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Harmon, David, ed. 2006. *People, Places, and Parks: Proceedings of the 2005 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: The George Wright Society.

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# Wilderness Advocacy from Aesthetic and Rational Grounds: Epistemology and Ontology as Grounds of Necessity in Wilderness Preservation

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This paper seeks to differentiate *rational* arguments as necessary and universal from *aesthetic* arguments as contingent and particular. Any speaker uses language, and this language depends upon reason for its coherence and meaningfulness. With arguments for and against wilderness preservation justified with appeals to “truth,” even the most rugged of anthropocentrists must pay this piper with Reason. After beginning with descriptive aesthetic arguments and moving to the syllogistic rational arguments of theoretical reason, we will culminate in practical arguments that lead into and proceed from wilderness.

## Two of three faculties of theoretical reason

We begin with Immanuel Kant and his differentiation between *aesthetic* and *rational* faculties of knowing. This differentiation between the faculties occurs first in Kant’s 1781 text, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant gives us what he calls a “transcendental aesthetic” at the beginning of this text. As transcendental, these elements are *a priori*, or prior to, experience and, therefore, necessary. They are not subject to the contingencies of finitude because they are always already present. This section begins with what he calls “conditions of sensibility” as the necessary conditions from which experience emerge in the contingencies of finitude and yet transcend any reduction to these empirical phenomena. These two conditions are space and time, and the act of joining them is called “intuition.” Nothing can be said about space and time, because intuition is non-discursive. Intuition is merely the immediate relation between the object and the cognition of this object, but it is not yet thought.

Another faculty called “the Understanding” is that which thinks objects, and this thinking of objects results in what Kant calls “concepts.” Judgments such as, “In wildness is the salvation of the world,” and, “This is a cathedral draped in mosses” are made through concepts, and Kant famously declares that, “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” Intuitions are still the “formless wasteland” of Genesis where God has not yet separated day from night.<sup>2</sup> Only division by the Understanding through concepts can give form and necessity. In the Understanding and its judgments lie a material cause of the division between nature and human, however, because nature must be “non-human” if it is to escape the logical fallacy of the tautology. Everything must be defined in terms of what it is not, or, in the words of Baruch Spinoza, “all determination is negation:”<sup>3</sup> logger versus “environmeddler,” corporate fat cat versus displaced choker-setter, and owls versus jobs.

## Aesthetic arguments from intuition and the understanding

Intuition and the Understanding provide the cognitive basis for aesthetic arguments,

although description as an argument is a misnomer: precisely because they are aesthetic, descriptive, formed by judgments, and lacking syllogisms, they are not arguments if we define arguments as structured syllogistically. This is a fundamentally descriptive enterprise. Descriptive judgments become arguments only when the reader shares an experience of the writer through the mediated intuition present by the text. The moral conscience of the reader is the critical link leading from these intuitions to moral claims such as, “(1) One ought to preserve ancient forests; (2) I can preserve this ancient forest; (3) Therefore, I ought to preserve this ancient forest (1,2).” Premise two is provided by an aesthetic argument, but premise one of this syllogism (and consequently the conclusion) is external to the aesthetic judgment.

We thus see how aesthetic arguments use judgments to make a case for wilderness preservation. The goal of such writing is to communicate intuitional content, i.e., to bring the reader from her armchair in the flat or urban wasteland to heather-covered summits and deserts. Nature writing frequently employs both aesthetic and rational arguments and alternates between the arguments based on the artistic sensibilities of the writer, so pure paradigms of the different types of arguments are uncommon. Nevertheless, William O. Douglas’ *My Wilderness* comes closest to the pure paradigm of an aesthetic argument.

Douglas begins this text as follows: “The Arctic has strange stillness that no other wilderness knows. It has loneliness, too—a feeling of isolation and remoteness born of vast spaces, the rolling tundra, and the barren domes of limestone mountains.”<sup>74</sup> Only in the introduction and the final sentence of the book does he mix description with prescription: “Audubon’s hermit thrush sang over and over again.... It means the Wallows, and lengthening shadows, and a sanctuary that greedy man must never destroy.”<sup>75</sup> The “must” expresses a moral “ought,” and this division of “is” from “ought” departs from pure description which necessarily confines itself to description of that which “is.” With such sparse moral claims, we are left to speculatively assume that Douglas is writing to stimulate “an aroused public opinion and effective political action to keep the Pacific West from being ruined.”<sup>76</sup>

By transmitting the intuitional content of experience with wildness, conservationists have used aesthetic arguments with great success—John Muir in nature writing and Ansel Adams with nature photography, for example. Nevertheless, aesthetic arguments remain trapped in the contingency of the empirical: one *may* or *may not* feel moved by wildness just as one may or may not have a conscience. Aldo Leopold begins *Sand County Almanac* by differentiating between “some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.”<sup>77</sup> While he directs his aesthetic arguments toward the former, he relies upon rational arguments to reach the latter.

### **The third faculty of knowing: theoretical reason**

High-school debate teams and law students exemplify theoretical reason in its purity. It employs syllogisms, and these are structured by a major premise (M), a minor premise (M’), and a conclusion (C). For example, “M: All wilderness preservation is biophilic. M’: The Wilderness Act preserves wilderness. C: Therefore, the Wilderness Act is biophilic.” From this conclusion, we can make another syllogism: “M: All that is biophilic realizes my highest

objective. M': The Wilderness Act is biophilic. C: Therefore, the Wilderness Act serves my highest objective."

Universality is the great advantage of the necessity accompanying theoretical reason, because this universality compels an audience to either accept the rationality of the argument or to deny an appeal to the ground of rationality. If rationality is denied as ground to which to appeal, then the audience is locked into what is known as a "performative contradiction:" they do precisely what they say they cannot do when they use reason to construct an argument against reason. This contradiction is fallacious and, therefore, can be rejected.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter one of John Muir's *Steep Trails* presents a friend of Muir's locked in a self-refuting argument through a performative contradiction. His friend's *practical preference* for wild wool invalidated his *theoretical preference* for civilized things. After exposing this contradiction, Muir examines the theological Argument from Design to show that it does not support anthropocentrism. Divine ends may govern the destiny of matter, but human choice destroying wilderness does not imply that these choices are sanctioned by God. Muir rejects the premise conflating providence as a whole with choice as a part, and this exemplifies a rational argument.

Theoretical reason highlights the necessity of wilderness preservation, but it has one major shortcoming: its universals are desiccated of intuitional content. The theoretical necessity of an argument will convince someone that wilderness must be preserved, but I daresay that a sound argument for preservation by itself moves no one to action. Theoretical rationality is formalistic, pedantic, and boring. Aristotle defined practical reason as desire guided by theoretical reason, and desire arises in relation to the intuitional content from the aesthetic argument. Heart and head must be united for action: I must be able to read about the crumbly rock and old cedars of the Olympic Mountains, feel an intuitional connection to this land, read scientific data suggesting preservation, and then formulate the moral imperative that I ought to seek preservation of the Olympics. My intuitional connection to the land sparks my desire—not my correct syllogism.

### **Arguments from practical reason: intuition, the understanding, theoretical reason, praxis**

Reason proceeds from and returns to wilderness, because aesthetic arguments require intuitional content, theoretical reason requires aesthetic arguments, and practical reason requires action that physically lives out the imperatives of theoretical reason. Wilderness activities are thus the best arguments for wilderness preservation, because they necessitate both the aesthetic connection to the land and the reason required to maneuver in it. Praxis motivated by the imperative to save wilderness transforms *reason considered as the activity of knowing* into *rational activity as the highest form of knowing*. Praxis contains within itself the intuitional content of the aesthetic argument, the judgments constitutive of premises, and the syllogisms whose conclusions are—like mysticism in all its forms—non-discursive: as Aristotle pointed out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* long ago, the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action. This action is one that preserves and protects wildness and wilderness.

## Endnotes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 193–194.
2. Genesis 1:1–5.
3. Letter 50 to Jarig Jelles.
4. William O. Douglas, *My Wilderness* (Sausalito: Comstock Editions, 1960), 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 160.
6. *Ibid.*, introduction.
7. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1949), xvii.
8. The most pure form of rational arguments are found in environmental philosophy texts such as Murray Bookchin's *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, Erazim Kohák's *The Embers and the Stars*, Arne Naess' *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, and the paper I am reading right now. This rational work is important for a rational people, because they formulate, preserve, or attack premises and reason through their own arguments while preserving or attacking the arguments of others. As products of reason, the conclusions are supposed to be universal and necessary. Yet the relatively pure form of theoretical reason is stripped away from descriptions of Yosemite shrouded in fog or Mount Washington being pounded by gale-force winds. An alternative to purely rational and purely aesthetic can be found in arguments alternating between aesthetic and rational forms. John Muir (among others), for example, is a painter of arguments who paints from a full palette—the art of influencing readers to preserve wildness. We may find other cases of artistic mixing in works such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.