizing and routine perception. This is a second 'negative' to which positive aesthetics addresses itself. It is not only the ugly but

⁴³ 'Nature in the Light of Art' in Hepburn *Wonder and Other Essays*, 47.

the dull, routine and average that is not beautiful. As Hepburn puts it, 'The enemy of the aesthetic is the object of perception that is inexpressive, characterless, null, incoherent, unable to sustain attention, full of 'holes' and 'dead space'.⁴⁴ Here the problem is expressed in terms of what is perceived, whereas I expressed it in terms of the routine operations of the perceiver. But these two, like the mutually enhancing free play of the senses and the sensed, are not separable when it comes to aesthetic practices. The danger of allowing, then, is that we allow our perception and our sense of what is perceived to carry on, insensible to the beauty of what is unfolding, manifesting and transpiring, the sense of beautiful nature as the beauty of what we see everyday. This third danger, in contrast to the first two, is not a danger of the leaving everyday perception of nature behind rather than cultivating and enhancing it, but in mistaking the practice of allowing everyday perception free play with continuing in our everyday insensibility to natural beauty.

6. Beauty, Negativity and Artificiality

Having sketched out three practices of positive aesthetics and various potential pitfalls for those practices, I want to end by drawing together some of the implications of this approach for our understanding of environmental aesthetics and its aims. Foremost amongst these is the view of aesthetic appreciation in general as fundamentally involving aesthetic practices. The consequence of this for the notion of positive aesthetics is that the role of philosophy is here understood not primarily as the articulation and defense of a doctrine or thesis such as 'everything in nature is beautiful,' or one of its more nuanced permutations. Rather, following the revival of philosophy as a way of life practiced through a set of spiritual exercises that Hadot has inspired, positive aesthetics becomes a set of practices designed to help us draw out and appreciate the beauty that one is committed to finding, if possible, everywhere in the natural world. There is no guarantee that any such exercises will be entirely successful on any one occasion. The idea that 'all' nature is beautiful now does not mean that there is an account of that total beauty which we must convince ourselves of as a general truth. Rather it means that, on each occasion of practicing positive aesthetics, one proceeds on the basis of a practical commitment to the possibility that one might

⁴⁴ Hepburn, 47.

potentially experience the natural world in a way that would be helpfully described in terms like 'each and every thing is beautiful,' 'the whole is beautiful,' 'the appearance of things is beautiful.' The doctrines and judgments that are proposed as part of these exercises may perform various roles and the practice as a whole does not stand or fall by the success of arguments for or against doctrines and judgments. At its most general, we might venture, positive aesthetics stands or falls by the practical commitment to exercises that on any occasion have the potential to draw out the beauty in each natural thing, everything taken is an open-ended whole, or allowing the beauty the perceptual field to unfold.

There are three more specific implications of this view. The first concerns the sense of 'beauty,' which I have left implicit in the foregoing descriptions. Having set out the kind of thing that I have in mind by a practice of positive aesthetics I can now make the sense of beauty that it implies more explicit. There are two senses of 'beauty' that are usually distinguished in the literature on positive aesthetics. On the one hand, there is beauty in the sense of some specific (positive) aesthetic quality, as distinct from other (positive and negative) aesthetic qualities. However one understands the distinctive quality of beauty, understanding beauty in this sense is usually seen to make any doctrine of positive aesthetics *prima facie* highly implausible. After all, if all natural phenomena are only and entirely beautiful, this analytic sense beauty would suggest that they can have no other aesthetic qualities. That is why, for example, Paden et al. suggest that one reason we should reject the doctrine of positive aesthetics is that it does not leave room for all of the other positive, negative and ambiguous aesthetic qualities we find in nature, such as the sublime, the tragic etc. On the other hand, advocates of positive aesthetics tend to operate with a general umbrella sense of 'beauty', which makes the term all but synonymous with positive aesthetic quality.⁴⁵ This sense of beauty remains formal and rather thin although, naturally, understanding beauty in that sense makes the claims of positive aesthetics doctrines much easier to defend.

⁴⁵ Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," 8 suggests that we can think of 'positivity' in terms of 'the attribution of aesthetic goodness, inherent beauty, or more particular positive qualities'; Hettinger, "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics," 39, note 3 summarises the 'umbrella' notion: 'I use beauty to refer to the entire range of aesthetically valuable properties, rather than for a particular type of aesthetic merit that contrasts with ugliness.'

The sense of 'beauty' implied by the aesthetic practices I have described is rather different to either of these senses employed in the theory of positive aesthetics. Rather than a distinctive quality or a general 'umbrella' for positive qualities, the sense of beauty that these practices work to draw out is what we might call 'phenomenal beauty.' It is an experience of the phenomenal character of natural phenomena, the dynamic character of nature's presentation of itself to us in perception. In this sense beauty is the beauty of the dynamic of appearance and disappearance of phenomena in the perceptual field. This is a sense of beauty that phenomenologists such as Galen A. Johnson have pointed towards. Johnson describes it as an experience of an enhanced openness to the world.⁴⁶ In this sense, any phenomenon can have various qualities ('positive', 'negative', 'ambiguous' or 'mixed') as the thing presented, and yet at the same time have a different dimension of beauty in the quality of its presentation or manifestation.⁴⁷ Positive aesthetics understood as a truth claim has, unsurprisingly, often been defended on the basis of an objectivist view of aesthetics.⁴⁸ Phenomenal beauty, however, is neither straightforwardly objective nor straightforwardly subjective, but rather involves taking up attitudes and cultivating practices that allow the beautiful ways that nature can appear to manifest themselves. For example, I might see the dull gray bill and brown mottled primary feathers of a juvenile swan as less than beautiful qualities, especially when compared to the bright orange and black bill and shining white primaries of the adults. However, after seeing the shining manifestation of those stark and bright colors of the adults I might cultivate a sense of the manifestation of animated swan colors in sun and reflected in the water, and return to the juvenile with a renewed openness to the manifestation of all swan colors, the 'dull' and 'mottled' colors with their own kind of shining manifestation. One might worry that this would be to appreciate our experience of nature rather than nature itself. Yet it is not that I appreciate my own open perception. I appreciate the manifestation of colors, rather than simply the colors that are manifest, that

⁴⁶ Galen A. Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics* (Evanston (Ill.): Northwestern University Press, 2010), 6. Guðbjörg Rannveig Jóhannesdóttir helpfully summarises this sense of beauty as one that, 'not only refers to form and other sensuous qualities (color, sound, smell), but also refers to a certain relation between subject and object; in this relation there is not distance, but a certain closeness and openness [...]', "Phenomenological Aesthetics of Landscape and Beauty," in *Nature and Experience: Phenomenology and the Environment*, ed. Bryan E. Bannon (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 193.

⁴⁷ Heidegger describes beauty as the 'shining' of self-concealing being, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32.

⁴⁸ Phemister and Strickland, "Leibniz's Monadological Positive Aesthetics." 1220-1227

such openness brings to experience. This is the sense of beauty, I would suggest, that the practices of positive aesthetics seek to draw out or allow to show through, in each natural thing and in the open-ended whole. This is also why aesthetic practice and education are so important, because it teaches us not only to see the manifold qualities of things in the natural world, but to develop a depth of experience that appreciates the beauty of their dynamic manifestation.

The second implication of understanding positive aesthetics as an aesthetic practice concerns the significance of 'negativity.' There are at least three ways in which negativity plays a role in positive aesthetics as a practice. Firstly, if positive aesthetics is a practice, rather than a thesis or doctrine, then it is a practice that presupposes that some of our experience of nature in the normal course of perception is not of ideal beauty. If it were then there would be no need for such a practice. In fact, given the range of criticisms that have been levelled at positive aesthetics as a doctrine over the years, I think it is safe to say that there is a good deal of perceived negativity that these practices can work on, helping us to see things more clearly, in a new light, in a different context or from new perspectives. Secondly, as we have seen, not all of that initially perceived negativity will be straightforwardly converted into positivity by a successful exercise in positive aesthetics. Sometimes initial negativity may become entirely positive if we come to see that we did not have the focus, the breadth of vision or the patience to allow our perception to unfold. At other times we will discover ambiguous aesthetic phenomena, such as sublimity (Brady), Tragedy (Paden), discomfort (Tokarski) or 'terrible beauty' (Hettinger), that might nevertheless be felt to have a positive valence in their manifestation. With the help of these practices, we can seek to shift our perspective away from the qualities of what is manifest and towards the beauty of manifestation, of what I just described as phenomenal beauty. Again, there is no guarantee that any such exercise will be a success on any one occasion, but the practical commitment of those who exercise positive aesthetics is that there is always the potential to draw out beauty or allow it to appear. Thirdly, I am not suggesting that practices of positive aesthetics are the only aesthetic practices that are worth pursuing for those who want to develop their aesthetic appreciation of nature. On the contrary, the idea of practices of positive aesthetics suggests that there might also be practices aimed at perceiving without valence, with indifference or neutrality, that have their place in our

aesthetic development. There might well also be practices of negative aesthetics, involving exercises in perceiving negativity, that are also important.⁴⁹ Yukio Saito has suggested that Western aesthetics has tended to neglect negative aesthetics, but that it is important part to develop our sensibility for the negative, not least because this can give us a first indication of when something is not going well and may need work or assistance of some kind.⁵⁰

Finally, that brings me to the implications of this view for our understanding of nature in relation to the artificial. Some readers may be concerned that with such a broad view of the practice of positive aesthetics, together with the suggestion that we can also develop practices of indifference and negative aesthetics, I have lost sight of the point of positive aesthetics, whether as doctrine or practice. The point was, presumably, to show us that there is something aesthetically special about nature. Can't all the exercises that I have described be developed just as well to draw out the beauty of human artifice, or even the waste and effluent of artifice that is so often responsible for marring the beauty of nature? Not only that, it might be thought that there is an especial problem with thinking of positive aesthetics as aesthetic practice, because that makes our perception of nature itself into something artificial. My response to such concerns is that viewing positive aesthetics as aesthetic practice shifts our sense of artifice. The artificial that positive aesthetics tries to avoid in its perception of nature is not thought of as 'anything done by humans.' The sense of artifice that positive aesthetic practices show up as distorting and marring is the artificial reconstruction of nature, including the natural perceptual capacities of human beings. These exercises develop, cultivate, and allow space for our perception of nature, which focus, envision and allow natural phenomena to manifest themselves. They do not try to artificially reconstruct nature or our perception of nature from the ground up. The most positive aesthetic experiences of nature come when we perceive nature's beauty with a cultivated but still natural and everyday perception. Clearly, many of the starkest opportunities for such experiences will be in places that are relatively wild and untrammelled. Whether on

⁴⁹ 'Evolutionary ecologists would often find positive value in disorder and dysfunction.' Paden, Harmon, and Milling, "Ecology, Evolution, and Aesthetics: Towards an Evolutionary Aesthetics of Nature." See also, María José Alcaraz León, "Positive Aesthetics: Claims and Problems," *Enrahonar. Quaderns de Filosofia* 45 (2010): 15, <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/enrahonar.216>.

⁵⁰ Yukio Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics in the Japanese Tradition," in *Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West*, ed. Liu Audi and Curtis L. Carter (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), 164–83.

any occasion human activity is going with the grain of nature or has become artificial is something that our aesthetic practices can help us to get a better sense for. That is why we need to rediscover and develop new practices of positive aesthetics, now more than ever. Not because they will lead us to see the truth of the total and complete beauty of pristine nature lying underneath all human activity, but because human activity is in the process of obliterating the beauty of nature and artificially blinding and muting our capacity to experience that beauty.