

# **Aesthetic properties in Allen Carlson's theory for the appreciation of nature: Focusing on the functions of categories**

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## **Introduction**

The concept of Contemporary Anglo-Saxon environmental aesthetics came into existence around 1960-1970. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the issue of natural beauty has been reconsidered in various areas. Environmental aesthetics has two characteristics: the method of analytic aesthetics and the connection with North American environmentalism and environmental ethics. It is necessary to consider the possibility of contemporary aesthetics of nature with paying attentions to those characteristics. Allen Carlson, a representative figure in this field, claims that we have to have common sense/scientific knowledge to aesthetically appreciate nature more appropriately, i.e., to find aesthetic properties in natural objects. He has focused on the object side for its potential in the theory of aesthetic appreciation, and not on the subject side that has been emphasized by many proceeding theories. [1] He mainly argues about aesthetic properties/qualities in the objects of appreciation. [2] This theory has elicited many responses. However, as Carlson himself pointed out, we have to pay attention not only to the object but also to the subject to consider the various aspects of aesthetic appreciation in nature. [3] Emily Brady is one of the philosophers who conclusively grapple with this problem. She has constructed a theory focusing on the interplay between the object and the subject by emphasizing the subject's faculties working to discover aesthetic properties, especially imagination. [4] Although many philosophers, including Brady, have developed their own theories to criticize Carlson, a systematic interpretation of Carlson's argument about aesthetic properties has not sufficiently appeared. So, in this paper, I aim to present an interpretation of Carlson's argument on aesthetic properties.

To understand his thought on aesthetic properties, it is important to describe the function of the categories explained by common sense/scientific knowledge (the classification of natural objects by science). Carlson refers to the relationship between categories and aesthetic properties in two distinctive contexts: the natural environmental model and a defense for positive aesthetics. These two arguments have different purposes. In the natural environmental model, Carlson claims that objective aesthetic judgments can be made about nature, analogous to some artworks. The defense of positive aesthetics means building the theory of aesthetic appreciation, which gives a foundation to the praise for wilderness, on the basis of his objectivism. It is a traditional perspective on nature from the 19th century in North America. In his theory, the categories are assigned two different functions with specific purposes; there are two kinds of aesthetic properties. In short, I will claim that we can find two kinds of aesthetic properties in an object

by appreciating it under common sense/scientific categories. In sections 1 and 2, I will clarify the content of two kinds of aesthetic properties by referring to their background. In the conclusion section, I will interpret the difference and similarity between them and present a problem in Carlson's theory.

## **1. The Natural Environmental Model**

### **—Categories define the noticeable points in appreciation**

The natural environmental model is a critical response against formalism. For example, Carlson criticizes the research procedure by the United States forest service because it adapted formalism to assess natural beauty. E. L. Shafer, the director of Environmental Forestry Research, presented some black and white scenery pictures to people who visited mountains and assessed the aesthetic attractions of landscapes by the tendency of people's preferences. [5] Carlson also criticizes some attitudes to appreciate nature as if it is an artwork for the same reason ('the object model' under which we appreciate nature as if sculptures and 'the landscape model' under which we appreciate nature as if paintings.) [6] Under these models, people apply different frameworks to the appreciation of natural environment. As a result, we cannot appreciate 'the nature of the natural environment' [7] since we pick up some formalistic features of nature under such models. He claims we can aesthetically appreciate nature only when we understand it. [8] In this sense, the first function of categories becomes important.

Before going further, it is important to note that Carlson is based on the distinction between non-aesthetic properties and aesthetic properties, which was proposed by Frank Sibley. Non-aesthetic properties mean physical properties of the objects (Cf. big, green). Aesthetic properties are based on non-aesthetic properties and perceived with taste. [9] [10] We refer to them as making aesthetic judgments (Cf. graceful, powerful). Following this distinction, Carlson says that people have 'emotional and perceptual sensitivity' and "a certain amount of knowledge and understanding of the environment." [11] Then, what kind of knowledge do we have? He states that it is 'common sense/scientific knowledge' [12] and explains its importance by comparing it with aesthetic appreciation of artworks as follows:

If to aesthetically appreciate art we must have knowledge of artistic traditions and styles within those traditions, to aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different environments of nature and of the systems and the elements within those environments. In the way in which the art critic and the art historian are well equipped to aesthetically appreciate art, the naturalist and ecologist are well equipped to aesthetically appreciate nature. [13]

Why does he understand the common sense/scientific knowledge at aesthetic appreciation of nature as analogous to the knowledge at appreciation of artworks? He says both kinds of knowledge have the same role in appreciation: to clarify what the object is. When we try to appreciate artworks appropriately, we usually do not only see their form but also refer to the historical contexts and the information about the style. In the same way, according to Carlson,

we have to refer common sense/scientific knowledge that also reveal what the object is. Following this argument, as there are ideal observers [14] for artworks ('the art critic and the art historian), there are 'naturalist and ecologist' in the case of nature. [15]

The specific role of common sense/scientific knowledge in the procedure perceiving aesthetic properties based on non-aesthetic properties is explained by the first function of categories. Carlson clarifies it by applying Kendal Walton's theory for categories of art. [16]

To understand Carlson's argument, let us see the outline of Walton's theory. [17] According to Walton, aesthetic properties in artworks not only depend on non-aesthetic properties but also on the differences between them: standard, variable and contra-standard. The categorization of a non-aesthetic property is defined by the category under which the work is appreciated. I will explain this by using an example.

A feature of a work of art is standard with respect to a category 'just in case the lack of that feature would disqualify, or tend to disqualify, a work from that category.' [18] Standard properties do not play a central role in aesthetic judgments but give order, stability, and correctness to a work under a category. [19]

For example, if a work does not have a flatness, we may hesitate to appreciate it as 'painting.' A flatness of paintings is not directly related to their values but confirms that they are 'paintings.' Variable properties are related to aesthetic judgments and do not define the categories to which a work belongs. [20] For example, which colors it has is not related to that work belongs to 'cubism.' However, it is an important element to make aesthetic judgments on it. Contra-standard properties prevent us from appreciating a work under a certain category. For example, Schönberg's twelve-tone music is not appreciated as belonging to 'romantic works' because of its scale. In this case, the scale is a contra-standard property to the category 'romantic works.'

As stated earlier, the categories under which a work is perceived decides the status of non-aesthetic properties (standard, variable and contra-standard). Walton also claims that the aesthetic properties of a work can be decided by how we perceive non-aesthetic properties in a work (as standard, variable or contra-standard). In that way, under which category a work is perceived decides what kind of aesthetic properties we appreciate in it. Our aesthetic judgments are varied according to categories. On the basis of this argument, Walton considers true/false aesthetic judgments. According to him, our aesthetic judgments of a work tend to be correct when we perceive it under the correct categories and vice versa. [21] Although there is no strictly accurate procedure to define correct categories for artworks, we have four points to decide correct categories: relatively a large number of standard features for the category, whether a work can be more interesting or aesthetically pleasing under the category, intentions of artists, and the conditions of society in which a work was produced. [22]

Now we have the outline of Walton's claim, but it is about artworks. Walton says we cannot assess the correctness of our aesthetic judgments about nature because we cannot decide correct categories for it in his sense. [23] Carlson understands Walton takes objectivism for aesthetic judgments of artworks and relativism for aesthetic judgments of nature. [24] According to Carlson, it is a suspicious position. For example, "The Grand Teton is majestic" seems to be intuitively correct, but "The Grand Teton is dumpy" seems to be false. Walton's position cannot explain this intuition. On the other hand, Carlson apprises the validity of Walton's theory for

explaining our aesthetic judgments of artworks. Hence, Carlson claims that we can say our aesthetic judgments of nature are objective by showing the possibility to apply Walton's theory to Carlson's theory for aesthetic appreciation of nature.

In fact, the idea to apply Walton's claim to nature is not so radical. Walton's theory of categories consists of two parts. In its first part, Walton explains the dependence of our aesthetic judgments on categories by using empirical examples. In this process, Walton uses not only artworks but also natural objects—elephants—as an example. [25] However, he claims we cannot assess the trueness of our aesthetic judgments of nature when he argues about the true/false of aesthetic judgments in the latter part. According to him, we can compare aesthetic judgments of natural objects and that of artworks with unknown origins. Certainly, we can make aesthetic judgments on them, but we are not in the position to assess their appropriateness. [26]

At this moment, the most important issue is the intention of artists and social condition of production, among Walton's four points. [27] Of course, because natural objects are not our creations, they do not have any intention or social condition. Carlson says "...we do not produce, but rather discover, natural objects and aspects of nature." [28] We do not create nature, but it does not mean we cannot understand it. We can understand it by discovering natural objects, i.e., by finding them and grasping their origins. Carlson considers categories related to this process, i.e., "common sense and/or "scientific" kind group," can be correct categories. In the case of appreciating artworks, categories, defined by referring intentions of artists and social conditions for production, have the function to make objective aesthetic judgments on their origin. In the same way, according to Carlson, categories defined by their origins can be correct categories for appreciating nature.

Carlson claims that we can decide correct categories for appreciating nature, and aesthetic properties perceived under correct categories are appropriate. For example, in Grand Teton, the height is a variable property under the category 'mountain,' and it is relatively higher than other mountains. On the basis of this non-aesthetic property, 'dumpy' may be an inappropriate aesthetic judgment but 'majestic' can be an appropriate one. In this process, the categories work for defining the perspective on a non-aesthetic property of the object. When we perceive natural objects under correct categories, we understand the appropriate focus on appreciating them. We can go beyond formalism based on the form of objects when we bring the understanding of their origin to our appreciation.

## **2. Positive Aesthetics**

### **—Categories show the positions of natural objects in natural world**

Carlson tries to theoretically defend the positive aesthetics on the basis of the argument that we saw in section 1. In this process, he assigns the second function to common sense/scientific categories and, as a result, gives another kind of aesthetic properties to the objects.

Positive aesthetics can be described as follows: all virgin nature is essentially aesthetically good. Carlson admits this seems to be unacceptable at first. It has a background, the thought of wilderness from the 19th century in North America. Carlson says positive aesthetics is completed by John Muir. [29] He is one of the naturalists who have received attentions through the rise of

environmentalism. He does not claim positive aesthetics philosophically but takes this position through writing essays about his experiences in nature. Carlson theoretically supports North American traditional view of nature, like Muir.

Then, Carlson's argument cannot entirely avoid the response that it is only valid under North American culture. However, he points out some examples to show how science can change our appreciation of nature outside of North America (even in this case, it is limited to the Western world). [30] For example, as Marjorie Hope Nicolson shows, the development of geology in the Western world has gradually changed their aesthetic judgments about mountains. Darwin's research also changed the view of nature, as Carlson explains. He put more contemporary philosophers, like Holmes Rolston III who appreciate nature aesthetically positive in terms of ecology, in this family tree. [31] As we will see later, Carlson himself is one of the philosophers who connect aesthetics to ecology.

Then, if there are some actual examples that show science can change our aesthetic judgments of nature, why can it happen? Carlson explains this by referring to common sense/scientific categories again.

As described in section 1, Carlson says that science provides us knowledge about nature and clarifies the correct categories of the objects. He claims positive aesthetics also can be plausible by those categories. However, of course, we cannot always make correct aesthetic judgments about artworks even if we perceive them under the correct categories. Why can we always make positive aesthetic judgments under correct categories of natural objects? Again he refers that we cannot create nature but discover it. But, this time he emphasizes the difference between artworks and natural objects. According to him, we "*create categories for them*" [32] when we discover a new natural object. He claims aesthetic goodness is related to this creation of categories as follows:

...a more correct categorization in science is one that over time makes the natural world seem more intelligible, more comprehensible to those whose science it is. Our science appeals to certain kinds of qualities to accomplish this. These qualities are ones such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, resolution, and so forth. ...Moreover, these qualities that make the world seem comprehensible to us are also those that we find aesthetically good. Thus, when we experience them in the natural world or experience the natural world in terms of them, we find it aesthetically good. This is not surprising, for qualities such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, and resolution are the kind of qualities that we find aesthetically good in art. [33]

The scientific categorization, common sense/scientific categories, makes it easy to understand the natural world. I interpret the aesthetic properties he mentions are, from its literal meaning, constituted by the relationships among each elements in natural world. Under the categories, which are created considering such aesthetic properties based on relationships, virgin nature is always assigned these kinds of aesthetic properties. [34]

However, can we call them as aesthetic properties? Do scientists consider these properties in the process of categorization not from aesthetic reason but from the logicality in science? This

question always follows the whole of his theory. But, at least, Carlson seems to justify these properties as aesthetic by claiming they are referred in aesthetic judgments about artworks, too. According to Carlson, we perceive some aesthetic properties in environments based on the relationships among the elements as we perceive same aesthetic properties in paintings by focusing on the relationships between their elements.

In this way, in defense of positive aesthetics, categories have different roles, as pointed out in section 1. [35] In this case, categories clarify the relationships between the object of appreciation and other objects in the natural world. Then, we assign aesthetic properties to it on the basis of their relationship.

## Conclusion

I clarified two kinds of aesthetic properties in Carlson's theory by examining the functions of categories in the natural environment model and the defense of positive aesthetics. There are some logical problems in his theory that I mentioned in another paper. [36] In this conclusion, I will point out a substantial problem in his argument about aesthetic properties.

Carlson explains the connection between the natural environmental model and positive aesthetics as follows:

...this model [the natural environmental model] provides theoretical underpinnings for positive aesthetics. When nature is aesthetically appreciated in virtue of the natural and environmental sciences, positive aesthetic appreciation is singularly appropriate, for, on the one hand, pristine nature—nature in its natural state—is an aesthetic ideal and on the other, as science increasingly finds, or at least appears to find, unity, order, and harmony in nature, nature itself, when appreciated in light of such knowledge, appears more fully beautiful. [37]

Carlson grasps the relationship between two arguments as the natural environmental model theoretically supports positive aesthetics. Under his framework, the natural environmental model and positive aesthetics cannot be separated. For once we perceive a natural object under the scientific category, both functions of the category work. In terms of aesthetic properties, however, both theories reveal different kinds of properties. On the one hand, in the natural environmental model, variable non-aesthetic properties are the focuses for appreciation and define aesthetic properties in the objects. The Grand Teton's aesthetic property, 'majestic,' is derived from its relative height among a category, "mountains." In this way, when we think about the first function of categories, it is essentially important to compare the object of appreciation with other objects belonging to the same category. On the other hand, in the second function of categories, the objects under the same category may not be compared. Rather, the relationship between other kinds of elements in the same environments defines aesthetic properties in objects.

Moreover, the characteristics of two kinds of aesthetic properties are different. The first kind of aesthetic properties can be understood supervening on the forms of objects because it is based on non-aesthetic properties, i.e., physical properties of objects. The second kind depends on the

scientific relationship between objects and is near to the conceptual understanding. Even if both are related to common sense/scientific categories, they are so different that we call both of them as aesthetic properties.

However, I want to pay more attention to the similarity between them. Carlson considers both of them as analogous to aesthetic properties in artworks. The first kind of aesthetic properties in his theory is captured by the application of Walton's argument for aesthetic judgments of artworks. The second kind is precisely called 'aesthetic property' because they are found in artworks, too. [38] Of course, it is not problematic that there are aesthetic properties common to nature and artworks. Sibley also says that his theory of aesthetic properties can be applied not only to artworks but also to other kinds of objects. [39]

I think, however, it is a problem for environmental aesthetics. Common sense/scientific categorization is a devise to focus on a natural object without applying frameworks for other things (sculpture, landscape painting). However, if the perceived aesthetic properties by this devise can only be analogous to aesthetic properties in artworks, it results in an attitude that captures natural objects as static like artworks. If so, Carlson's theory cannot explain the various aspects of our experiences in nature. This is because since around 1990, many theories against Carlson have been established that criticizes this static understanding of aesthetic properties. [40] Many of them argue the active aspects by subjects in aesthetic appreciation of nature. Brady, as I mentioned earlier, claims Carlson does not consider the freedom in aesthetic appreciation of nature and emphasizes the faculties of subjects, especially imagination, to explain it. Brady does not point out the similarity of aesthetic properties in his theory, but legitimately criticizes him. Nevertheless, her argument also depends on disinterested aesthetics, which are based on modern artworks. [41] I think the important difference between traditional artworks and natural environments is that the latter can be a part of our everyday life. Brady's theory ultimately cannot explain this difference. Although I have to examine her theory on another occasion, I think it will be an important work to reconsider the most basic concepts, such as 'aesthetic,' and refine the theory of environmental aesthetics focused on the differences between artworks and natural environments.

## Notes

- [1] Carlson [2000], 128-133.
- [2] In this paper, 'object' of appreciation means not only literal objects like trees but also natural phenomenon and natural landscape.
- [3] For example, Carlson [2005] positively refers to the recent researches that try to connect Carlson's argument with Brady's argument. Carlson [2009] also suggests the possibility to combine his theory with Arnold Berleant's 'the aesthetics of engagement.'
- [4] Brady [2003]
- [5] Carlson [1977], 137-139.
- [6] Carlson [1979a], 268-271. See Carlson [1979b] to understand his criticism for formalism.
- [7] Carlson [1979a], 271.
- [8] Hepburn [1966] also claims there is trivial and serious aesthetic appreciation of nature and we should aim for the latter. Although Hepburn himself connects the seriousness to scientific knowledge, this idea has a great influence on Carlson.

- [9] ‘Taste’ in Sibley’s argument has several interpretations. For example, Brady [2001] points out that Sibley takes appropriate knowledge not as a condition to discover aesthetic properties but as a condition to more sensitive perception. In other words, according to her, knowledge is not one of the essentials to taste but a supplement to it. Moreover, she claims that the taste in Sibley’s sense is not restricted to the specialist. Everyone can exercise it to some degree. I think her interpretation is valid. It is not a simple result of Sibley’s argument that “a certain amount of knowledge and understanding of the environment” is a condition to having taste as Carlson claims.
- [10] Cf. Sibley [1959], [1965]
- [11] Carlson [1977], 153.
- [12] Carlson also refers to cultural knowledge as a supplement to common sense/scientific knowledge in appreciation (Cf. Carlson [2000] Chapter 14.)
- [13] Carlson [1979a], 273. Carlson refers to John Muir (1838-1914) and Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) as examples of naturalists and ecologists on the notes. They have discovered natural beauty based on ecological knowledge (although ecology was not established in Muir’s day) and left many literatures for us. They have also contributed to the developments of environmentalism and environmental ethics. Muir was a founder of the Sierra Club. Leopold claims ‘land ethic’ that is a source of contemporary environmental ethics. As a reference about them, see Okazima [1990].
- [14] The argument of ideal observers has a long tradition from Hume. Brady suggests that naturalists and ecologists are ideal observers in Carlson’s theory and I agree with her (Brady [2003], 193.)
- [15] Carlson calls Leopold as “environmental critic” who has of the same capacities as art critics (Carlson [1977], 155).
- [16] Here, ‘paintings,’ ‘cubism,’ or “the style of late Beethoven” can be examples of ‘categories.’
- [17] Walton [1970] is against ‘the intentional fallacy,’ which is supported by Monroe Beardsley. This position weakens the importance of historical contexts in the criticism of literature. On the contrary, Walton tries to explain that the historical context can work as a presupposition of aesthetic judgment, although it is not directly related to the aesthetic judgment itself.
- [18] Walton [1970], 339.
- [19] Ibid., 347-348. However, overly standard non-aesthetic properties do not have this effect. For example, when we listen to a work under the category ‘sonata,’ the fact that it is constituted only by tones of piano (a standard property) does not give a special order to the work.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Ibid., 356. Walton admits that there are multiple correct categories for a work (Ibid., 357). He also does not claim aesthetic judgments under correct categories are always correct nor there is only one correct aesthetic judgment about a work.
- [22] Ibid., 357-358. We should be careful to the fact that Walton never claims that all categories, which are found by considering all four circumstances, are always correct or it is a correct category if it is found by considering at least two circumstances of them.
- [23] Ibid., 355.
- [24] It may be a cause of a false understanding about Walton to call his position objectivism. Walton certainly claims aesthetic judgments under wrong categories are false, but he does not claim aesthetic judgments under correct categories are always correct.
- [25] Ibid., 350-351.
- [26] Ibid., 364.
- [27] Carlson understands these two points are at issue, too. The number of standard properties can be straightly applied to categories of natural objects. Carlson assesses whether an object can be more aesthetically pleasing is not an essential component of the correctness of categories (Carlson [1981], 27.) Although there is a room to examine whether his assessment is valid, I will not consider it in this paper.
- [28] Carlson [1981], 21.

- [29] Carlson [2000], 11-12.
- [30] Carlson [1984], 21-24. Although Carlson does not suggest, there are some examples that science has changed aesthetic appreciation of nature, too. Saito [2008] points out that we can see the influence from science on Shiga Shigetaka's argument about natural beauty in his *Nihon Fukei Ron*.
- [31] Carlson [1984], 23. Rolston is an environmental philosopher. He explains our duty to nature from aesthetic values of it (Cf. Rolston [1983], [2002]).
- [32] Ibid, 30.
- [33] Ibid. It is unclear that whether he says natural world itself or individual natural object is aesthetically good. However, I think the results of two interpretations are not much different. Even if we take the former, individual natural objects are also aesthetically good because they are the parts of an aesthetically good natural world.
- [34] Ibid. We should be careful to the following two points: (1) Carlson admits the justification of positive aesthetics by science is a culturally relativistic view to some degree because it has no validity outside the community, which holds scientific view about the world (Ibid., 32) (2) Positive aesthetics based on science is expanding the realm of aesthetically good nature by proceeding the scientific understanding of our world. Carlson thinks some day we can appreciate aesthetically positive things, but we cannot appreciate them now by providing scientific knowledge. (Ibid, 33)
- [35] Carlson [1993] presents "order appreciation" and tries to defend positive aesthetics more precisely. It is a procedure to appreciate aesthetic properties that are not easily perceived in natural objects posing it in the natural order. It is generated by geological, biological, and meteorological forces, and we can understand it by knowing the story given by natural sciences. 'The order appreciation' can explain why all natural objects can be equally appreciated aesthetically, i.e., positive aesthetics. For the story orders nature and gives individual objects in nature some aesthetic properties, such as meaning, significance, beauty. All natural objects can be a part of this natural order. Then, he claims that all of them can have positive aesthetic properties (Carlson [1993], 219-221.)
- [36] Aota [2014]
- [37] Carlson [2000], 12.
- [38] According to this issue, Nishimura Kiyokazu says "Carlson's claim also, at least about aesthetic properties, arrives at 'artistic model' which Carlson himself criticizes because he applies the forms or orders which we find in artworks after categories to the logical properties, such as order or regularity, in nature." (Nishimura [2011], 39.)
- [39] Sibley [1959], 422.
- [40] For example, Foster [1998] pays attention to the "ambient dimension" of aesthetic appreciation which cannot be described by terms or static aesthetic properties. Carroll [1993] explains appreciation of nature from our emotions aroused by it.
- [41] Brady [2003], Chapter 1.

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\* This is based on my paper:

Aota, Mami. 2015. "Allen Carlson-no-Shizen-Kanshō-Riron-niokeru-Biteki-Seishitsu: Category-no-Hataraki-ni-Chūmoku-shite." *Bigaku* 246. 89-100 (published by the Japanese Society for Aesthetics).