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# Nature, Aesthetics and Humility

Emily Brady

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In this essay, I discuss how environmental (or “nature”) aesthetics offers ideas for thinking through humility towards the natural world. While various forms of aesthetic responses to nature may support an attitude of humility, the exalting yet humbling effects of encountering the sublime in nature will constitute my main focus. With respect to the concept of humility, I consider both epistemic and moral forms, and I ask how particular features of aesthetic experience and response can function to set limits on human knowledge and power. To explore this topic, I develop a conversation between eighteenth-century aesthetics, a rich source for thinking about the aesthetics of nature as well as the sublime, and the contemporary writings of the late philosopher and influential environmental aesthetician, Ronald W. Hepburn.

## 1 Humility

In the eighteenth century, humility had, arguably, different meanings than we see in philosophical discussions today. Commonly, the term was used in discussions of the virtues, and in David Hume’s philosophy, for example, humility meant being humiliated, a painful experience contrasted with the pleasure of pride<sup>1</sup> – rather than an attitude of humbleness and a recognition of the limits of human knowledge, which is how many philosophers understand the concept today. Somewhat in contrast to Hume, Adam Smith’s conception of the ‘prudent man’ speaks more to humility:

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1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (1740; Oxford, 1978, 2nd edn), 286 (II, I.v). Hume is also known for including humility among the ‘monkish virtues’, and went so far as to call it a vice. See *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (1777; Oxford, 1975, 3rd edn), 270 (IX, I); and Mark Button, “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility”, *Political Theory*, 33 (2005), 840–68, 847.

The prudent man, though not always distinguished by the most exquisite sensibility, is always very capable of *friendship*. But his friendship is not that ardent and passionate, but too often transitory affection, which appears so delicious to the generosity of youth and inexperience. *It is a sedate, but steady and faithful attachment to a few well-trying and well-chosen companions; in the choice of whom he is not guided by the giddy admiration of shining accomplishments, but by the sober esteem of modesty, discretion, and good conduct.* But though capable of friendship, he is not always much disposed to general sociality. (My emphasis – E. B.)<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary discussions of humility are diverse, ranging from philosophy of religion to moral philosophy and environmental ethics. Nancy Snow's study of the concept of humility provides some general insight on the idea: "To think too much of yourself and too little of values extending beyond the self is to lack proper humility".<sup>3</sup> In environmental ethics, Simon James, influenced by Buddhism, has discussed humility as incompatible with self-aggrandizement, and argues:

[the humble person] will not tend to exaggerate his [or her] role in human history. [...] Considering the fate of a particular endangered species, he [or she] will be acutely aware of the vast evolutionary history that produced it, the accumulated effects of countless tiny changes in the genetic composition of the relevant populations. And he [or she] will therefore realize how momentous an event it would be if we late-comers to the evolutionary scene were to bring about its extinction...<sup>4</sup>

Edward Relph takes a similar approach with his concept of 'environmental humility', which describes different ways of 'treating the world'. These ways have in common 'only an inclination to work with environments and circumstances rather than trying to manipulate and dominate them'.<sup>5</sup> For his part, Hepburn does not discuss humility at length, however, there is a prominent

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2 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), 213 (vi.i).

3 Nancy Snow, 'Humility', *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 29 (1995), 203–16, 209.

4 Simon P. James, *Introduction to Environmental Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2015), 88.

5 Edward Relph, *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography* (Lanham, 1981), 162. More recently, see Matthew Piantalo, 'Humility and Environmental Virtue Ethics' in Michael W. Austin (ed.), *Virtues in Action: New Essays in Applied Virtue Ethics* (London, 2013), 132–49.

theme throughout his work that the aesthetic subject ought to show *respect* for the natural world as part of any aesthetic experience. Respect plays a role in his discussions of the sublime, wonder, serious and trivial aesthetic appreciation of nature, and the overlaps and boundaries between aesthetic, moral and religious experience.

Why, then, is the concept of humility one we should care about in this conversation between eighteenth-century aesthetics and Hepburn's writings? In this conversation, I am less concerned about whether or not various philosophers have discussed humility explicitly. Rather, my interest is focused on a constellation of concepts and ideas which embody what moral philosophers today would call 'other-regarding attitudes'. Specifically, I want to know where these concepts and ideas are located with respect to the aesthetic subject and response, how they help us to think through humility, and how that term functions as a kind of ideal virtue or attitude with regard to nature and environment.

On a more general level, this essay seeks to contribute to broader philosophical concerns in both historical and contemporary contexts: first, to highlight the role of aesthetic appreciation of nature as a counterbalance to the celebration of humanity and reason in the Enlightenment; and second, in light of the declared age of the 'Anthropocene' – the pervasive and often damaging effects of humanity on the earth – to explore just how environmental aesthetics might contribute to understanding humility as the appropriate response.

## 2 Self- and other-directed admiration in the natural sublime

A common theme emerges in the history of the sublime that the greatness of some external object in the world enables the mind or soul to become aware of its own greatness. This is evident, for example, in the writings of John Dennis, John Baillie, Alexander Gerard, and Thomas Reid, to mention but a few.<sup>6</sup> The idea can be traced back to Ps. Longinus' sublime, which is mainly conveyed via a treatise on style in language. He ties the sublimity of great or lofty language to its uplifting effects on both the mind and our emotions: 'For the true sublime naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud

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6 Depending on the analytical framework, the idea has been criticised as a claim to superiority (or power) over other classes of people, colonised peoples, women, or nature. See Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature* (Cambridge, 2013).

exaltation, we are filled with joy and pride, as if we had ourselves produced the very thing heard.’<sup>7</sup> Centuries later, in 1696, Dennis writes that, ‘the soul is transported upon it, by the consciousness of its own excellence, and it ‘is exalted, there being nothing so proper to work on its vanity [...] if the hint be very extraordinary, the soul is amazed by the unexpected view of its own surpassing power.’<sup>8</sup> Later, in the eighteenth century, in his *An Essay on the Sublime* (1747), Baillie defines the idea in this way:

Hence comes the name of sublime to every thing which thus raises the mind to fits of greatness, and disposes it to soar above her mother earth; hence arises that exultation and pride which the mind ever feels from the consciousness of its own vastness – that object can only be justly called sublime, which in some degrees disposes the mind to this enlargement of itself, and gives her a lofty conception of her own powers.<sup>9</sup>

Gerard, influenced by Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Addison and Hume, among others, echoes these ideas when he says that: ‘from this sense of immensity, [the mind] feels a noble pride, and entertains a lofty conception of its own capacity’.<sup>10</sup>

In response to ideas about the sublime such as these (and including Immanuel Kant’s), Hepburn has pointed to how they diminish ‘nature’s contribution in favour of the onesided exalting of the rational subject-self’<sup>11</sup> and ‘the natural, external world may come to be seen as of value in the sublime experience, *only* because it can make a person feel the capaciousness of his soul. Intensity of experience may become the solely prized value.’<sup>12</sup> In my book, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, in opposition to these views, I have argued that many theories of the sublime – from those of the Scottish Enlightenment to many others of the period – also emphasise the

7 Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, rev. Donald Russell (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 179 (sect. 7).

8 John Dennis, ‘Remarks on a book entitled, Prince Arthur (1696)’ in Andrew Ashfield and Peter De Bolla (eds), *The Sublime: a Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, 1996), 30–1, 30.

9 John Baillie, *An Essay on the Sublime* (London, 1747), 4 (sect. I).

10 Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (London, 1759), 14 (I, 2).

11 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Landscape and Metaphysical Imagination’, *Environmental Values*, 5 (1996), 191–204, 202.

12 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘The Concept of the Sublime: Has it Any Relevance for Philosophy Today?’, *Dialectics and Humanism*, 1–2 (1988), 137–55, 143.

ways in which the natural sublime creates a feeling of insignificance in the subject, where the subject feels humbled by the natural phenomena of soaring mountains, stormy seas, vast deserts, and the night sky.<sup>13</sup> The sublime aesthetic response is, in many theories, and perhaps in actual experiences too, both self- and other-directed, in so far as the power or great scale of natural phenomena enable one to grasp both how small one feels, but also how humanity fits – or finds a place in – the natural world.

The natural world was central to eighteenth-century notions of the sublime, even if the arts also played an important role. James Beattie, Gerard's student, sums up many of the ideas found in eighteenth-century theories, including the essential role of nature:

The most perfect models of sublimity are seen in the works of nature. Pyramids, palaces, fireworks, temples, artificial lakes and canals, ships of war, fortification, hills levelled and caves hollowed by human industry, are mighty efforts, no doubt, and awaken in every beholder a pleasing admiration; but appear as nothing, when we compare them, in respect of magnificence, with mountains, volcanoes, rivers, cataracts, oceans, the expanse of heaven, clouds and storms, thunder and lightning, the sun, moon, and stars. So that, without the study of nature, a true taste in the sublime is absolutely unattainable.<sup>14</sup>

The sublime experience of nature can be said to consist in dual admiration that is both internally and externally directed. Hepburn would seem to agree with this, because he has *also* written that, 'It does seem to me that some experiences of sublimity are very thoroughly other-directed, celebrating, wondering at astounding features of the world, a world with which we certainly interact that which is also irreducibly over-against us.'<sup>15</sup>

This provides an opening for Hepburn's philosophy to show the way for building a stronger case for sublime aesthetic experience as both self- and other-directed. If this case can be made sufficiently well, it serves my aim of showing how aesthetic experience supports an attitude of humility toward

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13 Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, esp. chapter 8.

14 James Beattie, 'Dissertations Moral and Critical (1783)' in Ashfield and De Bolla, *The sublime*, 180–94, 186.

15 Ronald W. Hepburn, Review of *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* by James Kirwan, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 47 (2007), 217–219, 219.

the natural world. To this end, I now turn more fully to an examination of Hepburn's work.

### 3 Hepburn on environmental aesthetic appreciation

A common theme running through Hepburn's thought is that there are two main components of environmental aesthetic experience (generally understood, not just in the sublime). He writes:

We need to acknowledge a duality in much aesthetic appreciation of nature, a sensuous component and a thought-component. First, sensuous immediacy: in the purest cases one is taken aback by, for instance, a sky colour-effect, or by the rolling away of cloud and mist from a landscape. Most often, however, an element of thought is present, as we implicitly compare and contrast *here* with *elsewhere*, *actual* with *possible*, *present* with *past*.<sup>16</sup>

These components can be simultaneously present, and each component is appropriate and aesthetically valuable, opening up space for a wide range of appropriate responses and different aesthetic frameworks. Why? He says that this will 'ensure an inexhaustible diversity in the resultant aesthetic experience.'<sup>17</sup>

Now, the thought-component has a special place in aesthetic experience for Hepburn, for it constitutes the autonomous contribution of the subject, that is, the subject's capacity to freely imagine, create, improvise within aesthetic experience by bringing the subject's thought components to bear on perceptual particulars. Importantly, these thought components are 'not separable, added-on reveries, but are integrated with the perceptual component as we experience them.'<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the thought component enables an opening out of aesthetic experience towards 'some background awareness, whether

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16 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Aldershot, 2001), 1–15, 2.

17 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Untitled paper' read to the British Society of Aesthetics Annual Conference, Oxford, September 2007. See also, Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Freedom and Receptivity in Aesthetic Experience', *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, 3 (2006), <http://www.pjaesthetics.org/index.php/pjaesthetics/article/view/42/41>, accessed 6 October 2017. (At time of printing, *PJA* is moving to a new online location.)

18 Hepburn, 'Untitled paper'.

autobiographical, scientific, historical, metaphysical, cosmic – to move increasingly far from the particularised.<sup>19</sup>

The thought component is where the freedom afforded by aesthetic experience occurs. The idea is also, most likely, an outcome of influences by Kant and Romanticism on Hepburn's work, for both emphasised the place and value of imagination in aesthetic experience and beyond.<sup>20</sup> However, it is useful and interesting to consider earlier work in aesthetics which emphasises the free play of imagination. For example, Addison's remarks on the sublime from very early in the eighteenth century anticipate the free play we later find in Kant's aesthetic theory: 'such wide and undetermined prospects are as pleasing to the fancy, as the speculations of eternity or infinitude are to the understanding'.<sup>21</sup> The aesthetic subject reflects on an image of their own freedom, as instantiated in experiences of the sublime in nature: 'a spacious horizon is an image of liberty, where the eye has room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the immensity of its views'.<sup>22</sup>

Now, Hepburn does not seem entirely comfortable with this feature of freedom in aesthetic experience. Throughout his philosophical work there is a tension between what he refers to as 'human freedom' and 'human finitude', which he describes in different ways depending on the focus. For example, in the article, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', a duality operates between aesthetic attention to particulars and ways that aesthetic experience enlivens the self. When environmental aesthetic appreciation is serious rather than trivial, there is, 'on the one side, a respect for its structures and the celebrating of these, and on the other, a legitimate annexing of natural forms for articulating our own inner lives'.<sup>23</sup>

It should be clear by now that human freedom is expressed through the thought component. On the other side, a reasonable interpretation is to identify human finitude with the sensuous component of aesthetic experience or attention to aesthetic qualities in nature, themselves. It is that aspect of aesthetic experience in which one takes up an other-directed form of attention,

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19 Ibid., 5.

20 See also Hepburn's remarks on the Kantian sublime in 'Freedom and Receptivity in Aesthetic Experience', 2.

21 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator* (London, 1712), No. 412.

22 Ibid. Cf. Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays on Aesthetics* (New York, 2005), 25. Guyer also argues for the emergence, in the eighteenth century, of feeling and imagination as key aspects of aesthetic thought. See Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics, vol. 1, the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2014).

23 Hepburn, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, viii.



outwards from the self. In the sublime, this might happen by focusing attention on the vast starry sky, or the subject might be drawn out of themselves by a thunderous clap during a storm, or a brilliant, crooked flash of lightning in the sky. Here, we find that such attention can constitute a ‘respect’ and ‘celebration’ of aesthetic qualities in nature because the subject exercises not freedom, but the capacity to limit self-attention, consider, and value the ‘more-than-human’ through the aesthetic response.

Why does Hepburn not express such a stance as humility, and why do we not see more mention of the term in his work? He was deeply influenced by figures such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (both were influenced by Kant), and he shared with them an interest in aesthetic experience of the particulars of nature as linked to metaphysical experience in the subject. For example, Coleridge remarks that the sublime is vast unity, ‘boundless or endless *allness*.’<sup>24</sup> When describing the complexity of a mountain range, he characterizes the impression of formlessness, which is reminiscent of themes in Kant: ‘too multiform for Painting, too multiform even for the Imagination.’<sup>25</sup> The movement from some particular of nature to the metaphysical realm was a hallmark of Romanticism, but it was not one that was fully directed at nature itself, as if nature fully absorbed the subject to the exclusion of everything else.

It should also be clear that such movement was active rather than passive aesthetic experience. Hepburn put it best, I think, when he wrote that aesthetic experience of nature is reflexive, the subject is ‘involved in the natural aesthetic situation itself [...] [as] both actor and spectator, ingredient in the landscape [...] playing actively with nature, and letting nature, as it were, play with me and my sense of myself.’<sup>26</sup> This type of involvement can mean experiencing oneself in ‘an unusual and vivid way; and this difference is not merely noted, but dwelt upon aesthetically. [...] [W]e are *in* nature and a part *of* nature; we do not stand over against it as over against a painting on a wall.’<sup>27</sup> As such, a kind of relationship may be formed: ‘Nature and ourselves are indissolubly co-authors, for instance, of our aesthetic experience’, but ‘the task is to avoid

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24 Samuel Taylor Coleridge quoted in Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, ‘Coleridge on the Sublime’ in Earl Leslie Griggs (ed.), *Wordsworth and Coleridge* (Princeton, 1939), 192–219, 196.

25 Coleridge quoted in Thorpe, *ibid.*, 201.

26 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’ in *idem*, *Wonder and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields* (Edinburgh, 1984), 9–35, 12–13.

27 *Ibid.*

self-diminishing without lurching to the opposite error of exaggerating our creative role.<sup>28</sup> I interpret Hepburn's remarks here as attempting to capture the mutual interaction, maybe even agency, of each part of the human–nature relationship. I would also suggest that he is expressing, implicitly, a concern that sometimes goes along with the attitude of respect. Respect is potentially over distancing, an other-regarding attitude that can sometimes, in one's effort not to manipulate or to interfere, put the other at too great a distance.

What we find, then, is not humility toward nature in the form of kneeling before the beauty, wonder and sublimity of nature – or indeed a kind of nature worship. Rather, Hepburn celebrates imaginative and poetic responses to the natural world, and where a relationship with nature shapes the individual and leads to life-enhancement. In this way his conception of the human role here is one that sees the aesthetic subject as active, responsive, improvisational and, importantly, receptive. In this mode, the aesthetic subject adopts a stance that is also 'other-acknowledging,' where we seek to grasp that other, even if we cannot do so fully. The natural world is not passive either here, consisting in ecological, geological, dynamic phenomena and particulars that activate imagination and encourage participation.

Hepburn explicitly says that he is not interested in a single notion of respect, and that various notions of the concept will be relevant in our attitudes toward the natural world. Also, he remarks that we need a cluster of concepts to shape the right attitudes, 'respect, wonder, compassion'.<sup>29</sup> Although Hepburn is most likely less interested in a narrow idea of humility in environmental aesthetics, we can see that his views do at least share the spirit of the attitude, in the way that Snow describes it as concerned with 'values extending beyond the self'.

Maybe, for Hepburn, humility does not fully capture the feature of freedom that is such an important component of the aesthetic mode of human experience for him. Indeed, this has been a common, historical criticism of Christian humility and even non-religious notions of humility, that the subject may become overly passive, and humility potentially causes inaction in the face of injustice. Perhaps on Hepburn's approach, this would translate into aesthetic experience that is overly receptive, and preventing a proper relationship to develop, that is, the interplay of human and nature in the aesthetic response and a sense of where each member in that relationship stands.

It would be amiss not raise discussion of *wonder* with respect to experience of the natural world, though the essay by Isis Brook in the present collection

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28 Hepburn, 'Values and Cosmic Imagination', 162.

29 Ibid., 161.

treats the topic in the proper detail that it deserves. Hepburn wrote one of the few early papers on wonder by a contemporary philosopher, and it remains a classic.<sup>30</sup> I agree with his assessment that wonder and aesthetic experience are fields and experiences which overlap, but they are not to be identified with one another.<sup>31</sup> As with the aesthetic response, it is an easy transition from wonder to humility; wonder is commonly said to involve being receptive to otherness, sensitive to the world, and open to its diversity and majesty. Wonder has also been linked to epistemic finitude, that is, becoming aware of what one does not know, perhaps discovering not answers, but mystery in the world.

It is also an easy transition from aesthetics to wonder, but the two ways of relating to the world are not one and the same. There are overlaps to be sure; my response to a snowflake glistening on the sleeve of my winter coat mixes aesthetic delight at the complex, delicate forms, with a reaction of “Wow! Look at how intricate that snowflake is; it looks so different up close, and that’s just one snowflake among all the tiny snowflakes in the snow flurry around me!”

However, wonder is very much a way of relating characterised by curiosity and wondering how and why. In the moment of marvelling at the incredible patterns of the clouds above or the apparently orderly actions of thousands of worker ants tending to their nest, we are at the same time struck by questions: “What’s going on up there in the atmosphere that makes the clouds those incredible shapes? What are those ants doing? Oh, I see they’re moving food and working together to move it to particular place, but where and why?”

So, wonder may integrate an aesthetic reaction like sublimity, for example, but it is accompanied by a questioning attitude. Wonder commonly stirs intellectual curiosity and a desire to know, which is not always the case in aesthetic responses. Wonder is relational also, in the often unconscious *comparison* – the contrast – between ourselves and that which is astonishing. Wonder is an attitude where we attempt to grasp what is different from our human selves – fascinating and wonderful at least because of that.

Hepburn writes that wonder has a life-enhancing character which is ‘appreciative and open, opposed to the self protective and consolatory’, and:

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30 See Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Wonder’ in idem, *‘Wonder’ and Other Essays*, 131–54. See also Sophia Vasalou, *Wonder: A Grammar* (Albany, 2015). While noting similarities, Philip Fisher contrasts wonder and sublimity by referring to them respectively, as an ‘aestheticization of delight’ and ‘an aestheticization of fear’. See *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, 1998), 2.

31 Hepburn, ‘Wonder’, 147.

The attitude of wonder is notably and essentially *other-acknowledging*. It is not shut up in self-concern or quasi-solipsistic withdrawal. [...] [T]he task and distinctive point of view of morality are obscured until the *otherness* of one's neighbour is realized, and realized with it is the possibility of action purely and simply on another's behalf.<sup>32</sup>

Via the 'close affinity' between attitudes of wonder and 'attitudes that seek to affirm and respect other-being', he notes a close connection between wonder and compassion, and from here he adds 'gentleness – concern not to blunder into a damaging manipulation of another.'<sup>33</sup> He then goes on to make a direct connection between wonder and humility (also citing the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss):

From a wondering recognition of forms of value proper to other beings, and a refusal to see them simply in terms of one's own utility-purposes, there is only a short step to *humility*. Humility, like wonder, involves openness to new forms of value: both are opposed to the attitude of 'We've seen it all!'<sup>34</sup>

Hepburn was clearly interested in the ways that aesthetic appreciation of the natural world – the experience of aesthetic richness of particular things – set off a host of imaginings and thoughts. His philosophical ideas suggest a deep concern about how aesthetic, quasi-aesthetic and moral experience shape the self – but also, importantly, point beyond the self to 'other-being', whether that is in terms of wondrous or sublime things, or simply metaphysical possibility. The receptivity of aesthetic experience, wonder, and humility, point to the importance of a life in which we certainly have *not* 'seen it all'.

In Hepburn's later work, there are two papers which speak directly to this sense of the cosmic unknown: 'Mystery in an Aesthetic Context' and his very last, posthumously published paper, 'The Aesthetics of Sky and Space'.<sup>35</sup> In the former, he offers some interesting ways to understand mystery in aesthetic appreciation of both art and nature. While he does not align it explicitly with the sublime, the category of cosmological mystery, and its sub-category of

32 Ibid., 144–5.

33 Ibid., 145–6.

34 Ibid., 146.

35 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Mystery in an Aesthetic Context', paper read to the research seminar of the Philosophy Department, Durham University, 2003; 'The Aesthetics of Sky and Space', ed. Emily Brady, *Environmental Values*, 19 (2010), 273–88.

‘indeterminate mystery’, describe a feature of Romanticism which Isaiah Berlin characterised as ‘the absence of a structure of the world to which one must adjust oneself.’<sup>36</sup> More recently, Stan Godlovitch has adopted the idea of ‘mystery’ to characterise his ‘acentric theory’ of aesthetic appreciation of environment, which has also been called the ‘mystery model’.<sup>37</sup> The acentric perspective places the aesthetic subject in a position of radical de-subjectivity where all cultural, and even scientific knowledge, is removed. In a position of being acutely aware of nature’s independence from us, and lying beyond our knowledge, he argues that our only appropriate aesthetic response is a sense of mystery.<sup>38</sup> With respect to the sublime, scientific knowledge can enable us to understand many things greater than ourselves, like the incredible atmosphere and landscapes of Mars. Nevertheless, a feeling of the ungraspable may remain, and that feeling is part of the metaphysical aspect of sublime experience which goes along with being overwhelmed.<sup>39</sup>

Although Hepburn and Godlovitch helpfully articulate how aesthetic experience involves a sense of the unknowable, the concept of ‘mystery’ carries too much terminological and cultural baggage for my liking. We have seen that the sublime functions – within aesthetic experience – to place limits on the human, to unseat humanity from its common anthropocentric position with respect to the rest of the natural world. The sublime, in this way, could be said to produce a cosmological shift from a sense of confidence and ability to one in which the greatness of other things forces us to re-examine our place in the cosmos. This provides an opening for epistemic humility through sublime, aesthetic experience.

‘The Aesthetics of Sky and Space’ was delivered posthumously at the Celestial Aesthetics conference held at Valamo Monastery in eastern Finland in 2009. Conference participants, including myself, marvelled at the vast starry night in a dark sky/low light pollution setting on the edge of a frozen lake. The extent to which human beings can aesthetically experience cosmological phenomena with the naked eye, let alone telescopes and the like, provides a supreme case of sublimity. Sublimity is not the main concern of his paper,

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36 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London, 1999), quoted in Hepburn, ‘Mystery in an Aesthetic Context’.

37 As described by Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York, 2000), 8.

38 Stan Godlovitch, ‘Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11 (1994), 15–30, 26.

39 On the role of science in the sublime, see Sandra Shapshay, ‘Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Neglect of the Sublime’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 53 (2013), 181–98.

although it is perhaps implicit in much that he says. In exploring just what an aesthetics of sky and space might look like, he returns to a familiar theme in his work – how human freedom is afforded by and discovered through aesthetic experience, and what happens in the wake of that:

don't we have a choice between two views of ourselves: on the one hand, as hugely diminished by our full realisation of the dimensions and numbers of the galaxies in comparison with our 'own' planet and solar system, and the total loss of any analogical or symbolic 'placing' of humanity in the cosmos [...], and, on the other hand, seeing ourselves as quite extraordinarily 'favoured' in another way. We can see ourselves as the place where the impersonal becomes personal, the unconscious conscious, and the un-free free. Not only are consciousness and freedom essential features of humanity, conferring dignity— far more so than would greater physical size or cosmic centrality or other physical enhancement. But we have also the extraordinary capacity for concern about other sentient individuals and in some cases the capacity to love. No less notable is the use of our freedom to make the aesthetically unappreciated become progressively appreciated and enjoyed.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, the aesthetic encounter with the cosmos can be existentially disorienting, 'with handrails gone, we may have vertiginous moments too – and wish that our freedom were *less*.'<sup>41</sup> Once again, Hepburn reminds us how aesthetic experience of the natural world evokes a feeling of both human freedom *and* human finitude.

#### 4 Conclusion

Let me draw this essay to a close by bringing some of these ideas back into discussion with eighteenth-century thought. What can we learn from Hepburn's philosophy for understanding other-directed admiration in the natural sublime? Hepburn lived in a time of rising environmental awareness, environmental protection and conservation. We live in that same era now and face the greatest yet global environmental catastrophe in the form of climate change. While the likes of Dennis, Hutcheson, Addison, Hume,

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<sup>40</sup> Hepburn, 'The Aesthetics of Sky and Space', 285.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

Gerard, Baillie, Reid, and so on were not environmentalists, they were living in a time when landscape tastes opened up direct appreciation of the beauty, sublimity, and wonder of nature and the cosmos. Concurrently, scientific discoveries of the time moved beyond theistic understandings of the natural world. Within this context, the sublime, as well as wonder, provided aesthetic and quasi-aesthetic experiences and forms of aesthetic appreciation that were other-directed, potentially valuing aesthetic qualities of the non-human world for their own sake.

In various accounts from the period we find a kind of ‘descriptive aesthetics’ which describes a whole range of cases of sublime objects and phenomena. Such descriptions are used to underpin discussions of aesthetic valuing of nature, the arts, architecture, and so on. We find that various philosophers point to particular natural qualities for aesthetic appreciation. For example, Addison favours the natural to the artistic sublime: ‘There is something more bold and masterly in the rough careless strokes of nature, than in the nice touches and embellishments of art’.<sup>42</sup> Note the quotation from Beattie above and, later, we see Archibald Alison describing a sublime eagle as ‘expressive [...] of liberty and independence, and savage majesty’.<sup>43</sup>

Do these kinds of remarks suggest a genuine valuing of nature, an *other*-regarding moral (not merely aesthetic) attitude within the sublime response? It is difficult to be sure. It is worth raising the point, however, that a ‘moral sublime’ surfaces in some theories via discussions of admiration for universal benevolence. Although directed towards human virtues, such admiration nevertheless suggests how the sublime can involve respect – perhaps even humility – beyond the subject. In this regard, Adam Smith extols the virtue of self-command as ‘great’, ‘Virtue is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary [...]. The awful and respectable, in that degree of self-command which astonishes by its amazing superiority over the most ungovernable passions of human nature.’<sup>44</sup>

It is also instructive to situate these ideas within the broader context of the close relationship that was drawn between aesthetic, moral, and religious experience in eighteenth-century philosophy by the likes of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and others (even as philosophy became more secular during the Enlightenment). Such affinities are, interestingly, reflected in Hepburn’s

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42 *The Spectator*, No. 414.

43 Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (London, 1871; 5th edn), 139.

44 Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 6 (I.i.5).

long-standing philosophical views and in his own theories, which often examined the overlaps and boundaries between the aesthetic, moral, and religious, exemplarily in his essays of *The Reach of the Aesthetic*.

In the sublime, we have found that there is human freedom expressed in the expansion of imagination and an uplifting of the self, but there is also engagement with the very qualities of greatness in nature. If the interpretation here is a reasonable one, then the conversation opened up in this essay shows that there is room for humility in eighteenth-century conceptions of the sublime, as well as in Hepburn's own contemporary understanding of environmental aesthetic appreciation. What, however, is at stake here with regard to humility? Why is this sort of moral attitude relevant aesthetically and environmentally-speaking? Above, I mentioned that Hepburn thinks we need a cluster of concepts to shape the right attitudes, 'respect, wonder, compassion'. As I see it, the stance of humility has the potential to address the problem of overly-distanced forms of respect, as long as that stance is not too subservient or passive. The close attention to and appreciation of the natural world that often comes through aesthetic valuing has the potential to support right attitudes. With this in mind, humility may be said to bring more feeling into the aesthetic-ethical picture, with the possible advantage of dampening the hubris of human dominance of the earth.

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