

Aesthetic experiences as evidence of biodiversity's final value

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In this essay, I argue that biodiversity has final value as the aesthetic experience that an object provides is evidence for its final value. The precise description of this final value is an open question, as aestheticists debate the existence of aesthetic properties. Nevertheless, if one accepts that beauty exists, one could argue that biodiversity is beautiful, and therefore has final value, as evident from the aesthetic experiences which the object itself provides. Some might argue that my argument is observer-dependent, and thus fails to show that the object itself has final value, since my approach ultimately rests on an observer's perception. I will defend my argument in response to this objection by arguing that an object's capacity to provide aesthetic experiences persists in a world where there will never be any observers to perceive said object (i.e. that my claim will pass the isolation test). Thus, in this essay, I aim to give a nonconstructive "proof" of biodiversity's final value. First, I will define the key terms involved in my argument, such as Stecker's aesthetic experiences, and Korsgaard's final value (and her two distinctions of goodness). Second, I will construct my argument for the aesthetic experience that biodiversity provides. Third, I will defend my claim in response to those who might argue that my claim is mistaken, and that biodiversity's value is extrinsic and instrumental. To close, I will note the limitations of my argument, e.g. the lack of consensus in environmental aesthetics as to which exactly is the object of our perception, and the lack of consensus of whether aesthetic properties exist, and show that despite these open questions, I will have successfully demonstrated that biodiversity has final value.

Korsgaard (1983) argues for two distinctions of goodness: intrinsic/extrinsic goodness, and final/instrumental goodness (p. 169). Korsgaard argues that if an object is

valued "for its own sake", the object has final value (p. 170). Likewise, if an object is valued "for the sake of something else", then it is instrumentally good (p. 170). This is her final/instrumental goodness distinction. In contrast, her intrinsic/extrinsic value goodness is about where the object's value resides. If the object is valuable by itself (i.e. in isolation), then it is intrinsically good (p. 170). If the object derives value from "some other source", it is extrinsically good (p. 170). Thus, while some appropriately equate the two, these distinctions serve as the basis of my argument.

Stecker (2019) defines aesthetic experiences as "the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience" (p. 23). Stecker then argues that we need not decide whether there is a correct or objective definition of aesthetic value (p. 20). He argues that we can choose a definition which suits our project, and that we should be aware of the limitations of our choice definition and our act of choosing. He notes that aesthetic value can be "the value of a type of experience" (p. 21), which is subjective (p. 22), as someone is required to value the experience before the experience itself has aesthetic value. He also notes that "[a]esthetic value is a 'first order' value that is not constituted by other values" (p. 17).

Morrow (2024) takes biodiversity to be "the number and variety of species", or approximately the "species richness" in a specific domain (p. 3). She notes that the use of species richness invites debates and concerns, as it might not be the best proxy for diversity (p. 3). Regardless, she accepts it for simplicity. I will now construct my argument using these definitions.

Does biodiversity give rise to aesthetic experiences? Morrow notes that some find biodiversity to be "inspiring, complex, interesting, and perspective-inducing, regardless of its usefulness" (p. 8-9). Thus, because we can claim that biodiversity is interesting, we acknowledge our ability to attend to biodiversity for its own sake, and not for the sake of

anything else. Thus, aesthetic experiences do arise from biodiversity. One might disagree, arguing that we are actually attending to the aesthetic experience itself, and not the object which gives rise to said experience. I argue that this objection is still within Stecker's definition of an aesthetic experience, as one need only attend to the experience for it to be a successful aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, I argue that one can attend to both the experience and the object in question, simultaneously. For example, one might derive wonder and intrigue from biodiversity, as one is captivated by the concept itself, and the instance of it. Yes, one could be attending to one's pleasure/wonder derived from the experience, but that does not necessarily detract from one's attendance to the object itself. Note that Stecker's definition does not require us to derive pleasure, or any particular response, from the experience for it to be an aesthetic experience. Thus, if my experience of biodiversity is mundane, it would still be an aesthetic experience, and hence there would be nothing to distract me from attending to biodiversity (or the instantiation of it) for its own sake. Thus, as long as one is attending to biodiversity appropriately, one would generate an aesthetic experience.

Now, I will argue that aesthetic experiences show that biodiversity has final value. I argue that the notion of attending to biodiversity for its own sake aligns with Korsgaard's definition of final value. Specifically, I argue that we attend to biodiversity because it has final value. Suppose we value an object for its own sake. This provides the basis on which we generate aesthetic experiences. We have reason to attend to the object for its own sake if it has final value. Thus, $p \text{ iff } q$; aesthetic experiences arise from biodiversity if and only if it has final value. What would motivate us to attend to that which only has instrumental value, for its own sake? The fact that we seek out aesthetic experiences and attend to objects for its own sake is a fitting response to an object's final value—we act with reason when we attend to something for its own sake. I acknowledge that one could make this claim more precise by

arguing that biodiversity is beautiful, where beauty is an aesthetic property, and thus we value something for its own sake. One could then object to this claim, arguing that we are attending to biodiversity for the sake of beauty, and not for the sake of biodiversity itself. One could counter this objection by arguing that we genuinely attend to objects for their own sake, because they are beautiful. Beauty is the motivating reason as to why we fittingly attend to an object. I take a noncommittal stance to this approach, as I refer to Stecker's discussion of aesthetic properties. Some argue that the aesthetic value of an object should be referred to under a framework of aesthetic properties (i.e. in reference to and on the basis of e.g. beauty; p. 34). Stecker argues that his discussion of aesthetic experiences is entirely compatible with, or wholly subsumes the discussions of aesthetic properties (p. 35). Thus, one need only discuss aesthetic experiences when discussing the value of objects. Thus, I am satisfied with simply arguing that we act with good reason when we attend to objects for its own sake, without specifying precisely what these reasons are.

Where does the value of biodiversity reside? It would be strange to claim that biodiversity is extrinsically valuable, i.e. that biodiversity derives its value from something else, as what would that something else be? Species richness is a property of a set which contains multiple species. Its constituents do not possess the property of biodiversity. Thus, species richness arises from a relation between species. More conventionally, if we took a set containing multiple species, and applied the isolation test, the property of biodiversity resides entirely within this set. That is, evident from this isolation test is that the property persists in isolation, and does not appeal to anything else. Thus, if biodiversity has value, it must be intrinsically valuable, and not extrinsically valuable.

Some might argue that my approach is observer-dependent, thus showing that aesthetic experience is not genuine evidence for an object's intrinsic and final value. They might say that observers are necessary for aesthetic experiences to arise. After all, perception

requires an observer. An experience requires someone to experience the experience. I disagree with their main claim. If we apply the isolation test to an object which gives rise to aesthetic experiences, it retains its capacity to give rise to aesthetic experiences. This is because final and intrinsic value persists in isolation. Even in a world with no observers, with no one to value anything, the object itself still is valuable. Thus, I accept that we have evidence only because of observers' perception. Thus, there is nothing problematic about my approach being observer-centric. However, one might argue that value is only derived from humans, or from observation. More specifically, one might deny the existence of final value, or intrinsic value. Thus, one might claim that action is required to bring about instrumental and extrinsic value. Accordingly, they would argue that our aesthetic experience is a response to an object's instrumental and extrinsic value. I find this response strange. Consider rubbish in the ocean. What use does it have to us? What extrinsic value does it have? Its harm to the environment is an intrinsic property. The fact that we can attend to anything, including a piece of rubbish for its own sake shows that final value exists. Why else would we attend to rubbish, if one argues that it is only extrinsically and instrumentally valuable? Unless one denies our ability to attend to something for its own sake outright, I do not see the force of this objection. Alternatively, I could also appeal to Kant's framework where goodwill is the only intrinsic goodness, or any other framework which argues for the existence of at least one intrinsic goodness, and thus have the underlying argument that intrinsic and final value exists. Thus, the burden is on them to supply a counter (i.e. to show that final and intrinsic value does not exist).

I note the limitations and nature of my argument. I note that I have not explicitly stated what biodiversity's final value is, or given a precise, detailed and comprehensive account of aesthetic experiences which arise from biodiversity, and the reasons which motivates us to attend to it. My argument is a nonconstructive "proof". This vagueness, I

argue, is simply a consequence of the many open questions in aesthetics. I also note the open questions regarding aesthetic objects in environmental aesthetics. For instance, it is uncertain whether we should adopt an environmental model, or an impression model, &c, when making precise what exactly we are attending to when we look at e.g. Mount Fuji (see (Stecker, 2019, p. 110) for more). Our definition of biodiversity is implicated by this unsettled discussion. Nevertheless, I have shown that biodiversity does have final value, given our aesthetic experiences of it.

References

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