Using Moral Foundations Theory to Understand Environmental Aesthetic Reactions: A Brief Exploration

Allison Fritz
Chadron State College

Winner of the Hubert Griggs Alexander Award

The purpose of this brief paper is to illustrate that the machinery and assumptions in moral foundations theory can further inform our understanding of environmental aesthetic experience and reactions. Moral foundation theorists employ emotions to explain moral intuitions and motivations. They do so by focusing on the types of things that elicit emotions and categorizing these into groups–what they call "foundations—rather than focusing on individual emotions themselves. They argue that the foundations emotions were originally developed to be set off by have been elaborated in different, sometimes highly symbolic ways, and that the intuitions to which they give rise can explain motivations for action. Similarly, I want to say that aesthetic evaluations about the environment are affectively driven, the emotions at the center of such evaluations have often been culturally elaborated in complex and symbolic ways, and this affective element explains our motivation to protect certain environments while avoiding others. In both cases, we will not always be aware of the foundation that gives rise to our reactions and judgments. The thoughts I offer in this paper are preliminary at best, but I hope to spark a serious interest in the viability of using frameworks like moral foundations theory in our theorizing about reactions to the environment (both aesthetic and sometimes moral—for as I shall illustrate, the two are sometimes difficult to parse out).[1]

Moral foundations theory argues that how people morally view and react to the world is the product of intuitions and these are based on five basic psychological foundations. The psychological foundations that it proposes are

understood as innate, and so universal. Each foundation includes some basic concept along with its opposite (meant to capture both positive themes we evolutionarily developed and the negative traits we try to avoid). The five foundations are: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/degradation. The theory found its origins from an intersection of inquiry into the evolutionary basis of morality as well as cross-cultural similarities and variability in virtues (Haidt and Joseph).

Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, who first developed the theory, argue that it is more explanatorily adequate to examine the notion that morality can be both evolutionary and culturally based. They do so by positing a relationship between intuitions, which they argue are innate, and virtues, which are social constructions. The idea is that human beings have an innate readiness to feel flashes of dis/approval toward displays involving other humans. Intuitions are judgments that pop into our heads without cognitive awareness of the mental processes that gave rise to them. At the heart of their explanation is the role of affective mental states: each foundation includes a characteristic emotion(s) used in the intuition (although these paradigm emotions are not meant to be taken as necessary or sufficient for their foundation). The emotions do have an original set of things they were developed for (their "proper domains"), but are culturally elaborated to be elicited by new things (their "actual domains"). For example, the care/suffering foundation originally developed to be triggered by one's own children and their vulnerability (the emotion at its base is compassion), and now can be elicited by fetuses, animals, etc. I propose that the foundations of purity/degradation, harm/care, and perhaps even loyalty/betrayal are responsible for some of our aesthetic judgments about nature. I will explain each of these in turn.

The foundation that focuses on harm is connected to our evolutionary history as mammals—and in particular the trait developed as feeling attachment to others. We feel a positive attachment to others and react negatively to their pain. Those interested in moral explanations claim this foundation is responsible for the virtue of kindness. This compassion has been expanded so that it includes reactions to harm to animals. We can, and in certain cases have, further extend our care reactions to include the environment in general. And theories within environmental ethics hypothesize and use these reactions. In "The Land Ethic," Aldo Leopold asks us to consider the biotic community (soil, water, organisms) as entities that can be harmed and so deserve care. The belief that we can harm the environment is not radical, even if we have not quite worked out what harm might *look* like. Aldo Leopold famously stated that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold, 262). There is evidence that philosophers and naturalists see a direct relation, perhaps even an identity relation between negative aesthetic value and harm.

Environmentalists have conflated (perhaps collapsed) aesthetic and ethical value in explanations concerning them. Some theorists even take beauty as an ethical concern regardless of human preoccupation with it. Beauty *can* be seen as a mark of the health of a place; yet sometimes beauty is not treated merely as a litmus of other values, and is instead counted among the very aspects of health, much like a rosy countenance is counted as a healthy quality. If this is the case, then visible harm to an environment will be interpreted as ugliness and vice versa. People will feel compassion for some visual change due to perceived harm, want to avoid having environments look that way, and so view such changes as ugly. And persons will have a negative reaction to some environmental change, evaluate the change as ugly, and in turn interpret it as harm. Perhaps the same negative emotion can drive both evaluations simultaneously.

Consider the negative reaction to littering. Why do many people have this … intuition? If you ask a child why one should not litter, you may get a response about the ugliness of it. However, they also might say it *harms* nature. I certainly believed such things as a child. And yet, the existence of a Styrofoam cup in a park does not quite constitute harm like dumping several quarts of used motor oil does. But it certainly *feels* like it is harmful. If this is the case, then it is a concern for harm that seems to drive our aesthetic judgments about the ugliness of highway dumping. There is an old public service campaign against littering, the very purpose of which seemed to be to invoke the emotions at the center of the harm/care foundation, called the "Keep America Beautiful" campaign. This campaign might very well be partially responsible for engendering the American view that litter is ugly, and further linking that ugliness to harm. Most famously, there was a commercial that depicted many different scenes heavily identified with pollution and litter, in which a Native American is shown looking over a veritable wasteland, crying.[2] Crying elicits compassion and the commercial implies that these highly visible forms of pollution are a form of disrespect to be identified with harm. Social mechanisms like these internalize a link between visible pollution and ugliness, and pollution as harm.

It is interesting that Leopold should include beauty in his holism. One way to interpret his notion of aesthetics is that it arises out of a concern for care/harm. Perhaps the perception of beauty is just a positive emotional reaction to a landscape, the perceptual qualities of which symbolize an environment that is healthy. And a negative reaction to an obviously degraded ecosystem will be the result of a combination of perceptual qualities that symbolize harm.[3] And Leopold was a champion of the importance of aesthetic experience in our environmental education—"Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty" (Leopold 102) We ought to learn to appreciate nature aesthetically for it is the gateway to seeing other qualities in nature that lead to a holistic ethical approach. He may have realized that some of our aesthetic reactions are driven by a deep-seated concern for harm and care. We start with a superficial reaction, only

to develop a deeper understanding of the causes of those reactions, or a proclivity to note the environmental harm that causes these reactions, which hopefully leads to further concern not for the experience of beauty itself, but rather for nature and its citizens.

Other naturalist writers lace their descriptions and arguments with thick evaluative terms related to aesthetics. Holmes Rolston III argues that, when looking at the world from an ecological perspective, the values are automatically built in (100-01). Looking at nature through ecology, our very description implies value: "harmony" and "order." But while we do value these things, and use them in our understanding of nature, he claims we don't impose this on nature. There is harmony and order in nature. We notice it due to our valuing it, and the existence of it in nature then informs our valuing it. In this way, Leopold may have seen the qualities that make nature beautiful as the very same qualities that we must use in our ecological descriptions of it, and that we are able to first see these qualities in aesthetic experience. This seems to suggest that to the extent that we can see instability and disunity in an environment, we will react negatively to it, and this reaction might initially best be regarded as aesthetic.

And this brings us to the core foundation of purity/degradation. Disgust, which underlies this foundation, is considered a basic emotion. Like others, this foundation can be meted out in highly conceptual ways. It is not just a reaction to contamination of our food source or living space that drives this foundation (although that is its evolutionary root). We have re-conceptualized purity within our lives in deeply complex and symbolic ways. The manner in which things become contaminated is also symbolic. How we conceptualize our living space—ultimately the natural world around us—is similarly symbolic. Fouling the water of a lake is an obvious case of contamination—and oftentimes one that can be seen. But we can conceptualize many forms of natural resource extraction as a defilement of its surroundings. People describe the industrial machine as "raping the earth." This type of reaction may be a response to harm rather than defilement. However, it can also be explained as a violation of purity.

The actual domain of the purity/degradation foundation now ranges over cultural taboos having to do with personal hygiene or sex. But sometimes moral disgust reactions are the products of taboo ideas, such as communism or bigotry. These last examples are quite interesting, given their highly cognitive nature. Disgust is usually elicited by sensory experiences. We can be told about a dish that produces a disgust reaction in us (chocolate covered raw fish), but to *see* the dish being made usually causes a much more robust reaction. The same is the case in our descriptions of a polluted waterway. Some people may think "Now that's disgusting!" but being assaulted by the sensory experience is quite a different thing. Examples of this phenomenon abound. It is simply easier to experience a disgust reaction from direct sensory stimuli than from having something verbally described to you.

Conceptually speaking, the actual domain of this moral intuition (embodied by disgust) does not wander far from the proper domain of things that could possibly trigger disgust in aesthetic reactions. An obviously polluted environment often triggers a negative aesthetic reaction. While this reaction can be the product of the perception of harm, I believe that it is often rooted in a disgust response. Haidt and Joseph argue that "culturally widespread concerns with purity and pollution can be traced to a purity model evolved to deal with adaptive challenges of life in a world full of dangerous microbes and parasites" (Haidt and Joseph 60). One can see pollutants as a mere extension of the dangerous contaminants in our environment. Where once disgust was reserved for water fouled by excrement or animal decay, we now recognize oil slicks and the acetone smell of a factory as disgusting. Additionally, many disgust reactions to the environment are symbolic in nature.

Metaphorically, Western culture feminizes much of the natural world. We speak of "mother ocean" and "mother earth"…"virgin" woods, and the "defilement" of nature. As a culture we are more preoccupied with the sexual purity of women compared to men such that the word "virgin" is more often used with reference to women. To call something "defiled" seems to presuppose a former purity now gone. Metaphors are pervasive in language and are apparent in both thought *and* action. For example, the direction "up" is associated with an afterlife, and we release birds at funerals. Using metaphors to describe the environment is not merely a rhetorical or poetic device; such language reflects the manner in which we comprehend, think, and act in the world.

Mark Johnson and George Lakoff argue that metaphors are an integral part of our perceptual system. These concepts are not merely subjects of our intellect; rather, they guide some of the very operations of our intellect—they help define our realities. Johnson and Lackoff contend that "metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system" (6). Granted, our conceptual system is not something that we constantly assess; we often think and act habitually, being only slightly conscious of the metaphors we use. And yet, I want to argue that the language we use can help determine the way we actually perceive the world. We constantly operate on a system of metaphors when speaking about our relationship with the environment, how we perceive the environment, and changes to it. Metaphors can be understood as a deep conceptualization about how we think and, more importantly, feel about the environment. If we can conceptualize the environment as a pure thing that can be defiled or even violated in ways that can be described as "rape," then we conceivably experience the attendant feelings about such states of affairs. To conceptualize and perceive something as defiled surely causes or is caused by a relevant affective response.

Much of highly visible human extraction and development is interpreted as a defilement on the order of rape. And one can easily see how this is the case. There is visible and forced penetration into the surrounding earth. In fracking, the

operation includes forcing water under great pressure into the earth. But not all negative purity reactions are so dramatic. Often it is simply a concern for order. When a building is erected, a drainage ditch dug, a monoculture planted, or a highway constructed in some sort of natural expanse, people often interpret such changes as unharmonious. And the perceptual judgments made about such a scene can be highly cognitively influenced. For some, the view of a neatly planted cornfield is aesthetically pleasing, due to the order of it. But adding a "pioneer test field" sign can ruin it. Knowing that the crop in front of you is genetically modified elicits a negative reaction in some, and this reaction is due to a deep-seated concern for natural purity and order, a highly cognitive one that relies on a conception of what genetic modification entails.

Examples like the above point to the existence of sometimes highly cognitive and conceptual variants of what are nevertheless plausible aesthetic reactions. Things can *look* orderly in a purely formalist sense, while conveying the notion of disorder. Many of the examples of this rely on an accepted notion of what is "natural" for an area, landscape, or the flora and fauna within it. For example, a uniform forest of slash or loblolly pines often seen in Southern Alabama might seem quite orderly and so aesthetically good to some. Yet, the knowledge of the history of forestry in the area yields quite different results for me. While these trees are native, the uniform nature of their planting points to silviculture, which reminds me that these forests were once dominated by long leaf pines, the destruction of which led to the endangerment of many species. The "order" is actually a symbol of human domination and economization of the landscape—of disorder in the natural system.

Arguably, the same is the case with negative reactions to invasive species. If people are aware of such species, and can further perceptually recognize them, then negative reactions to the perceptual experience of their existence in an environment can be explained by a concern for purity and order in an environment. Even to call a species "invasive" belies a clear connotation of an invader occupying a space where they do not belong. Interestingly, the way we conceptualize and react to invasive species may also have its roots in a concern for loyalty. Political philosophers/scientists explain that often the way that loyalty is conceptualized is as a concern for in-group safety. There is an identity and trust for those we are familiar with, and any interruption by those viewed as outsiders is met with a negative response. It is not that large of a conceptual leap for people to view plants and animals as outsiders in their familiar natural environment. To be sure, ecologically informed reactions to invasive species can also have their root in a concern for harm.

As you can see, it is sometimes difficult to parse out aesthetic reactions from moral ones. Consider cemeteries and how intertwined the aesthetic presentation *of* them is with our moral reactions *to* them. Despite a debilitating, historic drought in California, people were enraged by the dry-brown grass in cemeteries—

particularly National cemeteries devoted to the interment of veterans. As one citizen put it "We have a real purpose and a mission here at the cemeteries to create a place that's worthy of the people that rest here" (qtd. in Potter). In this case, aesthetic value is symbolic of our moral consideration (the respect/loyalty foundation) for the dead.

I have argued that environmental aesthetic judgments can immediately lead to moral ones, and moral judgments often precede aesthetic ones. This is plausibly because the intuitions and emotions that give rise to such experiences come from the same source. Understanding the sources of environmental aesthetic reactions and knowing how they motivates may be a useful tool in garnering support for environmental projects. Political psychologists have illustrated that acceptance of a political cause as contentious as climate change can be influenced by the very foundational evaluatively-thick words used to describe it (Feinberg and Willer 34-38). And so why not use the ugly and the foundations we rely on for it?

NOTES

1. A note is in order. I rely on a relatively rudimentary understanding of what counts as "aesthetic" reaction/experience. Due to space, I do not have time to defend this. I also understand the drive to keep moral and aesthetic values conceptually distinct, but think this drive is mistaken in that such a distinction fails to capture many aspects of both moral and aesthetic evaluation—particularly of the environment. I also don't have the space to defend the notion that aesthetic experience is affectively driven. I aim to offer what I hope is a compelling *explanation* of these reactions. And even if some might argue that the phenomena that I purport to explain is not purely *aesthetic*, I believe it will be of theoretical interest nonetheless.

2. I would be remiss if I did not point out that this campaign is widely considered greenwashing. The campaign was bankrolled by the disposable beverage container industry to deflect criticism for the proliferation of such containers, which inevitably ended up spilling over into the environment. Furthermore, the Native American at the center of the commercial turned out not to be native at all, and was an Italian-American actor passing as a native.

3. Certain authors (Yuriko Saito, Allen Carlson, etc.) within the field of environmental aesthetics clearly think that a degraded ecosystem ought to be aesthetically judged as negative. Yuriko Saito even claims that this needs to be the case for *moral* reasons.

WORKS CITED

Feinberg, Matthew and Robb Willer. "Apocalypse Soon?: Dire Messages Reduce Belief in Global Warming by Contradicting Just-World Beliefs." *Psychological Science,* vol. 22, 2011, 34-38.

Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. "Intuitive Ethics: how innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues." *Deadalus* vol. 133, no. 3, 2004, 55-66.

Johnson, Mark and George Lakoff, *The Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago UP, 1980.
Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation.* Ballentine, 1966.
Potter, Daniel. "California Cemeteries Adapt to Water Restrictions to Avoid Going Dry." *All Things Considered,* National Public Radio). 27 April 2015. http://www.npr.org/2015/04/27/402632444/california-cemeteries-adapt-to-water-restrictions-to-avoid-going-dry Accessed 17 October 2016.
Rolston III, Holmes. "Is there an Ecological Ethic?" *Ethics*, vol. 85, no. 2, 1975, 93-109.