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Source: *Environmental Philosophy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Special Issue: Ecotourism and Environmental Justice (Fall 2010), pp. 115-134

Published by: Philosophy Documentation Center

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26168045>

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Ethics Commands, Aesthetics Demands: Environmental Aesthetics for Environmental Justice in Newark

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I identify a commonly held position in environmental philosophy, “the received view,” and argue that its proponents beg the question when challenged to demonstrate the relevance of environmental aesthetics for environmental justice. I call this “the inference problem,” and I go on to argue that an alternative to the received view, Arnold Berleant’s participatory engagement model, is better equipped to meet the challenge it poses. By adopting an alternative metaphysics, the engagement model supplies a solution to the inference problem and thereby provides a more useful theoretical framework for application to pressing concerns in environmental justice, such as the plight of the historical Ironbound District of Newark, New Jersey.

I. Introduction

The Ironbound District in Newark, New Jersey provides an especially vivid illustration of some of the tricky challenges facing environmental aesthetics today. A host of vexing problems posed by this historic urban district makes especially palpable how inextricably linked the ethical and the aesthetic are for theories of the appreciation of environments, both natural and human, scenic and unscenic.

The area consists of four square miles of mixed residential, commercial, and recovering industrial areas once the home of forges and foundries, and which now comprise the East Ward of Newark. It is bounded by major commuter and freight railways, a major seaport, a major international airport, a matrix of major trucking routes, and the Passaic River, a major commercial waterway. It is also home to 50,000 people, making it the most densely populated neighborhood in Newark.

The Ironbound has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Throughout the nineteenth century it was home to a succession of immigrants from Germany, Lithuania, Italy, and Poland, who were slowly replaced in the twentieth century by Spanish, Portuguese, and Brazilian immigrants, providing the area with

Environmental Philosophy 7 (2), 115–133.

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its current alter ego as New Jersey's Little Portugal, and making it a favorite destination for foodies in search of ethnic flare.

One obvious question is how are we to appreciate such a place aesthetically? The sheer variety and diversity of the Ironbound landscape provide an especially clear illustration of the importance, for any theory of appreciation of environments, of what Allen Carlson calls "Berleant's Unified Aesthetics Requirement" (Carlson 2009, 42-4).

A local community group, the Ironbound Community Corporation (2010a), offers an environmental justice tour, which visits significant points of interest (2010b), including the Tidewater Baling company, now contaminated by high levels of heavy metals and PCBs (USEPA 2008); Covanta Energy, the state's largest garbage incinerator; "Container City," where empty port containers lie stacked eight stories high; the infamous Doremus Avenue, or "Chemical Row," industrial area, created in the early 1900s by dumping refuse and construction debris into the Passaic River salt marsh and which is now home to several chemical companies including the formaldehyde producer Hoechst-Celanese; and last but not least, the Diamond Alkali Superfund site which sits on the banks of the Passaic River, and which served as the site for the production of generations of pesticides and herbicides, such as DDT and Agent Orange, and now contains the world's largest concentration of dioxin (USEPA 2009). The superfund site extends seventeen miles up the Passaic River to Dundee Dam in Garfield, just downriver from magnificent Great Falls in Patterson, a designated National Historic Landmark.

The Ironbound is full of aesthetic contradictions that illustrate clearly the coming importance of planning for green urban communities. Atop a capped Agent Orange dump on the banks of the Passaic River sits a neat row of little spruce trees. Behind a twenty-foot-high chain-link fence enclosing a contaminated and abandoned industrial site near the former Ballantine Brewery sits a children's playground. At nearby Branch Brook Park, a lesser-known work of Olmsted, thousands of newly planted cherry trees are in spectacular bloom. One goal of the environmental justice tour is to place previously unaware tourists in a position to engage these contradictions aesthetically so that ultimately they are positioned to accept and to act upon the ethical call to resolve them.

II. What is the Relevance of Environmental Aesthetics for Questions of Environmental Justice?

I want to ask something like: Who cares? But not in the callous sense of, "Who cares about the sufferings of others?" Rather, I want to ask: what do pressing matters of environmental justice have to do with theoretical matters in environmental aesthetics? An even better question is simply: what model of aesthetic appreciation of environments is most relevant for addressing the unique ethical questions central to environmental justice? Air quality, soil contaminants, airport and truck noise pollution, industrial waste, trash

incinerators, water dumping, and the like pose problems not typically addressed in the canonical literature of environmental aesthetics. Much of that literature is concerned with grounds for securing a positive aesthetic appreciation of natural environments and of how that appreciation can be seen as providing a rationale for protection and preservation of environments. But the challenges posed by certain post-industrial urban environments like the Ironbound District in Newark appear to require a different kind of approach.

III. The Usual Framing of the Problem

Consider some standard sorts of questions at the interface of environmental aesthetics and environmental ethics. Is there any ethical imperative to preserve peaceful and enchanting swampland in Northern New Jersey rather than develop it for badly needed housing and commercial space? Should we build a wind farm in Nantucket Sound or preserve the spectacular views? Is there a case to be made for building a clean energy solar farm on existing preserved farmland in southern New Jersey? In such cases, the hope of course is that theories of the aesthetic appreciation of environments (AAE) can provide a foundation for, or at least a way of guiding ethical arguments for, preservation. In our case, we want to know what theory of AAE can best guide us in acting on our commitments to environmental justice. We want to know for example what a theory of AAE can tell us about how experience of aesthetic horrors can provide the basis for ethical resolve.

An initial worry about this line of thought can be voiced right away. The worry is that aesthetic concerns are trivial matters of mere amenities, while ethical concerns are profound matters of utility and necessity. But this worry is based on a mistake, as the examples from the Ironbound District clearly indicate. Stacking shipping containers five stories high is perhaps useful but it is certainly not the case that its usefulness overrides the negative aesthetic price paid by those who live in their shadow. Utility competes with beauty, and there is no obvious trumping relationship that favors ethical necessities over aesthetic amenities. Otherwise, there would be no issue at all, and yet there clearly is one.

A good deal of subtle and important work in this area has been done, and there is something of a received view about how to proceed.¹ The usual way of framing the issue is to begin by asking, broadly, what relevance environmental aesthetics could possibly have for environmental ethics. What licenses the inference, as Holmes Rolston puts it, “from beauty to duty” (Rolston 2002)? That is, what relevance do facts or values concerning matters in environmental aesthetics have for facts or values concerning matters in environmental ethics?

1. However, there is no one I know of who endorses this view officially. What I’m calling the “received view” is thus something of a fiction constructed for dialectical purposes.

The challenge can be seen as an inference problem which itself can be divided into two steps.

IV. The Inference Problem

Step One: How do we get from facts or values about lower-order, non-aesthetic properties to facts or values about higher-order, aesthetic properties? Here is a swimming polar bear. . . . Here is a surprisingly elegant and dainty creature at play. Here is an abandoned Agent Orange dump. . . . Here is a shocking and repulsive affront.

Step Two: How do we get from facts or values concerning higher-order, aesthetic properties to facts or values concerning ethical prescriptions or duties? Polar bears are magnificent and increasingly threatened creatures. . . . We have a duty to preserve them and their habitat. Dioxin is one of the most dangerous substances known to humans. . . . We have a duty to remove it from human environments, even if it is expensive to do so and affects only the poor.

The received solution to the challenge proceeds by drawing a distinction, due to Ronald Hepburn (1993), between serious and trivial beauty,² and then appeals to ways in which judgments of serious beauty can have an objective basis, or at least some measure of objectivity. Both parts address in fairly obvious ways the complaint that matters of AAE are trivial and subjective, and thus are not fit to play a role in debates about important ethical and policy concerns.

Step One

To fill in step one we secure objectivity of aesthetic judgments by adopting a realism about aesthetic properties³ together with a supervenience thesis governing their relations to non-aesthetic properties.⁴ According to the supervenience thesis, genuine higher-order aesthetic properties depend ontologically upon, but are not logically entailed by, lower-order non-aesthetic properties.⁵ To ensure that the supervenience relation itself is something objective, the standard view appeals to the objectivity of the ontological

2. Allen Carlson takes this distinction to be a requirement for any adequate theory of AAE, calling it “Hepburn’s Serious Beauty Intuition” (2009, 44–46).

3. Rolston (2002) suggests that aesthetic properties such as “elegance” can be treated analogously to ordinary secondary qualities like “red,” and that we adopt realism with respect to secondary qualities.

4. Some authors, such as Marcia Eaton (1994), adopt a stronger kind of realism that treats aesthetic properties as intrinsic properties, thereby eliminating the need for a supervenience thesis at all.

5. Emily Brady (2003, 17–18) mentions supervenience in connection with Frank Sibley’s canonical work on aesthetic concepts. She understands supervenience as providing for a moderate realism about aesthetic properties (192). Other advocates of the received view, such as Rolston (2002), appear to adopt supervenience implicitly.

dependence of the aesthetic on the non-aesthetic. Here, as we should expect, the going gets tougher, but advocates of the received view have a number of suggestions for how to proceed.⁶ These include appeal to various psychological factors involved in aesthetic judgments, including cognition, emotion, and imagination, which are themselves objective, or which have a substantial objective component.

Relevant cognitive factors include the understanding provided by our best theories from the natural sciences coupled with common sense (Carlson 1979; 1981), knowledge of historical-cultural facts and traditions (Saito 1998a, 1998b), and broad-based understanding of matters of environmental sustainability (Eaton 1997). The discussions of the importance of cognitive factors often appeal to Kendall Walton's now classical essay "Categories of Art" in order to help advance the objectivist epistemological-*cum*-psychological thesis that the kind of perception involved in aesthetic appreciation is guided by an interpretive role played by our categorial knowledge. Theorists differ, as just mentioned, over whether these categories are fixed by our natural cognitive capacities, commonsense, scientific theories, cultural-historical traditions, some combination of these, or some other kind of cognitive element. The basic problem for this kind of view is obviously that some aesthetic appreciation does not seem to require much cognitive front-loading and that the view fails to take seriously the freedom and subjectivity that are essential elements of aesthetic appreciation.⁷ For example, that the exhaust fumes emanating from planes, trains, trucks, automobiles, and ships in the Ironbound is repulsive and dangerous does not appear to require anything beyond common sense and ordinary perceptual and cognitive abilities.

Relevant emotional factors include the extent to which an emotional response to a situation can be, in virtue of what is "naturally salient" about the situation, appropriate or inappropriate. Given our natural perceptual capacities, and being the kinds of creatures that we are, certain elements of a situation, including many commonsense facts and categories to which the elements belong, will naturally stand out in relief.⁸ And then, again given the kinds of creatures that we are, certain kinds of emotional response will be appropriate, and others will not. Although it seems to be a straightforward version of the cognitivist theory of emotions, this approach provides for a kind of quasi-objectivist but non-cognitivist theory of AAE in which our "being moved by nature" is grounded in norms of appropriateness. As Noel Carroll puts it, borrowing from Ronald deSousa, "appropriateness is the truth of emotions" (1993, 257).⁹ Fear of poisoning from lead dust may be perfectly appropriate

6. Ned Hettinger (2008, 425–30), in an exceptionally clear and comprehensive discussion of this issue, provides a list of what he calls "resources for objectivity."

7. See, for example, Budd (2002) and Fisher (1998).

8. As Carlson puts it, "our cognitive appraisal of the situation," governs what is appropriate or inappropriate in emotional response (2008, 48).

9. Carroll borrows the phrase from Ronald deSousa (1980, 285).

when strolling near Field B in the Ironbound, given the knowledge that recent tests have revealed levels of lead dust ten times the safe amounts emanating from deteriorating artificial turf fibers. But signs indicating the presence of chipmunks would not make fear of chipmunk attack appropriate. Neither fear of lead dust nor fear of chipmunks could be true or false, but given various pieces of commonsense and everyday knowledge, those fears are certainly properly described as appropriate or not.

How the imagination can provide a path to objectivity is much less obvious, but to this end Emily Brady (2003) has advanced a vigorous and subtle defense of the importance of the imagination for preservationist-driven theories of AAE. Rather than a direct appeal to objectivist epistemology or to a cognitive theory of emotional response, Brady employs a neo-normative distinction between imagining well and imagining poorly (158–61). The imagination can be understood in a roughly Kantian way as a faculty whose proper employment requires skill, and as such, certain ways or forms of imagining can be appropriate or inappropriate. “Imagining well” is to be understood as something analogous to an Aristotelian virtue. Imagining a lamb dressed up in baby clothes is inappropriate because it invokes cheap sentimentality, whereas the kind of imagining involved when Aldo Leopold advises us to “think like a mountain” is a perfectly appropriate and presumably morally virtuous use of the imagination (159). Another illustration makes the point for our case involving the Ironbound. When residents living across the street from “Container City” complain about the stacks of shipping containers that stand eight stories high on the site of a former playground, it would be inappropriate for authorities to suggest that they learn to like the containers by imagining that they are the Grand Tetons, although it would be perfectly appropriate to respond negatively to them in imagining how dangerous they might be to adolescents and children who might go exploring there.

Filling-in the discussion a bit, an Agent Orange dump, even if it has a pretty row of trees atop it, should receive a negative assessment on each of the above approaches advanced by received-view advocates. The cognitive theory will render a negative verdict in virtue of the fact that empirical science has demonstrated the ill effects of benzene on the human nervous system. The emotional response theory will require rudimentary knowledge of such things as that benzene is a poison and that poisons cause death, but once this rudimentary knowledge is in place, it would seem that an appropriate emotional response of total disgust would follow. An imagination-based theory might render a negative verdict if we considered, in a quite natural and well-imagined hypothetical case, the effects of the Agent Orange container failing, with the resultant flotillas of dead birds, fish, and other animals.

So advocates of the received view can address step one by adopting an aesthetic realism whose ontological commitment is backed-up via one of the epistemological-*cum*-psychological strategies mentioned above. For the case of the Ironbound in Newark, this provides a way for us to take seriously the

negative aesthetic qualities people quite naturally attribute to many aspects of that troubled area, including aspects as obvious as the annoying, distracting, and inescapable airplane noise—a response which some might want to dismiss as merely a subjective matter of taste.

Step Two

To complete the second step, advocates of the received view enlist the objectivity they've secured for AAE in step one to serve as a foundation for the relevant inference from aesthetics to ethics constituting step two. Beautiful things, at least seriously beautiful things exhibiting real and non-trivial aesthetic properties, are imbued with aesthetic value, and this aesthetic value wears its preservation value on its sleeves. Just as the aesthetic value of artworks is a guide to their preservation value—"The Metropolitan Museum of Art and its magnificent contents are on fire. Save them!"—so too the aesthetic value of environments is a guide to their preservation value—"The magnificent temperate rainforests of southeastern Australia are disappearing. Save them!" Similarly, aesthetically negative environments, at least seriously repulsive environments exhibiting real and non-trivial (negative) aesthetic properties, are imbued with negative aesthetic value, and this negative aesthetic value wears its (for lack of a better term) amelioration value on its sleeves. "The Covanta Energy incinerator spews carbon-dioxide, sulfur-dioxide, lead, dioxin, and other pollutants into the breathing-space of the largely low-income and minority Ironbound District a stone's throw away. Fix it!"

Janna Thompson puts the point nicely in a passage Carlson refers to as "Thompson's Objectivity Desideratum":

The link . . . between aesthetic judgment and ethical obligation fails unless there are objective grounds—grounds that rational, sensitive people can accept—for thinking that something has value. If beauty in nature . . . is merely in the eyes of the beholder, then no general moral obligation arises out of aesthetic judgments. A judgment of value that is merely personal and subjective gives us no way of arguing that everyone ought to learn to appreciate something, or at least to regard it as worthy of preservation. (1995, 292)¹⁰

It seems to be taken for granted, however, that once the need for objectivity has been met the inference problem is thereby solved. But this is a slip, because, even if objectivity can be secured via one of the paths sketched above, there still remains the question central to step two, namely, how do we get from aesthetic facts to ethical prescriptions—as Rolston puts it, from beauty to duty?

This is a fair question, and simply asking it does not commit one to what some will see as an implied and dangerous "aestheticism," in which the

10. Carlson discusses the principle in (2009, 47).

aesthetic and the ethical inhabit “absolutely separate and distinct realms.”¹¹ To the contrary, it is fair to insist that step two of the inference problem poses a genuine challenge, but without presuming that the challenge cannot be met.

One approach adopted by received view advocates is to address step two obliquely by looking first at some more specific questions about the duty to preserve challenging and difficult landscapes such as swamps or prairies. Here, the challenge is to find ways to appreciate aesthetically “unscenic” environments.¹² But the further question about our duty to preserve challenging environments is set aside in order to address the more specific issue concerning how to locate and attribute positive aesthetic value to them. Thus although the received view does go some distance toward providing a theory for aesthetic appreciation and preservation of “unscenic” environments like swamps and prairies, the approach does not extend comfortably to the degraded environments of the Ironbound. To some extent, this problem is bound to plague any cognitivist theory.

A way to avoid this problem is to move from talk about ethical duties to talk about the motivational force that possession of aesthetic properties can provide. Ned Hettinger argues convincingly that philosophical aesthetics, perhaps more than philosophical ethics, can play a practical, motivational role. He cites other received view advocates as sympathetic to this:

[J. Baird] Callicott and Janna Thompson both argue that aesthetics has a special role to play, because, unlike moral duty—something people feel to be demanding and burdensome—aesthetics can seduce us and appeal to our capacity to love and cherish. Beauty motivates more than duty, for it moves our emotions in ways abstract ethical reasoning does not. Holmes Rolston makes the similar point that while ethics commands aesthetics entices. (2005, 8n)

This appears to close a gap between the positive value that cognitivists find in unscenic environments and the motivating force of beauty—something that goes a long way toward solving step two of the inference problem. But there remains a gap nevertheless.

The Ironbound District of Newark has significant negative aesthetic value, despite the fact that it is one of the most densely populated urban areas in the state. So what? The point is not that the inference problem poses an insuperable challenge to the received view, but rather that it is a challenge so far unmet by that view. The case of the Ironbound District helps to illustrate this point. As discussed above, the received view does provide ways of securing objectivity for our judgments that, for example, the urban environment we encounter from the comfort of our seats in the tour bus has a variety of negative aesthetic qualities. But the position provides little guidance as to why this should matter

11. See Carlson (2009, 64–65).

12. See, for example, Saito (1998b).

to us, or what we should do in response. Indeed, the received view might even invite us to seek the epistemic, emotional, or imaginative wherewithal that facilitates our stepping back to adopt a detached point of view with respect to the Ironbound's many aesthetic horrors and to then formulate a *positive* assessment instead. ("I love horror movies!") It is true that a cognitive view could avoid this worry by embracing the thesis that positive aesthetic value in the case of urban environments is equivalent to positive functional fit (and similarly for negative aesthetic value).¹³ But this would be to force aesthetic appreciation into the mold of functional appreciation. This is *prima facie* implausible, but it also forces received view advocates away from the traditional definition of the aesthetic, which they typically want to retain. More on this below, but for now, if there is a position that does offer a natural solution to the inference problem, that position is preferable, at least on those grounds.

V. Aesthetics of Engagement as an Alternative Solution

In a remarkably comprehensive series of articles and books, Arnold Berleant has developed an alternative approach to AAE—the participatory engagement model—which might fruitfully be extended to urban environments like the Ironbound in a way that makes it preferable to the received view. The most important point of departure from the received view, and the one relevant to the present discussion, is his apparent rejection of the objectivity desideratum mentioned above, and an embrace of a consequent subjectivity. But, because he is also careful to reject what he calls "subjectivism,"¹⁴ his position constitutes an important *via media* that might serve to finesse the challenge posed by the inference problem. Important for my purposes here, the participatory engagement model is especially well-suited as a model of AAE that can be applied to the appreciation of urban environments such as the Ironbound District, which are at issue in the rapidly growing field of environmental justice.

Berleant's participatory engagement model of aesthetic appreciation:

- rejects any Cartesian subject-object split:

[A] world in which subjectivity and objectivity are inconceivable as such, or at the very least fused into a continuity, is very much like the experience of appreciative engagement. We have here a unity, not a duality. (2007, 317)

- denies that aesthetic experience is essentially disinterested, and rather, suggests a mutual participation of perceiver and object that is continuous with practical, cultural, and historical interests. (1992, 146)

13. See Carlson (2001), and Parsons and Carlson (2008).

14. He apparently has in mind the kind of Cartesian subjectivism that leads ultimately, he believes, to mind-body dualism, and idealism or skepticism. See for example his remarks in (1992, 150, and 204, n10).

- embraces the multi-modal, multi-sensuous nature of aesthetic experience, especially in the case of AAE:

I not only see, hear, touch, and smell the places I move through: I grasp them with my feet and hands, I taste them in the air I draw in, I even adjust the way I hold and balance my body to the contours of the land and the texture of the ground under my feet. (1992, 28)

- and calls for a unified or universal aesthetics that encompasses experience of art and nature alike.

In contrast to a piecemeal approach to “two dissimilar types of phenomena, one concerning art and another nature,” the engaged approach appeals to “a single all-embracing kind of experience, which requires a comprehensive theory to accommodate it” (Berleant 1992, 161).

On the engagement model, AAE is not “contemplation but total engagement, a sensory immersion in the natural world that reaches the still-uncommon experience of unity” (Berleant 1992, 170).¹⁵ This places aesthetics at the heart of philosophy “by moving toward a naturalizing of aesthetics, . . . its association and continuity with other regions of experience, and toward identifying the aesthetic as a critical dimension of the value that binds together the many domains of the human world” (1992, 161).

VI. How the Engagement Model Addresses the Inference Problem

Step One

The fundamental notion is *aesthetic experience*. We must, Berleant says, “Replace the aesthetic of objects with an aesthetic of experience” (1992, 118),¹⁶ by which he advocates a move away from an aesthetics based on a subject-object dichotomy. Engagement and participation, inclusive of subject and object, provide the means for making manifest in experience the aesthetic qualities of all kinds of environments, including museums, natural landscapes, and urban areas. Aesthetic appreciation is then spelled out in terms of aesthetic engagement. Aesthetic appreciation is experience of aesthetic engagement (118), namely, perceptual engagement, an activity which broaches the subject-object divide:

[E]xperience is perceptual . . . and it carries the central trait of the aesthetic. Aesthetic experience involves an awareness of the sensory, the qualitative aspect of things, however we order, relate and interpret them. Aesthetic quality thus suffuses all experience. . . . (118)

15. Parsons (2008, 85–86) discusses this passage.

16. Berleant is speaking here about the aesthetic appreciation of art, but it is clear that the same is to apply in the case of environments.

Engagement . . . transcends the usual limits of subject and object, encouraging a mutuality of participation in the aesthetic situation that joins both art object and perceiver within a unified domain. (158)

The received view recommends that we distinguish aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic properties and then provide some metaphysical story about how the two kinds of properties are related. This typically involves embracing the traditional analysis of “aesthetic” with its appeal to disinterested contemplation, even though many authors, most famously George Dickie (1964), have argued vigorously and compelling against this sort of analysis.

The engagement model, by contrast, doesn’t so much offer an analysis of aesthetic properties as it does insight into a pattern, or a cluster of characteristics—Berleant calls it a “syndrome” (2007, 316)—inclusive of “cognitive, cultural and personal influences” on perceptual experience of things possessing aesthetic properties.

What the engagement model brings to the table is that it turns into a positive virtue of theoretical aesthetics what might otherwise be seen as a commonsense platitude, namely, that an object’s or a person’s or a situation’s or an environment’s aesthetic properties become increasingly manifest in proportion to our engagement with it. The aesthetic properties of a difficult work of fiction such as *Ulysses* are apparent only to the attentive and active reader who contributes “to the work’s coherence by discerning the order hidden amid the thick flow of events and thoughts” (Berleant 1991, 29).¹⁷ In the case of environments,

We bring aesthetic appreciation to environment when we exclaim over the fragile beauty of a yellow starflower in the spring woods, admire the rolling expanse of a broad landscape, watch the luminous progression of a sunset with silent wonder, or guide our car along a road as it curves through the hills that border a river valley. Aesthetic ideas enter in our attempts to understand such experiences, as well as those occasions when we are awed by the crashing waves on a stormy Maine shore, by the powerful torrents of water surging over Niagara Falls, or by a giant redwood in a California valley towering four hundred feet above us. Applying concepts such as beauty, appreciation and sublimity to environment forces us to rethink our basic assumptions about what constitutes appreciation, a work of art, creation and, indeed, human experience in general. The usual explanations that were formulated in relation to the arts fail to respond to the demand of environmental experience. (Berleant 1992, 1-2)

Some aesthetic properties of environments simply are not accessible from the point of view of detached, disinterested, disengaged contemplators. This is abundantly evident in the kinds of environments, like the Ironbound District, which exercise current thinkers working in environmental justice. The

17. Discussed by Parsons (2008, 84).

appropriate way to approach the Ironbound aesthetically is not to enter into a detached state of disinterested contemplation, but rather to engage the full range of aesthetic qualities, to “order, relate and interpret them,” by way of a “mutuality of participation,” that joins “object and perceiver within a unified domain.” This is presumably why Ironbound environmental justice tourists are invited to engage their full range of perceptual capacities by descending from the bus at various points along the tour, such as the infamous “Chemical Row” on Doremus Avenue, where thousands of pounds of chemicals, including benzene, ammonia, methanol, and copper, are emitted annually into the atmosphere within one mile of schools and public housing (Ironbound Community Corp. 2010b). Upon exiting the tour bus, visitors can take in a 360-degree view that includes the razor wire atop the giant wall enclosing the Essex County Correctional Facility, the ominous smoke billowing from the massive Convanta Energy garbage incinerator just up the road at Raymond Ave, the massive cargo ships in the adjacent port, and the innumerable airplanes arriving and departing from Newark Liberty airport just beyond the rumbling traffic on the elevated I-95. The constant rumble of semis, airplanes, and shipyards is accompanied by a smorgasbord of curious odors. It is impossible to be an aesthetic anti-realist along Chemical Row.

So the engaged aesthetician is perfectly happy to be a realist about aesthetic properties in the way that seems to be required for step one of the inference problem: the horrors of Chemical Row and the isolating and disturbing qualities of the abandoned Ballantine Brewery are really there. But they are available only to the engaged participant. The cognitive, emotional-response, and imagination models also provide a basis for realism because they provide their own strategies for making the aesthetic manifest in experience. But none of these models really provides a fully complete analysis of the “aesthetic” on its own, something evidenced in the ongoing discussions and debates among the competing advocates of those positions. The engagement model doesn’t provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an experience’s being an aesthetic one either; nevertheless, it too provides a strategy for understanding the aesthetic and for making the aesthetic manifest in experience. And it fares even better because it more obviously points to the kind of values relevant to the sticky questions of environmental justice at issue in such places as the Ironbound in Newark. More on this below.

Step Two

Value judgments . . . must be made from inside, for all discriminations occur within a context and not as the impersonal discovery of a disengaged observer. (Berleant 1992, 9)

I have been arguing that the received view must face up to the inference problem in a way that so far it has not. I have argued further that it is difficult

to see how the received view can address the second step of the inference. I now want to show how Berleant's engagement model provides a more natural account of how to make this step and thus how more naturally to solve the inference problem.

By extending appreciation to nature in all its cultural manifestations, the entire sensible world is included within the purview of aesthetics. This hardly makes the world more beautiful; if anything, it confronts us with the failures of taste and judgment that have marked most industrial and commercial activities in this century. But if environment, which is nature as we live it, can have aesthetic value, so then can actions be condemned that ignore that value. A universal aesthetic is therefore an aesthetic of the universe, and it offers us a goal to work for as well as a standard by which to judge our success. (Berleant 1992, 174-5)

The engaged aesthetics for urban environments offers to those concerned with environmental justice a way of understanding and promoting the sources of value central to being human. These sources are found primarily in sensory awareness, or "the qualitative sensibility that activates and directs perception" (Berleant 1992, 85). Aesthetic experience, insofar as it encompasses the "full range of perceptual experience at the center of value" (79) is itself a part of human flourishing, and the thus the conditions that foster such experience share and promote that value.

These conditions, Berleant says, are the ones that promote "perceptual awareness of a person as an embodied consciousness" whose "awareness resonates" with historical, cultural, social, communal and personal meanings, and consequences (79). As such, aesthetic appreciation of environments, especially urban environments, is necessarily active, participatory, and engaged. Perceivers in the urban environment and other environmental justice settings are actors, not disinterested, disengaged, or passive observers, but rather active, engaged participants. City-dwellers' capacity to realize the full range of human experience depends in part, obviously, on their surroundings, and thus the physical setting of an urban environment, which "determines the opportunities for people's movement and the conditions of their interactions" (85) and marks out the possibilities and the limits of human flourishing there. Because cities hold the greatest possibility for creating an environment that is "rich in aesthetic interest and values" (86) and which "encourages the productive and vitalizing qualities of collective life—curiosity, activity, and human satisfaction and fulfillment" (81), the aesthetics of urban environments is directly and crucially important for both environmental ethics and environmental justice in the urban setting.

The social and environmental conditions that stand in the way of pursuing "productive and vitalizing qualities of life" in places like the Ironbound District thereby pose the central challenge for the pursuit of environmental justice. The greatest obstacle to realizing this goal is what Berleant calls "environmental

oppression,” by which he has in mind just the kinds of impediments to human flourishing on view in the EJ tour of the Ironbound: air and noise pollution, crowding, and alienation (83). The solution is to promote realization of the conditions under which humans may engage with their urban surroundings, where these are understood not just as “physical arrangements” but as “physical presences felt kinesthetically by the body” (85). Persons and their urban environment constitute an organic whole: “This is the essential reciprocity of people and place, and the aesthetics of environment rests on a perceptual engagement between them” (91). Because of this essential reciprocity, Berleant concludes therefore that “more strikingly and insistently than in any other case, the aesthetic of the city is an aesthetic of engagement” (90).

The aesthetics of engagement brings to the table a way to bridge the gap from beauty to duty. Engaged in the full range of human perceptual experience, we are enticed by the aesthetic, not as a trifling amenity, but as a profound element of what it is to be fully human. Only then are we in a position to be moved by the ethical command of duty. Ethics commands; aesthetics entices. Engaged experience fosters the requisite values: “an aesthetic encounter is a way to approach environmental education by helping to cultivate feelings of care and responsibility” (2005, 57). And it is these feelings of care and responsibility that move us to action. These, after all, constitute the *raison d’être* of the environmental justice tour of the Ironbound.

VII. Objections

Advocates of the received view have been sharply critical of the engagement model.¹⁸ Critics concentrate on three perceived problems: the absence of an analysis of “aesthetic,” an inordinate emphasis on subjectivity, and failure to address what I have identified as the inference problem. The three issues are closely related. I discuss them in order.

The idea is that if, as I have suggested for cases such as the Ironbound District, we accept participatory engagement as the model for aesthetic appreciation and reject the traditional notion of disinterested contemplation, we are left with no way to distinguish between engaged experiences that are aesthetic, and engaged experiences that are not. More simply, engagement is neither necessary nor sufficient for aesthetic experience, and thus the account is unenlightening. Solving a logic problem is certainly engaging, but most people wouldn’t call it an aesthetic experience. Similarly, disinterested contemplation of the towering “Container City,” even from afar, is a mundane but clear example of an aesthetic experience, even if that experience does not include participatory engagement. The general problem posed is thus that the engagement account fails to capture the relevance of environmental aesthetics

18. See, for example, Carlson (1993), (2006, 416–27), and (2009, 30–31, 47–48); Budd (2002, 111–12); and Parsons (2008, 89–94).

for environmental justice because the account fails right from the start as an account of the aesthetic in general.

This is an important and fair criticism, and Berleant has addressed it head-on in various places.¹⁹ To the complaint that “participatory engagement” fails as an analysis for “aesthetic,” Berleant contends that he is not working within an essentialist metaphysics, and that therefore the failure to identify a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of the aesthetic (“a single, unique feature”) does not constitute a failed logical analysis, but rather, signals a difference in ontology, which is “an issue of a very different sort” (2007, 316). Instead, we should think of the aesthetic as “intrinsic perception that is focused, intense, and fraught with significance,” (Berleant and Hepburn 2003) characterized by “a pervasive perceptual intensity informed by associations with memory and by knowledge” (Berleant 1994, 238). This doesn’t require the traditional appeal to Kantian disinterestedness, for although this kind of experience is distinct from “social, practical, religious, or cognitive” experiences, the latter are distinct but “often conjoined with the aesthetic” (Berleant and Hepburn 2003). Understood in this way, we “return art and the aesthetic to the place it has occupied in most human cultures throughout most of human history” (Berleant 1994, 238). Furthermore, such a return to a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic provides the means for meeting the “unified aesthetics” requirement mentioned in the introduction. Participatory aesthetic engagement is, as it should be, ultimately part of the everyday activity constitutive of a good life.

The second objection is that the engagement model overemphasizes the importance of subjectivity, with the result that aesthetic appreciation is more concerned with subjective states of appreciators than with the objects of appreciation themselves. This in turn makes it hard to see how, as Carlson puts it, “any meaningful degree of objectivity concerning such appreciation and judgment can be supported by the engagement model of aesthetic experience” (2006, 425). To put the objection a slightly different way, the “ineffability of the experience of engagement”—a result of its emphasis on subjective experience—renders such experience “resistant to description” and thus undermines its capacity to serve as the basis for critical aesthetic assessments (Parsons 2008, 90).

This too is an important criticism, and again the advocate of the engagement model has a response. The traditional way of dividing up the world into subjects and objects inevitably results in the complaint that there is no way to get the two back together. As a result, camps divide into those who choose one side at the expense of the other. Berleant declines to accept the metaphysical worldview that requires dividing up the world in this way. Instead,

19. The position is defended throughout Berleant’s considerable opus, but some exchanges that zero-in directly on the issue here include his (2007) and (1994), as well as Berleant and Hepburn (2003).

We find in an aesthetic encounter a complex situation of interacting and interpenetrating features, not an appreciative subject confronting an art object. (2007, 317)

We are immersed in the world, which at the same time is a world transmuted by human agency. And, like Spinoza, we come to discover the ultimate unity of nature and to recognize [that] the human place is a part of the natural world. This is all too easy to overlook in the urbanized culture of the developed world. (2005, 66)

This mutes, at least initially, the charge that the engagement model rests on a dangerous appeal to subjectivity. In fact, as should be abundantly obvious, the whole point of an environmental justice tour is to place otherwise ignorant citizens in the position to engage meaningfully with the kinds of environmental challenges experienced daily by the inhabitants of stricken areas such as the Ironbound. This is fostered more naturally by participatory engagement than by disinterested contemplation.

Glenn Parsons voices a third, related objection, and the one most relevant to the question of environmental justice, namely, that the engagement model has no way of solving, as I've been calling it, the inference problem:

According to some, it is a virtue in a view of the aesthetic appreciation of nature if that view allows aesthetic value to be used in justifying the preservation of a threatened natural area. It is difficult, however, to claim this virtue for the engaged aesthetic. (Parsons 2008, 90)²⁰

The implication is that the received view does not have this problem. However, this third objection is not entirely well-grounded. As discussed just above, the received view places a premium on objectivity, and this has the advantage of ensuring that appreciation is directed at the world and its constituents themselves, rather than at the internal subjective states of appreciators. This, in turn, serves to underwrite subsequent claims about ethical obligations, which, if they are to have any genuine motivational force, must be grounded in objectivity. It is then argued that aesthetics plays a motivational role, not by directing rational arguments toward ethical obligations, but instead by “enticing,” “seducing,” and “moving our emotions” “in ways abstract ethical reasoning does not” (Rolston 2002, 131).

Why accept the received view? Because its appeal to objectivity underwrites the inference from beauty to duty: only if aesthetic judgments are objective does a “general moral obligation” arise from them.²¹ But then why

20. The criticism is directed at Cheryl Foster's (1998) discussion of the engagement model, but it is clear from the context that the critique is meant to extend to any version of the model.

21. See Thompson (1995), and Carlson (2009, 46-9).

accept that we have general moral obligations, such as the one to promote restoration and amelioration of the egregious environmental degradation in the Ironbound? Because that obligation is an upshot of the objectivity secured by the received view. But in that case we simply turn a full explanatory circle.

The complaint is that the engagement model flounders regrettably in subjectivity, with the consequence that it cannot take seriously the need for objectively grounded ethical judgments and prescriptions. But as Berleant takes pains to argue, the engagement model aims to finesse this point by avoiding the received view's metaphysical commitment to a subject-object distinction in the first place. This has the advantage of blurring the need to bridge the inferential gap between subjective aesthetic states and objective ethical duties. Of course, one could reply that this metaphysical choice is not justified on independent grounds, and that the choice is arbitrary. But then the advocate of the engagement model can reply that critics fall back into the subject-object dichotomy at their own peril, since as we've seen, that simply reopens the inference problem, and this cannot be solved without begging the question in favor of the received view.

VIII. Conclusion

Responding to the call to action from the growing environmental justice movement requires of theorists working in environmental aesthetics that they provide the theoretical means for connecting the aesthetics of environments to the ethics of environments. Doing so requires addressing what I have identified as "the inference problem," and I have argued that the received view—widely held if not widely officially embraced—runs head-first into this problem. I have also argued that an alternative position, the engaged model of environmental aesthetics developed by Arnold Berleant, fares much better on this front. I conclude that the best way to approach the ethical duties that have begun to arise from within the blossoming field of environmental justice is not by way of the received view's commitment to disinterested and distanced objectivity, but by way of the participatory engagement that fosters a commitment to the values, especially the aesthetic values, that pervade the entire range of human experience. Adopting this approach would place us in a position, both aesthetically and ethically, to address the various environmental joys and horrors of such places as we experience on the environmental justice tour of the Ironbound District in Newark.

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