

### Disclaimer

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# Human Getting Disconnected with Nature— A Distortion in Aesthetic Judgment

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## 1. Introduction

“When I see birches bend to left and right...

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.”

—Robert Frost

Just appreciate this lovely excerpt for a moment. In contrast to the “boy-and-nature” picture that might have come to your mind, this excerpt is the first quotation from the book *Last Child in The Wood* by Richard Louv, where children are gone, leaving birches swinging alone in the wind. Automatically, you might imagine the kids playing video games or confined to high piles of books inside a house.

Reflecting on your own experience, you might also feel alienated from nature from time to time. This is not uncommon across generations. Technology has rapidly been taking up more time in our daily life<sup>1</sup>.

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1 2018 Digital Future Report shows that the average hour spent online for Americans has grown from 9.4 hours per week to 22.5 hours since 2000. (Cole *et al.*)

Meanwhile, urbanization has not shown a sign to slow down, consistently bringing throngs of people to the “concrete forest”<sup>2</sup>. A complex combination of various factors has given rise to the “disconnectedness” that is troubling our relationship with nature. In this essay, I will give a short analysis of the consequences of and recommended solutions to the disconnected relation, with a focus on the role that “aesthetics” plays in both parts.

## 2. Consequences of Disconnectedness

### 2.1 To Human

Biophilia, a term coined and popularized by Edward O. Wilson, denotes a hypothesized “innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (Kellert and Wilson 20). This hypothesis describes human’s connection with nature as a “biological need”. Are we really dependent on nature? If so, in what ways? Follow-up researches reveal the positive correlation between exposure to nature and health—both physical and mental health. For example, green exercise—activity in the presence of nature—is shown in one study not only to upgrade health condition but also to improve self-esteem and mood (Barton and Pretty 3947). The “Helsinki Alert of Biodiversity and Health” report further confirmed that lack of exposure to nature is accountable for some physical illnesses and mental disorders (von Hertzen *et al.* 218). The fact that the influence could be indirect and chronic always leads people to overlook the importance of nature.

### 2.2 To Nature

Disconnectedness is a more serious and urgent problem in a broader

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2 The World Bank shows that urban population constitutes 55% of the total world population in 2017. The number was 33% in 1960. (World Bank)

sense that it can possibly lower individual's ability to appreciate beauty, thus weakening people's awareness of environmental protection, and eventually hurting the sustainability of nature.

To begin with, aesthetic judgment refers to “sensory contemplation or appreciation of an object” (“Aesthetics”). It seems logical to propose that our aesthetic perception of nature is to some degree distorted because of inadequate *contemplation* on sensations when interacting with nature. We do inevitably “see” nature when we go out and “hear” nature when a bird comes by. But we're detached from nature in a sense that we seldom *contemplate* on our “private and unique sensational experiences”. To take a further look at this argument, I believe Kandel would say that the key issue is the loss of *consciousness*, which is a broader concept including contemplation, when confronting nature. According to his definition of consciousness, simply experiencing nature and taking the pleasure out of it is not “conscious”. To contemplate consciously, we need to “attend to and reflect upon [the] experiences” (Kandel 182). This could mean closely observing a plant and being amazed by how beautiful the pattern looks, attending to birdsongs and distinguishing the species and many other activities that truly get oneself immersed in nature. With more and more households spending less time in nature<sup>3</sup>, the time spared for contemplation is even less. Thus, aesthetic judgment is more likely to be made recklessly. It is worth noting that because subjectivity is naturally present in “consciousness”, even the aesthetic judgments made *consciously* are not necessarily “the best”. Everyone has personal aesthetic taste, and it is not feasible yet to study the generating process on a neural level to figure out “the best one”. But still, just as shown in the experiment which concludes

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3 In a research done by *The Nature of Americans*, over 60% of adults in the U.S.A. report spending five hours or less outside in nature each week. (Kellert and Case & Associates)

that people interpret meanings of facial expressions similarly, we can't deny the possibility that we might agree on some general form of "beauty" universally (Kandel 189). There is just no scientific methodology for the proof yet. Despite the challenges posed by subjectivity, the importance of contemplation on the aesthetic judgment cannot be undermined, and the fact that disconnectedness will negatively affect aesthetic value held by the public should be given much concern.

To link disconnectedness with condition of nature, we need to understand the consequences that one's aesthetic appreciation can bring to the environment through actions. One good example is given by Carson—the "roadside crisis" in Maine. Upon applying chemical sprays, "a sere expanse of brown, withered vegetation" replaces "the beauty of fern and wildflower, of native shrubs adorned with blossom or berry" (Carson 148). People who valued the beauty of nature, like the conservationists, acted against plans for spraying chemicals. Their acuminous eyes that appreciated natural beauty offered them insights to see values beyond just aesthetics. Aesthetic value, seemingly superficial, indeed lays a foundation for awareness of other values of nature. In the roadside crisis example, those who scoffed at the idea to protect wildflower left out the economic value brought by beautiful roadsides. Additionally, they obviously ignored the significance of "harmony" in nature—harmony that not only pleases our eyes, but more importantly indicates biological balance among species. Aesthetic consideration prompts people to observe, to feel with heart and to *foresee* beyond just seeing. In reverse, if one does not care about the way nature looks, how conscious would he or she be when it comes to environmental protection? It will make little difference in their opinions whether to protect or not. On a societal scale, collective ignorance inexorably leads to collective indifference (Pyle 210). With fewer and fewer

people having the aesthetic taste of nature, the fact might be true that the voice to protest against environmental destruction in society will diminish. By then, few will stand up and step in for the better of this planet.

In retrospection, it is astounding that all the consequences discussed above have something to do with “disconnectedness”. Although disconnectedness is not the only culprit, it does harm nature by distorting people’s aesthetic judgment in the first place.

### **3. Recommended Solutions**

#### **3.1 Physical Connection**

To rebuild connection, elevating people’s aesthetic taste is at stake. The very first step needs to be considered is to physically bring people to nature, which requires practical actions taken by different sections of society. Government, for one thing, needs to carefully design the arrangement for landscaping to add biodiversity in a city. Besides, Louv in his book strongly encourages parents to take an active role in introducing nature to children through activities such as having a family day hiking and camping in the nearby woods. Since long-time exposure to nature will foster a sense of preference (“Mere-expose Effect”), this preference can further stimulate people to activate their sensations to appreciate the beautiful and harmonious elements.

#### **3.2 Philosophical Connection—In Search of Beauty In Science**

Physical contact has its advantages as well as limitations. When it comes to the hurdles created by technology, for example, they exist more on a philosophical level rather than a physical level. It is not merely because that people have limited access to nature, but more of the case that they don’t

take as much pleasure from nature as from chatting online or playing video games. To find one possible solution for this particular problem, I recall what Poincaré talked about *scientists*—they “take pleasure in studying nature” (163). The pleasure comes from the beauty and the simplicity of the facts they attain, consisting of parts organized by “harmonious order” and “pure intelligence”. Based on these arguments, I suggest a more science-oriented style of education that actively motivates students to wield aesthetic judgment in pursuit of pure knowledge. Consequently, students’ intrinsic curiosity will drive them to reconnect with nature by looking for the simple and the beautiful facts hidden behind natural phenomenon. This process requires an intensive usage of sensations and consciousness, resulting in establishing a tighter and more long-lasting bond with nature.

#### 4. Conclusion

Human have been disconnecting themselves with nature when confronting issues brought by technology, urbanization and other factors. Besides impairment to human health, disconnectedness can bring significant harm to nature by distorting human’s aesthetic judgment. To reconnect human with nature, it is crucial to cultivate a proper aesthetic taste of nature by approaches both on a physical and philosophical level. As a consequence, if you recall the excerpt in the introduction, now you must be positive that the naturally-pleasing appearance of the birches itself can bring the kids outside to play around spontaneously.

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### **Teacher’s comment:**

WU’s work spans multiple disciplines, raising salient questions about the purpose of knowledge of nature. It is a timely philosophical reflection as there is more evidence that the harm human beings have imposed onto nature is irreversible. To make the case, WU has done much research and critically engaged with credible sources. It presents a well-informed and specific position on the relation of humanity in nature and humanity as nature. The way she adapts ideas of scientists to a broader humanistic



realm of the meaning of aesthetic experience highlights the importance of complex mentalization in life-long intellectual endeavors. Her effort to perceive beyond intended meanings of the texts and extend them into an area of inquiry that envisions less recognized areas of intellectual interest is much appreciated. (YEUNG Yang)

