

THE IMPACT OF AESTHETIC IMAGINATION ON OUR ETHICAL APPROACH TOWARDS NATURE¹

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INTRODUCTION

Art has become the major issue of aesthetic reflection during modernity, but 20th century philosophers have reintroduced nature in the centre of aesthetic reflection. The Anglo-Saxon discourse on the aesthetic value of nature often neglects that aesthetically experienced nature has concurrently become a focus of contemporary German philosophers, as well. By talking about the impact of aesthetic imagination on our ethical approach towards nature, I will attempt to elaborate two major lines of thought of Martin Seel's *The Aesthetics of Nature*², published in 1991.

Why is aesthetic experience of nature important in our everyday lives? This will be my main question. After defining the meaning of 'imagination' and 'aesthetic nature' in the context of Seel's thought, I will reflect on two aspects of this question. Firstly, I will focus on the function of imagination within our aesthetic experience of nature. Secondly, I will expose some ethical implications of the aesthetic approach to nature. My conclusion will emphasize the importance of aesthetic imagination for our personal and collective behaviour towards nature.

Seel's basic idea of a junction between the aesthetic and the ethical approach towards nature

¹ This paper was presented at The Value of Aesthetic Experience graduate student conference at Senate House, University of London, June 2004.

² Martin Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1991)

is simple: we should take responsibility for the existence of free nature, which is a condition for the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation of nature which is part of what Seel calls a good individual life. Even if I personally agree with the major lines of Seel's position, I'm aware that my treatment of his view may lead to difficulties in several contexts. In spite of criticizing Seel's position, I'll simply try to expose it. Nevertheless, I hope that my intervention will give us the occasion for a critical discussion.

I. DEFINITIONS

I a. What is imagination: The theoretical integration of emotions and sensations in our understanding of art, as well as nature finds its roots in the philosophical recognition of imagination as an important faculty for understanding the human condition. It can be argued that the early conception of imagination as a link between perception and reality dates back to Greek philosophers and in particular to Epicurus. The concept of imagination has generally been used in two different ways. On one hand, imagination has been considered as a valuable tool for human reason (productive imagination). On the other hand it has been related to affective states and in this sense it was described as a dangerous cause of falsehood and error (reproductive imagination). This double-sided approach to imagination in Greek thought has continued to preoccupy philosophers throughout history.

Recently, the French philosopher Christophe Bouriau has provided an insightful introduction on the subject. His description of fantasy brings us closer to understanding the meaning of the term of imagination. According to him, the concept of fantasy is nowadays often related to 'caprice' and is generally used as a synonym for spiritual freedom and unpredictable originality³. Fantasy goes beyond conventions as well as any serious and monotonous aspects of life.

In opposition to fantasy, imagination has the capacity to represent reality. Guided by intelligence, imagination is a reliable instrument in understanding the world. According to the Kantian conception of the *Einbildungskraft*, imagination implies intellectual – and even

³ Christophe Bouriau, *Qu'est-ce que l'imagination?* (Paris, Vrin, 2003).

rational — fertility that we do not find in fantasy. Imagination is the starting point of major inventions in the development of human civilisation, while fantasy is connoted to be more private and confidential. In spite of this, imagination needs fantasy in order to be fertile.

Kant's distinction between productive and reproductive imagination gives us a good starting point for understanding the difficulty of philosophical approaches towards imagination. If imagination gives us something to 'see', if it provides us with a 'mental image' of an object that we have perceived with our eyes, Kant calls it 'reproductive imagination'. In this sense the concept of imagination mainly relates to a visual approach to reality. Nevertheless imagination is not restricted to the reproduction of visual perceptions. It can reproduce other sensual experiences such as sounds or tactile perceptions. And more importantly, it can *produce* these perceptions. Certainly our productive imagination does not create the material aspect of the perceptual world, but as fantasy it intervenes into the structures of the symbolic forms which define our visions of the world⁴. In other words, imagination creates the form and the arrangement of material existence.

Before I begin to expose the specific importance of imagination for aesthetic experience in the philosophy of Seel, I will try to define the second major concept of my essay: aesthetic nature.

I b. Aesthetic nature: The term 'nature' can be applied to those forces controlling the phenomena of the physical world and the whole universe. But in using the term, I have in mind a particular aspect of nature: the one that appears in aesthetic experience. In the following I will refer to this as 'aesthetic nature'. I will now give an initial definition of this term that will become more precise when I reflect on the function of imagination in the aesthetic experiences of nature and art. Martin Seel characterizes aesthetic nature in three ways. Firstly, he stresses the dynamic autonomy of nature. Secondly, Seel explains that aesthetic nature must be available to sense perception. Lastly, aesthetic nature is part of our lived experience (*Lebenswirklichkeit*).

In order to fully understand the concept of aesthetic nature it is furthermore useful to

⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *Versuch über den Menschen* (Frankfurt, Fischer, 1990), 234-243.

underline in which way its experience differs from the experience of aesthetic art. For this reason I will give now a last – and very short definition - concerning the concept 'aesthetic art'.

I c. Aesthetic art: What is aesthetic art? To understanding what follows, it is useful to remember that the concept of art has often been related to the Greek term of 'technê'. Within a wide concept of art, we can distinguish — for example according to Kant — aesthetic art from mechanical art. Mechanical art is characterized by its instrumental approach to reality. We use technical art to achieve definite goals. Plato uses the example of the fisherman practicing his art. Aesthetic art on the contrary describes a process of creative production that stimulates aesthetic experience; examples can be found in music, literature and sculpture. In the following I will use the term 'art' when referring to aesthetic art. I will now address the second part of my essay, which concerns the function of imagination in art and aesthetic nature.

II. IMAGINATION AS A LINK BETWEEN NATURE AND ART

Seel states that nature can speak to us on the condition that art provides it with linguistic skills⁵. In other words, he stresses that aesthetic appreciation of nature is structured by the aesthetic appreciation of art. Projecting artistic structures onto nature is possible because of imagination, a main link between the two domains. Our imagination enables us to appreciate nature as if it were art. Seel uses in this context the term 'art of nature' and cites a letter of the romantic poet Heinrich von Kleist who writes to a friend about a stroll along the river Rhine. In the twilight he claims to have heard 'an entire concert in the breeze of the eastern wind with various instruments from a tender flute to a untamed violin'. Even if this ability exists independently from any physical event, aesthetic nature is not a pure product of fantasy.

A person that perceives nature in the light of art should be aware that his perception only exists in his imagination. Still, the aesthetic value of nature depends on a creative act, which is in some regards comparable to artistic creativity. In addition to its dependence on art, our capacity to imagine aesthetic nature depends on existing forms of nature. In other words: if we

⁵ Seel, 158.

want to imagine aesthetic nature, existing nature has to help us. The creative process that leads us to perceive nature as if it were art arises on certain conditions that are not always present. For example we might find aesthetic nature only in a particular environment, in a certain climate or at a certain time. Kleist might have perceived a different 'natural concert in the breeze' if he had not strolled along a quiet river but had instead walked along the Irish coast during a storm. Physical nature provides the space in which our imagination intervenes. Our imagination projects the forms and possibilities of past, present and future art into the existing nature. How can we characterize the aesthetic appearance of nature?

Aesthetic nature results from a productive play between nature and artistic symbols. Nature is aesthetic when it gives us the impression that it improvises forms of art. The possibility of aesthetic nature arises from our ability to project aesthetic structures onto existing nature by means of our imagination. On the one hand, we project our aesthetic appreciation into the existing nature. On the other hand, existing nature interprets forms of art. Seel describes this by a simple proposition: 'We project, nature improvises'.

The possibility to experience aesthetic nature depends on the existence of what Seel calls 'free existing nature', nature determined by circumstances outside of human intrusion. Seel determines the degree of freedom of a given natural phenomenon according to the level of dependence on human interference. In a strict sense, free nature as well as nature entirely determined by human activity only exists in the imagination. The nature onto which we project our imaginations is one that has been partially formed by human beings. Entirely free or determined nature would leave no space for human beings to take the distance from it that would allow aesthetic experience. In this sense nature in an English garden might be called 'freer' than it would be in a French one. However, the aesthetic value of nature does not depend on the degree of freedom but on our ability to acknowledge its freedom. Therefore the potential freedom of existing nature is a condition for the imaginative construction of aesthetic nature.

In free existing nature we can find a potency of art that we can't find in art itself. By reflecting on art, nature gives us a vision of imaginative creativity that cannot be reduced to artistic creativity. Even if aesthetic nature is perceived with the same attitude as a work of art, it

is not a work of art. Hence, aesthetic nature is not a simple reproduction of art. Our imagination provides nature with a language that we learn through an aesthetic experience of art, but nature does not simply repeat what art could have taught us.

Aesthetic nature gives us the possibility to enjoy a *picture* of a *part* of the world not only as a reflection but also *as a part* of the world. Being part of human life, the art of nature gives us an imagined encounter with an imaginary life. Our imagination brings in coexistence the world of our every day life and the artistic presentation of a different world. Everything that artistic imagination can produce is founded on the structure of natural causality. In nature, art surprisingly attains a degree of imaginative freedom, which it does not attain without being projected onto nature. This proposition leads me to my final point, the ethical implications of our aesthetic experience of nature.

III. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AESTHETICALLY EXPERIENCED NATURE

Nature and art have been liberated – at least since the beginning of modernity – from links to a pre-established existence. That is to say, that nature and art represent their own structures. Even if the autonomic destiny of aesthetic nature cannot be separated from the autonomic destiny of aesthetic art, their destinies are different. It is not coherent to give an absolute privilege to one of these destinies. The difference between art and nature might be an artistic invention itself, but since the concept of nature exists, it preserves its aesthetic independence. But if we consider the autonomy of art as a given fact, how can the aesthetic appreciation of nature be linked to ethical or even moral norms?

Seel's reflections on this question diverge from an ethic of 'right' behaviour in Kantian terms, settling for an ethic of 'good life' (*'gutes Leben'*)⁶ or more precisely the structure of satisfying 'successful existence' (*'gelingende Existenz'*) in the sense of Greek moral thought. I will use the concept 'ethical' to describe a structure that favours satisfying ways of living, which might nevertheless lead to 'right' norms of social behaviour. How can we show that an inter-

⁶ Seel, 289f.

subjective ethical value resides in our appreciation of aesthetic nature?

In the first place we should be reminded that many attempts have been made to establish an account of the interdependence or, in some cases, the unity between ethical and aesthetic reflection. Seel, however, argues against this general approach (of unifying the aesthetic and the ethical) by distinguishing a 'rich' and a 'humble' concept of good life (*'reicher und bescheidener Begriff guten Lebens'*)⁷. The rich concept of good life implies an aesthetic dimension of life whereas a humble concept does not. This does not mean that only the aesthetic approach towards life can be good; aesthetic experience can inform and enrich good life. The aesthetic experience of nature is an encounter with a form of good life and for this reason it can provoke strong ethical experiences. If aesthetic nature helps us to live in a reality that leaves room for intensified sensation, diversified perception and distance from the limitations of our everyday life, it certainly has an importance for the concept of ethically good life. Seel distinguishes three contexts in which aesthetic experience intervenes in ethical human existence. Firstly, it benefits our involvement with inter-subjective forms of good life. Secondly, it enables us to gain critical distance from our life. Lastly, it opens prospects to other possible ways of living. The link between aesthetic and ethical values leads me now to my conclusion on the ethical impact of aesthetic experience on a moral attitude towards nature.

CONCLUSION

Even if the aesthetic autonomy of nature can be considered as an irreversible fact, the physical nature onto which we can project aesthetic nature is not indestructible. According to Seel, 'technical art' has the capacity to either destroy or develop freedom of physical nature. Technical art intervenes in the structural development of nature and therefore is characterized — at least to some extent — by the attempt to control nature. On the contrary the approach of aesthetic art towards nature depends — as I have pointed out — on the existence of a 'free nature'. Aesthetic nature enables us to imagine variations of reality. Seel puts it this way:

⁷ Seel, 331.

imagination can create 'space within space' and 'time within time' when it's projected onto nature. Aesthetic nature stimulates reflection and therefore facilitates the search for a satisfying life.

This explains the ethical value of aesthetic nature for individual everyday life. The existence of physical nature is a necessary condition for the possibility of aesthetic nature, which is itself vital for a 'rich' life. The junction of the ethical and the aesthetic leads Seel to the moral proposition that the conservation of free nature is a sign of respect for individual existence. It follows that the ethical value of aesthetic nature derives from a personal interest. This personal interest relates to the moral demand for respect toward ways of life that are advantageous for every human being. If we want to satisfy the demand of individual freedom and satisfaction, the defence of nature appears as a social and political necessity.

Reflection on aesthetic nature leads to evaluative and universal norms for human behaviour. What makes these norms specific is that the aesthetic approach towards nature is not instrumental. This approach can provide us with sensations that we would not have, if we were only to look upon nature as a social, scientific, or mythical object. Of course this does not mean that moral considerations concerning nature always depend on aesthetic experience. Aesthetic nature is not the only nature of value. Moral norms for human behaviour towards nature can also be founded on ecological, economical, medical, historical or other reflections. Still, aesthetic considerations are a useful addition to these approaches. They are particularly helpful in extending the limits of our imagination when feeling the emotional impact of nature on our life.