

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Disturbing Nature's Beauty: Environmental Aesthetics in a New Ecological Paradigm

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An ecological paradigm shift from the “balance of nature” to the “flux of nature” changes the way we aesthetically appreciate nature if we adopt scientific cognitivism—the view that aesthetic appreciation of nature must be informed by scientific knowledge.

Ecological science is grounded in metaphors: nature is a divine order, a machine, an organism, a community, or a cybernetic system. These metaphors stimulate and guide scientific practice, but are at most useful fictions in terms of how they reflect the values underlying a paradigm. Aesthetic judgments are intersubjectively correct in reference to the currently dominant ecological paradigm. Contemporary ecology is a science driven more by aesthetic than metaphysical considerations.

The “framing problem,” is the problem that natural environments are not discrete objects, so knowing what to focus on aesthetically is difficult. The “fusion problem” is the problem of how to fuse the sensory aspect of aesthetic appreciation with highly theoretical scientific knowledge. I resolve these two problems by defending a normative version of the theory-laden observation thesis.

Positive aesthetics is the view that insofar as nature is untouched by humans, it is always beautiful and never ugly. I defend an amended and updated version of positive aesthetics that is consistent with the central elements of contemporary ecology, and emphasize the heuristic, exegetical, and pedagogical roles aesthetic qualities play in ecological science.

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