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NATURE, KANT, AND GOD

Gordon Graham

This paper draws on some lines of thought in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to construct an aesthetic counterpart to the moral argument for the existence of God that Kant formulates in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The paper offers this aesthetic version as a theistic way of explaining how the natural world can be thought valuable independently of human desires and purposes. It further argues that such an argument must commend itself to anyone who is as deeply committed to the preservation of nature as to the promotion of justice.

I

The environmental movement has attained moral and political prominence across the globe with astonishing speed. Accompanying the call to environmental responsibility is the search for a philosophy to undergird it. An early contributor to this search, J. Baird Callicott, observed that "the central and most recalcitrant problem for environmental ethics is the problem of constructing an adequate theory of intrinsic value for nonhuman entities and for nature as a whole."¹ It is easy to see why this question is crucial. There are undoubtedly many human benefits to be wrung from nature, and simple prudence endorses an attitude of intelligent stewardship as a counter to pollution and wastefulness. But environmentalists have generally looked beyond simple stewardship and have sought to root attitudes to nature on what they sense to be its *intrinsic* value.

Just how we should conceive of "intrinsic" value is a complex philosophical issue. Is intrinsic value the same as "good in itself?" Are intrinsically valuable things always good in themselves, or is their goodness conditional upon the ends to which they are put? These and related questions have generated a very considerable philosophical literature.² At a minimum, however, we can say that intrinsic value is to be contrasted with instrumental value in just this sense: intrinsic value both transcends and puts limits on the uses human beings may make of it. To say that the

¹Callicott, "Intrinsic Value," 257.

²See for instance, Harman, "Toward a Theory of Intrinsic Value"; Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness"; Hurka, "Two Kinds of Organic Unity"; Wielenberg, "Goodness without Qualification"; and Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value."



natural world has intrinsic value, then, is to say that it has a value other than its capacity to serve human ends.

However deep-seated the intuition that nature has intrinsic value in this sense, on inspection it often turns out that attempts to articulate and defend it do in the end rely on connecting the natural world with human well-being. Currently, the commonest and most persuasive argument in favor of environmental responsibility makes appeal to anticipated ecological crises—notably global warming, coastal flooding, environmental pollution, soil erosion—and it lays the emphasis firmly on concern for future generations. These two features—the invocation of crisis and the focus on a relatively distant future—can undoubtedly serve as a powerful counter to the claims of short- or even medium-term material benefit. They prompt us to base our deliberations on considerations beyond the calculable economic and technological advantages that can be obtained from the exploitation of, for instance, fossil fuels, tracts of virgin forest, potentially arable land, or deep sea fishing grounds. Nevertheless, though the welfare of future generations wholly unknown to us provides a perspective that may be said to look beyond our customary moral parameters and to call for a rather wide-ranging conception of responsibility, insofar as it is grounded in future *human* benefit, it still qualifies as “shallow” rather than “deep” ecology, to employ Arne Naess’s useful distinction.³

In seeking to avoid such “shallowness,” an alternative approach rests its case on the beauty, grandeur and profusion of the natural world (what I shall henceforth call its “magnificence”). Of course, to the extent that this approach grounds the value of natural beauty in human recreation and pleasure—wildlife tourism, arctic cruises and the like—it too fails to transcend the limits of anthropocentrism, and it has the further weakness that, since it need make no appeal to any ecological crisis, it has much less traction in contemporary moral and political debate. Yet for the purposes of this paper, a focus on nature’s magnificence is philosophically more promising, and more interesting, than environmental causes centering on impending disasters and the human suffering that will flow from them.

The conviction that natural magnificence has intrinsic value is for the most part a matter of intuition, and intuitionism of any kind invites philosophical suspicion, because appeals to “intuition” so easily mask simple prejudices. At the same time, it is plausible to hold that with respect to certain matters, the very attempt to explain or defend their value is deeply misguided. Consider, for instance, the innocence of children. The person who sees nothing wrong with lewd drawings of children, provided no rights are violated or harm done, thereby displays a kind of insensitivity that in all likelihood no argument could remedy. More importantly, any attempt to supply an argument could itself be regarded as too great a

³Naess, “Shallow and Deep.”

concession to depravity, because it supposes that the value of innocence is *derived* from something else. And that is precisely the supposition that those who value the innocence of children want to resist. A similar point, without the language of depravity perhaps, might be made about nature's magnificence. The person who requires an explanation as to why such magnificence should be valued, it could be said, thereby exhibits the mind of the vandal, someone already deficient in the sensibility that matters. This is someone to whom no persuasive explanation can be given, and to whom none should be offered. If they remain unmoved by landscape, seascape, and so on, then the only available argument is one that points away from nature to its *parasitic* benefits—the profits of ecotourism or the sale of cameras, for example. But these arise from the fact that other people relish such things.

Whether or not this defense of intuitionism is correct, it does seem to be the case that the urge to preserve natural magnificence, and to resist its destruction, rests very largely on a basic evaluation that people have come to share, rather than relying on a calculation about anticipated future benefit. It is certainly possible to be or to become hardened or indifferent to natural magnificence. Moreover, people can reasonably disagree about just what things do and do not possess it. Nevertheless, it is comparatively easy to find clear instances in which we can both uncover and rely on a *sensus communis* about the value and importance of nature in some of its aspects. The wholesale slaughter of African elephants, the near extinction of the Siberian tiger, and the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef are widely regarded as serious losses by people who are ignorant of the long-term consequences of these losses. And this attitude persists even in those cases where it can be shown that human welfare is largely unaffected. Perhaps truly disastrous prospects for human life might rightly compel us, reluctantly, to accept such losses. Nevertheless, this extreme possibility is compatible with holding that in the normal case the value of natural magnificence cannot properly be offset or compensated for by increased medical or economic benefits. It is in virtue of this common, basic and non-instrumental attitude that we may speak of the magnificence of nature having *transcendent* value, a value, that is to say, that is not derived from human good and bad. Still, even those who could not be accused of a vandalistic attitude to nature, or indifference to its beauty and magnificence, might reasonably ask for some account of this intrinsic value. The reasonableness of this request explains the centrality of the question for environmental ethics. How is such an account to be given?

II

The previous paragraph employed the expression "*sensus communis*," a term that makes a well known appearance in Kant's third critique—the *Critique of Judgment*. For the larger part of this work, Kant is concerned with the subject of beauty and its relation to art, but in an important

appendix he returns to a topic that figures prominently in the second *Critique*, namely, arguments for the existence of God. Kant aims to undermine the traditional ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments and to offer a moral argument in their place.

This new argument has three features that are of special significance for my purposes. First, it grounds religious faith in practical rather than speculative or theoretical reason. That is to say, it connects the existence of God with rightness and the rationality of *action*, rather than with truth and the rationality of *belief*. Second, the argument takes as its starting point an intuitive conviction—that the demands of the moral law are inescapable. Third, here (as elsewhere) Kant's purpose is to uncover presuppositions necessarily required by practical rationality, rather than to draw inferences validated by deductive, or inductive, reasoning.

Despite the fact that Kant's later, and lengthier, elaboration of this moral argument is to be found in the appendix to a book devoted for the most part to aesthetics, the connection between the two is, at best, something towards which he merely gestures. On a straightforward reading, the main text's treatment of taste, beauty, imagination, genius, and so on, seems largely independent of the arguments about God that follow in the appendix. At the same time, occasional remarks suggest the possibility of forging a rather closer connection between the two. If the existence of God is a necessary presupposition required to validate our basic conviction that the moral law is inescapable, might it not also be the case that the existence of God is a necessary presupposition required to validate our basic conviction about the magnificence of nature? My aim in this paper is to explore precisely this question, and to ask whether a Kantian argument might provide an answer to environmental ethics' central question. Plainly, the cogency of this question rests upon the validity of Kant's moral argument—or rather, on the supposition that an argument of the kind that Kant elaborates could be valid, even if the specific version he offers us is not. For my own part, I believe that there is indeed a valid version of the moral argument,⁴ but it is evidently beyond the scope of this paper to defend such a contention. Instead, I shall be concerned solely with the issue of whether or not there could be an aesthetic parallel to Kant's moral argument.

On the face of it, it seems there could *not* be. Kant's argumentative strategy relies crucially on a radical distinction between theoretical and practical reason, and it is only within the sphere of practical reason that the argument can be shown to work. Famously, however, Kant declares aesthetic judgment to be non-practical. As his now familiar doctrine has it, aesthetic judgment has only "the form of purposiveness," which is to say, purposefulness *without* purpose.⁵ Subjective aesthetic pleasure can be combined with objective aesthetic judgment only if the intentionally

⁴See Graham, *Evil and Christian Ethics*.

⁵Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §§10–11.

purposeful form of something is wholly separated from any purpose that we might make it or want it to serve. Such at any rate is Kant's claim, and if this is true, the conviction that nature has aesthetic value cannot serve as a starting point for an argument about the presuppositions of practical reason. Aesthetic judgment is not, and cannot be, an exercise in practical reason. Since it concerns only the *form* of purposiveness; it is, he says, "in no way practical."⁶

There are a number of replies that might be made to this objection. One obvious response is simply to reject the radical distinction between practical and theoretical reason. Another is to deny that the value we intuitively perceive in nature is aesthetic. Neither of these responses seems to me promising. First, the distinction between practical and theoretical reason is crucial to the argument we are trying to parallel, so abandoning it would leave us with no argument at all. Secondly, the conviction upon which any parallel argument would rest is the intuition of a value in nature that is wholly non-utilitarian and yet sensuous. Natural magnificence transcends both human welfare and human pleasure, but nonetheless elicits our admiration and wonder. This is exactly how Kant conceives of beauty, so that aesthetic value, or something very like it, seems the most plausible candidate for the content of our intuitive conviction about nature.

A third possible response to the difficulty I identified accepts the centrality of practical reason, but questions Kant's contention that aesthetic judgment is non-practical. This is not an entirely novel move to make. Kant clearly wishes to locate aesthetic judgment somewhere between cognition and action, and his account of this middle ground has been so influential, that it has made the Kantian aesthetic the preferred philosophy underlying most versions of the belief in "art for art's sake." Nevertheless, Kant's conception of the purposelessness of art has regularly been called into question by the existence of architecture. Function and purpose seem no less intrinsic to a work of architecture than form. This is demonstrated by the fact that an architectural *folie* is defective, but in purpose not in form. It is conceptually indistinguishable from a "walk-through" statue precisely because it serves no function. If Kant is right, then, architecture cannot be an art, properly speaking. That is to say, insofar as it is purposeful it is not aesthetic in the fullest sense.

III

That architecture is not, properly speaking, an art is an implication Kant appears willing to accept. *Insofar as* architecture is a fine art, he says, a drawing of a building is as good as the building itself.⁷ A little later, he remarks that any useful purpose a building serves necessarily imposes

⁶Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §12.

⁷*Ibid.*, §14.

a limit on its aesthetic value. Its beauty is “attendant,” but never “free.”⁸ “One would be able to add much to a building that would be pleasing in the intuition of it if only it were not supposed to be a church,” he tells us.⁹ This reveals something very important about his account. Aesthetic judgment is essentially a matter of contemplation. The perspective is always that of a viewer, never the user. This explains why the example of a rose appears again and again in his account of aesthetic taste. No one knows, he says, what a rose is *for*. It just *is*. And though we can of course use roses as gifts or decorations, and make money out of selling them for these purposes, the aesthetic attitude is one of pure contemplative delight in the form of the rose as it is.

The existence and nature of a distinctively aesthetic attitude of this kind has been debated ever since, but whatever view we take on this subject, there is no denying that art and beauty have at least this connection with action; they are not merely encountered or cultivated, but *made*—in the form of paintings, poems, pieces of music, and so on. Nor does Kant mean to deny this. Indeed he devotes a significant part of the third *Critique* to the subject of “genius” which he characterizes as “a talent for art, not for science.”¹⁰

It is not easy to say exactly how, on Kant’s account, the “genius” of the artist relates to the “taste” of the audience. He addresses the point explicitly in §50. This is entitled “On the combination of taste with genius in products of beautiful art,” and it concludes with this sentence: “For beautiful art, therefore, imagination, understanding, spirit, and taste are requisite.”¹¹ The general idea seems to be that the artist is inspired to make works that freely flow from the imagination. By itself the necessarily “lawless freedom” of this imagination can produce “nonsense,” so it needs to be “brought into line” by the judgment of taste, which determines whether there is aesthetic value to be discovered in it.

If anything must be sacrificed in the conflict of the two properties in one product, it must rather be on the side of genius: and the power of judgment, which in matters of beautiful art makes its pronouncements on the basis of its own principles, will sooner permit damage to the freedom and richness of the imagination than to the understanding.¹²

In a post-Romantic art world that tends to value artistic “expression” over “tastefulness,” this decidedly unequal relationship between artist and audience is unlikely to win much support. But it should be noticed that Kant does assign artists a key role. Genius is not necessary for beauty—there is

⁸The distinction between “free” and “attendant” beauty is not necessarily to be interpreted as normative—i.e., “superior” and “inferior.” Still, “free” beauty clearly has an autonomy that “attendant” beauty lacks.

⁹Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §16.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, §49.

¹¹*Ibid.*, §50.

¹²*Ibid.*

the rose, after all—but it is uniquely productive of beauty. That is to say, beauty can be made as well as found, and at the heart of its making lies a distinctive act of mind that produces “aesthetic ideas.”

“Aesthetic idea” is another notably Kantian conception. He defines it as follows:

The aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language.¹³

This passage is difficult to understand. For present purposes, however, I shall draw the following inference from it. Beautiful art (or a lot of it) has quasi-cognitive as well as sensuous content. When we contemplate a great work of art we do not merely delight in its appearance—color, shape, tone, organization, and so on—but in the profusion of thoughts and imaginings that it stimulates within us. Kant finds aesthetic ideas at their most evident in the art of poetry:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g. death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature.¹⁴

This concept of “aesthetic idea” is helpful in explicating an important dimension of artistic and aesthetic assessment that a simple reliance on beauty cannot accommodate. Within the category of the beautiful, it seems, we can distinguish between the more and less profound. A simple folk tune and a major symphony can both be beautiful, as can a short story and a novel on the scale of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. To rank the second above the first, therefore, we need to find some criterion other than beauty. At the same time, this second criterion must not remove either object from the realms of the aesthetic, as say, an appeal to their respective contributions to recreation, historical knowledge, or moral improvement would do. Kant’s conception of the degree to which they make things “sensible beyond the limits of experience” is just such a criterion, though he gives no indication that he would use it in this way. Still, it seems right to say that if beautiful productions do give sensuous expression to things that are beyond the limits of human experience, then they do not merely have *aesthetic form*, but also realize or embody *aesthetic ideas*.

¹³Ibid., §49.

¹⁴Ibid.

IV

The intuitive sense we have of nature's magnificence seems to require a similar sort of distinction. A single rose is not any less beautiful than a sunset over snow-covered mountains, and yet in contemplating the latter it is difficult to think that its beauty exhausts the experience, and tempting to find in it what Wordsworth describes (in the *Prelude*) as "a sense of something far more deeply interfused." What should we say about this difference? In common with many writing in the eighteenth century, Kant combines his philosophy of beauty with a philosophy of the sublime, and it might be supposed that in what he says about it there is material that could address this question, especially since he expressly locates the "feeling of the sublime" in the experience of nature.

Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunderclouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set in a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist them into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature.¹⁵

In this (unusually) eloquent paragraph, Kant's concluding sentence is especially significant. The experience of the sublime is not meaningful for anything that it communicates about nature, but for what it tells us about ourselves. Such experiences show that the human mind need not be dominated by an immediate fear of nature's dynamic power. It has a way of accommodating the terrors, namely, by apprehending them in the imagination. Kant distinguishes between experiences of the sublime prompted by nature's dynamism, and those prompted by nature's magnitude. The great wildebeest migration, a simultaneous movement of well over a million animals that takes place in Northern Tanzania and Kenya each year, is an example that fits Kant's account well. The person who sees this torrent of animals apprehends their magnitude, but cannot comprehend it. That is to say, as we watch the migration we see at a glance a number so great that we know we could not count it. The feeling of the sublime—of a sensuous apprehension that somehow goes beyond the limits of experience—arises because this spectacular natural event prompts us to rejoice in a fact about ourselves. We find in ourselves a power to *apprehend* that which seemingly we cannot *comprehend*, and yet at the same time we know that this is an illusion. There is no mystery; we could in principle count all the wildebeest, no matter how many there may be.

¹⁵Ibid., §28.

Contrary to what we might initially suppose, then, “the sublime,” at least by Kant’s account, will not serve to explicate the transcendent value of natural magnificence. Insofar as we are seeking to articulate a widely-held intuitive conviction that the magnificence of nature presents us with a value that sets a limit to human aspiration and endeavor, there is no resource that will help us in the Kantian sublime. That is because the feeling of the sublime, as Kant analyses it, arises precisely from an understanding of how nature in all its power and magnitude does *not* limit us. The apprehension of the sublime reveals to us something about our *own* nature, not the nature by which we are surrounded.

V

Let us return to the question that prompted this brief exploration of the sublime. Kant gives us a conceptual framework in which to articulate the idea that “great” works of art differ from simple works, not by being more beautiful, but by expressing or embodying “aesthetic ideas.” That is to say, such works have the ability to give sensuous representations of rational ideas a sort of “completeness” that is greater than is ever to be found in everyday experience, even when that experience is summarized in empirical generalities. So, for instance, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, we find the intertwining of love and jealousy more adequately represented in the imagined events and poetic language of a drama than it could ever be in the recounting of an autobiographical episode from real life. One important result of this is that our minds go beyond merely aesthetic delight in the acting and the scenery, or even in the poetic beauty of the speeches. We are prompted to think about the theme of the play in relation to human experience as a whole.

Could there be aesthetic ideas of this kind in nature? In an interesting footnote to the section on aesthetic ideas, Kant refers admiringly to a picture inspired by the inscription over the temple of Isis (or Mother Nature). The inscription runs “I am all that is, that was, that will be, and my veil no mortal has removed.” The “vignette” Kant describes as “rich in sense” was printed as the frontispiece of an introduction to the theory of nature by the physicist and mathematician Johann Andreas Segner. Kant’s footnote suggests that he shared Segner’s view that this visual representation was the most effective way to “dispose the mind [of the student] to solemn attentiveness.” Now it is plausible to think that, whether intentionally or inadvertently, Kant has here articulated something very close to the idea that nature can have a value that transcends and so puts limits on human action. This is not entirely surprising, of course, since the original inscription to which Kant refers had religious purposes. Rich sensual experience (of the picture) prompts thoughts about the natural world (that its deepest secrets must remain hidden from human investigation) while inducing a certain feeling or state of mind (respect and solemnity) that is properly in accord with these thoughts.

Segner's frontispiece is a sensible representation of an abstract idea, and its being a representation makes it a work of art, not of nature. The difference is this. By *judging* it beautiful, we attribute to the picture the subjective purpose of aesthetic judgment—*finding* it beautiful. But we can also attribute an objective purpose to it, namely the artistic genius's purpose in making a representation that embodies aesthetic ideas. Kant thinks that natural objects can be beautiful, and thus be objects of the subjective purpose of aesthetic judgment, but he is emphatic in his contention that no empirical observation of nature's teleology—which is to say, its internal functionality—can warrant the attribution of objective purpose, however careful or comprehensive that observation might be. As evolutionary biology has shown, the most impressive functional relations in nature can be explained without recourse to the objective purpose of a divine (or any) designer. Strictly, though, art and nature are not mutually exclusive in this respect. If a natural object were *also* a representation of an aesthetic idea, then it could have objective as well as subjective purpose.

It is at this point that we might try to find an aesthetic counterpart to Kant's moral argument. Evolutionary biology has indeed shown, let us agree, that even the most intricate and impressive functional relations in nature can be explained without recourse to the objective purpose or intentional design of a supernatural Creator. If this is the case, then contrary to the proponents of Intelligent Design, it is futile to try to undermine Kant's contention about the impossibility of inferring an objective purpose from the evident teleology of nature. If we parallel the moral argument, however, a different prospect opens up. It now seems that we might uncover the conditions of the possibility of practically significant intuition with respect to natural magnificence.

Such an argument would proceed as follows.

1. We have an intuitive conviction that there is something about the magnificence of nature—its beauty, grandeur and profusion—that demands to be accepted and respected as a deontological limit on the pursuit of human benefit.
2. Such a conviction is intelligible only if the phenomena that prompt it—sunsets, seascapes, teeming forests, spectacular movements of wild life, and so on—are more than merely suitable objects for judgments of taste.
3. To be more than this, they must embody aesthetic ideas, and can only do this if they are emanations of "genius."
4. *Human* genius is powerless to embody aesthetic ideas in such natural phenomena.
5. Therefore, it is a *necessary presupposition* of our intuitive conviction about the magnificence of nature that there exists a supernatural "genius."

When Aquinas lays out his “five ways” to the existence of God, he concludes each “proof” with some such remark as “and this is what everyone understands by God,” or more simply “and this we call God.”¹⁶ My “aesthetic proof,” it seems plain, requires a similar move—the addition that the supernatural genius presupposed by natural “magnificence” is what everyone understands by God. On what basis is such an addition to be grounded? Furthermore, there is a critical question lying just below the surface of proposition 3 in the argument as it stands. Kant is clear that the nature studied by science is “mechanical” in its operations. If this is true, it seems impossible to regard it at the same time as an embodiment of “free beauty.” Yet if, as step 3 supposes, that which can be explained by naturalistic processes can also be a “representation” of the idea of those same processes—if a particular seascape can, for instance, represent the sea’s boundlessness—it must be the case that that which is “mechanical” can also be “free.” In short, there is a problem about how the law governed character of the natural world that science discloses could be compatible with the freedom that is required for the same natural world to embody the “aesthetic ideas” that emanate from God’s “genius.”

A satisfactory response on both these matters—the identification of “the supernatural genius” with “God,” and the tension between mechanical nature and “free beauty”—is crucial to this aesthetic argument’s being truly analogous to the moral argument for God’s existence that Kant offers us in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. With respect to the first we may, at a minimum, say this. It is a recurrent theme in theology that God’s creative activity has an importantly aesthetic component that sits alongside wisdom and goodness. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork,” Psalm 19 famously declares, and Psalm 50 tells us that “Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, God reveals himself in glory.” “Where were you,” the LORD asks Job, “when the morning stars sang together” (Job 38:7)? This is just one of a long series of rhetorical questions whose effect is to underline the truth that the grandeur and magnificence of God’s creation vastly exceed both the knowledge and the moral righteousness to which humans (rightly) aspire. In the Book of Revelation the same theme comes to a kind of culmination. John’s description of the City of God is replete with references to beauty. Precious stones, pure gold and clearest crystal are called upon as images which, despite their acknowledged inadequacy, may nevertheless point towards the glory of God. More strikingly perhaps, in the envisioned City, the glory of God replaces the sun and the moon, with the implication that our appreciation of their beauty in the created world is a poor reflection of the glory of God yet to be revealed in the world to come. In other words, the sum of God’s perfections comprises not only omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, but glory. This fact usefully connects the idea of

¹⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia Q. 2, A. 3.

God with the supernatural “genius” whose aesthetic ideas, on my reconstructed Kantian argument, are embodied in the magnificence of nature.

With respect to the tension between the “mechanical” nature disclosed by science and the “free” beauty the natural world invites us to contemplate, it is worth observing that this is simply one more dimension of a tension within the whole framework of Kant’s thought, one that even he himself acknowledged. It arises even more markedly in his moral philosophy. Human beings are both rational agents and physical objects. How is the freedom that their moral agency requires to be made compatible with the physical determinism that must govern them as bodies? In the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant accepts that he cannot resolve this tension. He argues, however, that this is not to be regarded as a debilitating failure. In these matters, he says, “human reason in general cannot make comprehensible [the moral law] as regards its absolute necessity,” but we “nevertheless comprehend its incomprehensibility” and that “this is all that can be required of a philosophy that strives in its principles to the very boundary of human reason.”¹⁷ The same strategy might be employed with respect to the apprehension of aesthetic ideas in nature. We cannot show that the laws of science allow the freedom within nature that such ideas necessarily require. What we can show, however, is that the assumption of such freedom is a necessary condition of apprehending the magnificence of nature. It follows that this orientation to the natural world is thus radically different to the one that science adopts. But this is no more (nor less) troubling than the agent/object duality of human nature with which we are obliged to live.

VI

Two further aspects of the parallel between Kant’s moral argument and the aesthetic version I have sketched are worth noting. Kant regards the inescapability of the moral law, the proposition on which his moral argument rests, as beyond debate. We cannot avoid that which morality requires us to do by the simple strategy of denying that we are under an obligation to do it. For most of us, this is probably a supposition we are unlikely to question. But the philosophical significance of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality* is that it persuasively opens up the possibility that this modern sense of inescapability is socio-psychological rather than logical, a product not of rational understanding but of deep-seated fear and resentment. These psychological dispositions have become institutionalised in social formations shaped by the distorting dichotomy of moral good versus evil. Nietzsche’s purpose is to liberate us from this dichotomy, by going “beyond good and evil.” If he were successful in this, it would show that the cogency of Kant’s moral argument is entirely dependent upon our acceptance of its basic assertion. Freed from our obsession with absolute good and evil, we would no longer accept the

¹⁷Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*.

condition upon which it rests, and thus have no reason to subscribe to its necessary presuppositions.

Now whether Nietzsche is right or wrong in his ambitious contention, the mere possibility he has uncovered shows that the familiar dictum "One person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*" applies in this case. Consequently logical validity cannot settle the matter by itself. "If the moral law is inescapable, then God must exist" is *not* logically superior to "God does not exist, so there is no inescapable moral law." And as Nietzsche also rightly contended, atheists (such as "the English moralists" he despised) rarely see the full implications of the second contention.

They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality. . . . [O]ne has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic. . . . Christianity is a system, a consistently thought-out and *complete* view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands.¹⁸

Among the things that one no longer possesses, on Nietzsche's account, is the morality that lays special emphasis to the plight of the poor and the vulnerable, as well as the morality that believes in human equality and proscribes the violation of human rights. Suppose that Nietzsche is right, not in the details of his genealogy, but in his claim about its implications. If so, we are presented with a choice. Shall we abandon our moral convictions on the strength of his genealogy (*modus tollens*), or shall we reject his genealogy on the basis of our moral convictions (*modus ponens*)? In most minds, I conjecture, a commitment to justice, to the relief of suffering, and to the protection of the vulnerable runs so deep, that there is a powerful motive for favouring *modus ponens* over *modus tollens*. If atheism means relinquishing justice and charity, subscription to it is too high a price to pay.

Now it is not so obvious (to me) that a similar point holds when applied to the demands of "respect for nature." Should it prove to be the case that the basic conviction that we have about nature's magnificence is incompatible with atheism, it is much less clear that there would be something inhuman about reasoning in accordance with *modus tollens* rather than *modus ponens*. Though it would be difficult to demonstrate, somehow a concern for justice seems much more basic to our evaluative consciousness than the urge to protect the magnificence of the natural world. There appears to be a major moral difference between, for instance, the exploitation of nature and the enslavement of human beings. The latter seems evil in a way that the former, however reprehensible, is not. Still, the extent and rapidity with which "green" movements have found support in widely differing social and political contexts does indicate that many people have (perhaps increasingly) profound commitments to what are called "environmental values." Such people will have as good reason

¹⁸Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, §5 (emphasis in original).

to favor *modus ponens* over *modus tollens* in the aesthetic argument, as the advocates of justice and rights do in the moral version.

A further important issue is this. Kant's non-consequentialist morality is often interpreted, mistakenly, as implying subscription to the (supposedly ancient) slogan *Fiat justitia ruat caelum* ("Let justice be done though the heavens fall"). But in the second *Critique*, Kant's explication of the moral argument relies no less heavily on the rationality of the pursuit of happiness than it does on the rationality of morality. Indeed, what brings the existence of God into view is the all-important fact that justice and prudence can come into radical conflict. Kant does not conclude (as some interpretations of "Kantianism" suggest) that rationality requires us, whenever such a conflict arises, always to take the side of morality. On the contrary, he thinks that rationality requires us to relinquish neither our duty nor our happiness, but to have faith in their ultimate harmonization. This is not a "conceptual" harmony in which "virtue is its own reward," nor a material harmony brought about by human law or political organization since it is not achievable in this world. The reconciliation of virtue and happiness can only be accomplished by a God whose justice and benevolence extends beyond the grave.

[I]n the mere course of nature happiness exactly proportionate to moral worth is not to be expected and is indeed impossible. . . . [T]herefore the possibility of the highest good from this side cannot be granted except under the presupposition of a moral Author of the world.¹⁹

It is at this point we can identify an important parallel with the duality of human need on the one hand, and the profusion and magnificence of the natural world on the other. Those who make nature a God after the fashion of (for instance) James Lovelock's *Gaia* can suppose no such harmonious resolution to environmental crisis. The result is that their message is "either concession or defeat." "There are no grounds for thinking" Lovelock tells us, "that what we are doing [with our environmentally destructive lifestyle] will destroy Gaia, but if we continue business as usual, our species may never again enjoy the lush and verdant world we had only a hundred years ago. What is most in danger is [human] civilization."²⁰ By contrast, the God who is a necessary presupposition in the aesthetic argument I have sketched is a God who has made the earth a fit habitation for human beings, and therefore a God who may be relied upon to harmonize the furthering of human welfare with the preservation of the natural world's integrity. The form, and timescale, of this harmonization falls beyond the scope of meaningful speculation, of course. God's time is the best time, but not our time, we might say. That is why, in emulation of Kant's moral argument again, the basis of action with respect to nature has to be faith rather than calculation or prediction.

¹⁹Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 150.

²⁰Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, 60.

The “aesthetic argument for the existence of God” that I have fabricated out of elements in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* will evidently be found unpersuasive by those who do not share the conviction that natural magnificence has transcendent value. For those in whom this conviction is correspondingly strong, on the other hand, its theistic conclusion may be unwelcome. This does not rob it of all interest, however. The central issue in environmental philosophy, in my estimation, is how to escape “shallow” ecology. If the argument just elaborated is indeed a cogent one, this shows that theism is one way of avoiding shallow ecology. An intellectual obligation thus falls on those who venerate the natural world and want to protect it against human exploitation, but do not want to call upon God. They have to show that there is some alternative, because in the absence of such an alternative, they face a suitably amended version of Nietzsche’s accusation against the English moralists—that however deeply felt their conviction about the importance of nature’s magnificence, they are merely “reasserting their position in a fear-inspiring manner as environmental fanatics.” Without a theistic grounding for that conviction, so my argument goes, they are open to the accusation that their moral affirmation is little more than table pounding.

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