

“The Aesthetic Value of Nature in Everyday Living” ©

Paul R. Shockley, Ph.D.

www.prshockley.org

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I. Introduction:

As I interact with students in both secular and sacred spheres of academia I come across young people who are longing for relief. Their lives seem incoherent, out of place, and ultimately unintelligible. Even some who proclaim Jesus Christ as their Savior have confessed to me that they feel like they are “lost in obscurity.” As one student recently said to me, “I feel like I am living in a dream. Doc, this isn’t fun. I need help. Can you help me?”

The problem: lost in obscurity. As I probe their lives, trying to discover the root cause (s) or web-like issues in which they are entangled, I have discovered that one critical problem many of them struggle with is a disconnection with reality as it is. In other words, they are “metaphysically lost” [my term]. See, the situational setting in which these young people have been raised lacked rich exposure to nature. I am broadly defining “nature” as the physical world, natural phenomena, living things, and the processes that control them independent of our human will (e.g., ecological forces). Their place of habitation is the virtual world, the digital sphere. Victim to the pleasures and plight of the digital age, they live inside their dwelling places with the command center of technology at their fingertips. Fun, knowledge, conversations, and relationships take place with a screen in front of them in the comfort of their home, their school, and their vehicles. Unlike previous generations, they do not have memories of playing war games in the woods, long hours turning over limbs and rocks to see what lies underneath, swimming in a nearby pond or lake, or building tree houses or forts with their childhood friends. They have not experienced the blessing of spending hours lying on the grass, watching the birds and clouds above as they use their imagination and dream big. Gazing upon the myriads of stars above is a rarity. Because of poor exposure to working hard outside, they lack contact with dirt; their hands are smooth; their fingernails are ever clean. From their perspective, nature is not in their midst. Instead, nature is found at a zoo, a farm outside of the community, a state park, a national forest. Coupled with business, parental demands for success, and indoor activities, young people lack qualitative experiences with the “outside world.”

First exposure to this problem. I was first exposed to this growing phenomenon when I attended an L’Abri conference many years ago at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky. A staff worker reported that unlike Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer’s years of ministry in Switzerland, they are discovering that before they can minister to those who are “metaphysically lost,” they have to put them to work outside. While they are cultivating the ground with their hands

for the very first time, nature is cultivating them, sanding down virtual barriers they have been placed all around them in this "sensate" age. As a result of qualitative exposure to physical nature, these prisoners in "Plato's cave" begin to break from their virtual chains and come to discover an intelligible world beyond shadowy images and imaginary beliefs.

What is needed? We need to recover the continuity of aesthetics with the normal processes of living life. This recovery is perhaps more important than ever before because of the powerful impact the digital age is having on young people. We have to realize that the metaphysical obscurity these younger generations are experiencing could very well be because they have not had enough qualitative exposure or physical contact with nature. It is amazing how God uses general revelation to reach people where they are and take them where they need to be. For example, the design and beauty of God's creation or certain raw forces of nature such as an earthquake can dredge up certain divine truths people want to suppress (Romans 1; God's existence). I suspect that this phenomenon is only growing worse in our Western culture as our comforts and our technologies continue to advance and our face-to-face interactions with each other in this physical world decrease.

Presupposing that God is the Creator of nature (a clear Creator-creature distinction), people are able to not only look at nature as "art" but are also able to follow the design, the movements, and functions of nature to God himself (*a posteriori*; going from "design" to the Author of the design). Thus, when we isolate nature from the daily life of a community by relegating it to a state park, putting it on a pedestal, or allowing nature to achieve some status apart from everyday life, we build walls that divide and deprive us of aesthetic experiences that point us to God. But these virtual barriers also generate within existential disconnections, distortions, emptiness, and even exhaustion. Thus, nature not only provides a context for rich aesthetic experiences to occur in everyday life (understanding aesthetic experience to be a facet of common grace), especially in a world filled with loss, pain, and tragedy because of depravity (Genesis 3), but nature also serves as an aesthetic witness to God Himself (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1). From my perspective I think of nature as God's art just as we are His handiwork (Psalm 139). I am defining an aesthetic experience as a heightened process of continuity that is intense, memorable, involving active participation, perception and appreciation. Because non-aesthetic activities are so common, when we encounter an aesthetic event or moment, all too often we categorize the aesthetic experience outside of our normative activities. Interestingly, we can become so accustomed to the non-aesthetic that we will even look to the sensational and the exaggerated for relief. Moreover, using Schaeffer's categories of "lower story/upper story" in his critique of modern philosophy, we may find ourselves *valuing* experiences with nature *divorced* from the *facts* about nature.

Therefore, when we isolate nature from everyday life, three sets of aesthetic problems emerge: (II) the problem of origin and use, (III) the problem of enrichment and poverty, and (IV) the problem of division and emptiness. In sum, the greater the isolation of nature from human experience the larger the need to fill it. As a result, not only do we miss out on opportunities to have aesthetic experiences in daily living that both enrich our lives in and ultimately point us to God in daily living, but we also develop an appetite for the cheap and vulgar (artificial & counterfeit). So, I will examine these three sets of problems and (V) conclude with some brief recommendations.

Three clarifications needed. But before we examine our first problem, namely, the problem of origin and use, let me offer three clarifications:

Clarification regarding the phrase, "dynamic interplay." First, I seek to bring awareness to the dynamic interplay that exists between our environment and us. I take it that since we are in nature and nature is in us, or better yet, we are part of nature since we are an aspect of God's creation, a dynamic interplay exists for we feed on the environment and our environment feeds on us. Consider these two examples: We affect our environment and our environment affects us in the context of filthy living. If we surround ourselves with trash, we become trashy. Or our connection to our environment may be likened to the relationship between an unborn baby and mother. The baby's health affects the mother and the mother's health affects the baby. Thus, a symbiotic relationship exists between our environment and us. Though we are not determined by our surroundings, there is no doubt that we influence our environment just as our environment influences us.

Clarification on the value of preserving nature. Because of this dynamic interplay, the problem is not with parks, nature reserves, and master plan communities where natural landscaping finds pertinent expression. I recognize both the need and value of preserving nature and its various ecological systems. In fact, I am very appreciative of private charities, private landowners, government institutions, and research centers that protect these places. But when we think of nature outside of the community, elevate nature on pedestal, or support opportunities whereby "nature" achieves some status apart from everyday life, we construct barriers that limit aesthetic experiences with nature that can take place in the ordinary daily life of the organized community.

Clarification on the relationship between nature and ordinary living. The witness of God's handiwork of creation is powerful (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1). Nature can passionately be used by God to open eyes, stir affections, slow down business, foster possibilities of personal inquiry and introspection, and be sources of meaning. Nature possesses aesthetic qualities in abundance. In order to visit nature, see wildlife, and experience the phenomena of the natural physical world, if we are led to believe that we have to travel outside the community to experience these aesthetic riches, especially in urban settings, we miss out

on the beauty and wonder God has created which give evidence of His existence, His creativity, and His genius in our daily lives. May we encourage our community in a biblical balanced way (e.g., do not blur the Creator-creation distinction), to support opportunities for physical nature to thrive within the commonplaces of life, where God's art may be dynamically experienced and shared by all in the details of ordinary living. Thus, in people's daily lives, in the comings and goings of work, home, study, and play, people are able to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell nature; the witness of God's creation is at work.

My aesthetic theological concern is twofold: (1) The marginalization or isolation of nature from ordinary living and (2) the lack of awareness by the evangelical community of the dynamic relationship and apologetic/aesthetic values of physical nature in the daily lives of the organized community. Like Schaeffer demonstrated in *Pollution and the Death of Man*, we Christians need to have a significant presence in the community offering biblical truth in an appropriate way regarding nature as an evangelistic witness and as responsible stewards.

Now having addressed these three preliminary issues, our inquiry will now turn to the isolation of nature from everyday life by probing the problems of origin and use, enrichment and poverty, and division and need. All three sets of problems are interrelated. So we will examine these concerns like we might assess a multifaceted diamond. Afterwards, I will make some brief suggestions how we might bring about greater continuity between people in the life of the organized community and nature as God's art.

II. Problem of Origin and Use:

The isolation of nature from ordinary living is tragic because nature possesses a quality of activity. Nature pulsates with and magnifies life, creativity, movement, color, intricate form, intelligence, purpose, relationships, communication, habituations, reproduction, power, tragedy, stability, instability, and even death itself. For example, when we watch a butterfly break out of its cocoon our attention is arrested. Aesthetic qualities abound in view of the colors, movements, and instinctual desires we observe. Thus, when we fail to recognize the fact that all of nature, including us, was created by our Creator and that humanity was placed within the context of physical nature and all of these aesthetic activities and images, I am fearful that we marginalize the aesthetic experiences we can have between nature and day-to-day living. God created Adam and Eve in the context of physical nature. Since God did not choose a different context to plant the creation of humanity, we commit the fallacy of selective emphasis when nature is isolated from daily living. While God created nature from where we ultimately draw our nourishment, clothing, shelter, and medicine, it is reasonable to infer that physical nature is also a magnificent source for aesthetic experiences that not only enrich our lives, but also move us to contemplate the ultimate

Artist of it all. For example, the beauty we see around us and the aesthetic experiences we have can lead us to seriously ponder God's existence. Consider these four examples:

Example 1:

1. Beauty implies a mind of beauty.
2. There is objective beauty.
3. Therefore, there is an objective Mind of Beauty.

Example 2:

1. It appears to human beings that normative (transcultural) aesthetic experiences occur.
2. The best explanation for aesthetic normative experiences (transcultural) is that it is grounded in God.
3. Therefore, God exists.

Example 3:

1. There must be objective beauty.
2. Objective beauty is beyond individual persons and beyond humanity as a whole.
3. Objective beauty must come from an objective Mind of beauty.
4. Therefore, there must be a beautiful, personal Mind behind objective beauty.

Example 4:

1. Beauty is a rational enterprise.
2. Beauty would not be a rational enterprise if there were no aesthetic "order" in the world (e.g., unity, intensity, and complexity).
3. Only the existence of God traditionally conceived could support the hypothesis that there is an aesthetic order in the world.
4. Therefore, there is a God.

Nature affects the quality of our lives. If physical nature is expressed in ordinary living, then the quality of activity (both positively and negatively), the images, and the scenes of beauty and ugliness become a storehouse of memories, places of inspiration, and catalysts to stir our imagination, our intellect, our creativity, our human condition, and longings for eternal life with God.

Nature is a continual embodiment of meaning. Because of the transactional activities we enjoy with nature and recoil from, new meaningful experiences and relationships are made. Nature continually inspires new realizations individually and collectively. Nature, in both its beauty and horror, arouses us to make new inquiries, discover new connections, and create things that will benefit others.

Nature also dredges up the existential struggles of our soul with all of its beauty, its fragility, and its brutality. The precarious aspects of nature, for example, cause us to question our significance, our meaning, our purpose. Thus, nature with all of its constructions, patterns, and movements mark an experiential way of human envisioning, visualizing, imagining, contemplating, and soul-searching. The decay and death we observe in nature also moves us in powerful ways to consider our finitude and our frailties. Like Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) once wrote, "*The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.*" Nature reminds us that at any moment that what he hold dear may be taken from us. But the changes we witness outside of us and within us create deep and earnest longings for permanence. Since Adam rebellion in Genesis 3, the beautiful and the horrific go hand-in-hand. Experiences such as witnessing the birth of a baby produce unspeakable joy while the death of a loved one generates unspeakable sorrow. The taint of sin is everywhere. The suffering and wickedness that abounds in nature not only stirs the *angst* within, but it also generates, at least for some, a deep longing or yearning for something more, namely, a place and state where permanent joy and peace may be found and where redemption from sin will be realized.

This bi-relationship between nature and us is "pregnant" with new and open possibilities, developments, processes, relationships, questions, and introspection. Potentialities unfold and we change as we encounter, engage, and absorb these images, movements, and scenes within a spatio-temporal context. Stated differently, the dynamic transactional interplays between ourselves and the stable and precarious, unstable aspects of nature not only feed the human genius, but also bring to surface the ultimate questions of life such as, "Who are we?" "What are we?" "Where did we come from?" Unlike art-products that evoke these existential questions and ultimate issues, nature is invasive and is ultimately beyond our control (e.g., hurricanes). We can walk away from certain art pieces, music, and images that dredge up the larger questions of our human condition and the answers we willfully suppress, but we cannot with nature.

The power of dredging up of these issues and the natural facilitators that point us to God is not merely the material, efficient, formal, and final causes we observe in nature, but are also found when our experiences with nature become emotionally charged, both negatively and positively. Moments like these can come about suddenly as when we turn a bend and are immediately introduced to a display of trees arrayed in fall colors or when a large cloud gives way to the sun and rays of light strike the water teeming with life, revealing a

kaleidoscope of colors and reflections that are overwhelming. These experiences can be intense, are memorialized, and are set apart from the mundane moments in daily living. Experiences such of these do not have to be only found outside of the community in parks and nature reserves, but can also be found in greater abundance in daily living when we look out our window, step into our garden, or walk through our neighborhood. But these experiences can also be emotionally charged negatively when we observe a tragic misstep when young life is crushed or when forces of nature destroy what we cherish as individuals and as a community.

As stated earlier, we also have to recognize that nature itself is invasive. While virtual shells within our indoor living distort our contact with the world and generate obscurity within, natural calamities have been used to wake many of us up from our virtual stupor. But in the most startling way, destruction, pain, and tragedy often bring us together, putting us into contact with the actual world in ways we have previously ignored. While some of us may not be able to respond to the deprivation and loss that the forces of nature can bring about, others of us do and are the better for it. Altruism and benevolence find expression and relationships with long-time neighbors are made. Adversity can move us in the most dramatic and beneficial ways whereas false pleasures, for example, immobilize us from making our lives count for something great personally and collectively. False pleasures are desires, inclinations, or preferences that are contrary to God's person and purposes.

III. The Problem of Enrichment and Poverty:

When we marginalize nature from the daily life of an organized community, enriching opportunities of its apologetic witness, aesthetic experiences, and delightful perceptions are diminished both personally and collectively. In fact, the problem of isolation of nature from daily living, affects the moral, the creative, and human qualities and conditions of civilization itself. This will involve examining aesthetic experiences and the aesthetic functionality of nature.

Isolation of nature from common life deprives people of potential aesthetic experiences in at least two compounding ways. First, isolation diminishes opportunities to have aesthetic experiences in ways that stir our mind, inflame affections, spark our imagination, and dredge up our existential longings. And second, isolation impoverishes the community as a whole because members of the community are not able to share and celebrate these experiences with one another in daily activities. Not only are we impoverished because we are not only impacted by the abounding presence, activities, and movements of physical nature, but also because of nature's practical ability to serve and inspire creativity, experimentation, and intelligence.

Since we are affected by our surroundings, physical nature provides a context that does not inspire us to feast on the “cheap and the vulgar.” Rather, physical nature motivates us to enjoy, produce, and replicate in art forms what empirically observe. But when there is a general loss of civic consciousness of physical nature in all of its aesthetic signs, we miss out on the creative impact nature has upon us and its ability to point us to the God of Beauty, the God of the Bible. I am fearful that where this occurs, the greater the possibility for people to turn to theories of art, language, and arbitrary authorities that are divorced from sound metaphysics and epistemology. Even our own kids, who go from screen to screen and game to game, inundated with interactions all day long within walls, vehicles, and buildings, are extremely deprived of possibilities, enrichment, and interactions with the power of nature as God’s art. Interestingly, when we encounter a small piece of nature in the midst of business, mundane living, and closed settings, our hearts melt, our attention to it can easily become exaggerated, and longings for more are stirred. The excitement can be infectious.

In contrast, when physical nature connects with common life a sense of unity, a bond is constituted in the daily lives of the community where sources of meaning are embodied, significance is attached, and creativity finds new expressions in people as the drama of the physical unfolds, moves, changes, dies, and reappears. Wildlife finds a haven. Lives are enriched. Because of the wide array of colors and designs, the stable and precarious aspects of nature, and the beauty and brutal force of nature with all of its abilities are able to penetrate the deepest aspects of individuality as well as collectively over time and space and in spite of change. Stated differently, physical nature is able to impact the young and the old, the uneducated and educated, the tribal and the most sophisticated. Unlike certain art-products, aesthetic qualities of nature such as color, design, and purpose do not rob the best parts from us or lead us to moral degeneracy. Rather, a single flower, the sound of a bird, the grace of a swan can bring about a moment of serenity to a troubled soul, woo a romantic heart, or usher in delight to a rather uneventful day. Even an encounter with decay and death in nature can bring about the best in us, leading us to make beneficial contribution and investments in the lives of others. Tragedies that result from forces of nature can cause us even the worst of us to respond in the most heroic ways. Therefore, we should promote nature as art because God’s creation is able to enrich the community in the most dynamic and benevolent ways. But the value of recognizing the aesthetic interplays between physical nature and our humanity becomes even more pressing and difficult because of the next and last interrelated problem associated with the isolation of nature from common life, namely, the problem of division and emptiness.

IV. The Problem of Division and Emptiness:

These two problems are grouped together because separating physical nature from everyday life engenders “class division,” “elitism,” and “aesthetic hunger” among the life of the organized community. By “division” I am referring to class distinctions that are promoted when physical nature is detached from common living. Nature loses its significance among us in everyday living because we perceive and describe nature, especially in urban settings, as only being found in places like state parks, nature reserves, and land owned by wealthy people. Some of us might even say consider opportunities to be with nature a luxury for the wealthy because time, opportunity, and the possession of certain resources (e.g., own a RV). But here's the concern: the seclusion of nature from common life leaves an existential vacuum whereby we are likely to seek satisfaction from art-products that are qualitatively anemic and detrimental to community and ourselves. Stated differently, the isolation of nature promotes aesthetic anemia, “emptiness,” or “aesthetic hunger.” Like enduring art-products (e.g., Michelangelo's David), when nature is isolated from the life of the organized community, we develop a hunger that translates into pursuing art-products that are both crude and of poor quality. We find the emptiness to be multifaceted. Consider the following five consequences of nature isolation.

A “superior cultural” mindset can be cultivated when certain spaces of physical nature are set apart and invested, owned, and privately owned. Once again, this false perception is that physical nature is not part of common life but belongs only to those who possess a “superior cultural status.” While this posture may not be specifically directed to people, it is directed toward their interests. Thus, isolating nature from common life can promote aesthetic segregation among the lower socio-economic classes of society.

Nature can be perceived as being reduced to a museum as specimens of nature are collected and exhibited. Thus, when aspects of nature set apart for private viewing or payment by the public is required, nature is isolated from the daily comings and goings of viewing.

When nature is isolated from common life, artists too are affected. Since nature is not related to the collective needs of the community, art that depicts nature within the community can be marginalized or venerated (e.g., placed on a pedestal that blurs the Creator/creation distinction; an endorsement of metaphysical naturalism). As a result, individuality apart from the community emerges. They reflect this consequence by creating art-products that champions “self-expression,” “independence,” and “obscurity.” Thus, nature and all of its apologetic and aesthetic qualities are either displaced or blurred into something that is reflective of the human condition (e.g., a celebration of the profane, sensually indulgent, and morally wicked).

The isolation of art from its origin and use creates a gap between ordinary and aesthetic experience, a confusion of aesthetic values and perception. By relocating nature outside of the ordinary lives of the community, philosophies about nature find pertinent expression and development apart from the common life. Nature is put on a pedestal and can even be given “God-like” qualities. These radical and false ideas generate idolatrous worship (Romans 1), philosophical monism, and unbiblical notions of mysticism.

Division is directly linked to aesthetic hunger. When nature as art is unavailable to the community at large, hunger grows and is likely to see fulfillment in that which is poor and profane. Because we are part of and affected by our environment, aesthetic conditions worsen. This leads us to the idea of “emptiness.” I suspect that the greater the isolation of nature as art from human experience, the larger the need to fill it because we were originally created in the context of physical nature. Sensibly, we can conclude that we are likely to pursue that which cheap and vulgar, artificial and counterfeit.

V. Conclusion:

Nature as God’s art is able to break through all sorts of barriers that divide people. The testimony of nature is a universal form of language (general revelation) from God to humanity. This seems obvious given cross-cultural appreciation for nature. Friendship and affections find completion in both the appreciation and stewardship of nature. Moreover, certain aspects of nature draw attention and are even demanded in certain social gatherings and celebrations.

Nature can be a catalyst to bring people together, promote sacred spaces (e.g., the beauty found at the Garden of Gethsemane and the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem), bring restoration to those who are lost in metaphysical obscurity, and be a source of all sorts of incidents and significant scenes of life. The union between people becomes a reward and a hallmark, testifying to the power of nature which God has created.

Nature can also become a prompt of the establishment of that particular union and prod us to promote and pursue future unions. Nature as God’s art can tie the past and future together as evidenced in the recognition of certain places and events.

Lastly, nature as God’s art has the ability to affect and infect the collective life of the community. This occurs because of the interpenetrating relationship between people and their environment. Power of nature can intensely affect our emotions, conjure ideas in our minds, dredge up to the surface what we are trying to suppress, prod our wills to greater awareness of ourselves and our relationship to our God, and bring about punctuated moments of aesthetic pleasure in a world already filled with depravity and decay because of the destructive nature of sin (Genesis 3).

Therefore, when people come across your sphere of influence, people who are confused and disconnected, perhaps it is because nature is foreign to them in their daily experience given the digital sphere in which they live.

Help them reconnect with reality as it is by having them experience nature.

Ensure your family understands the value of nature as God intended it to be understood since so many environmentalists blur, ignore, or marginalize the Creator-creature distinction, promoting an unbiblical worldview (e.g., animism; atheism; pantheism; pantheism). Expose them to the natural beauty of God's creation. Help them to understand why there is decay and death in nature (Genesis 3). Teach them from God's Word that God cares for His creation and that we are to be good stewards of the privilege He has given us (Genesis 1-2). Instruct them about God's future plans when He brings about a new heavens and a new earth (Revelation, chapters 21-22).

As a servant leader in your community, anticipate and promote opportunities and programs that will bring greater interaction with physical nature in your daily living. But if a group blurs the Creator-creation distinction by claiming such false ideas that nature is God or that the particulars of nature are indwelt by spiritual beings, or pursues an agenda that lies outside the contours of biblical orthodoxy (as evidenced by some of today's environmental movement), offer alternatives within your sphere of influence. For example, in my first pastorate in Sugar Land, Texas, a group of us chartered a Boy Scout troop that primarily targeted the home school community. We now have over 100 boys and young men involved in the scouting program.

Help those to whom you minister, not to only look at nature, but also to follow it along to the God of the Bible.

In sum, support activities that will bring about nature within the community with a larger project in mind, namely, to see people encounter nature as reflective of God's art. Allow the powerful witness of nature as art to play its role in testifying to God's existence as we seek to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ by proclamation and personal presence.

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