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## Aesthetic Engagement, Ecosophy C, and Ecological Appreciation

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## Aesthetic Engagement, Ecosophy C, and Ecological Appreciation

Cheng Xiangzhan

### 1. Introduction

With the aim of healing the earth and sustain a healthy ecosystem for all life forms, not humankind alone, ecoaesthetics emerges as a critique of Enlightenment mentality and of modern aesthetics as it is embodied in it. This mentality contributes greatly to the global ecological crisis and to other problem areas, such as population, economic, political and religious ones. In my understanding of aesthetics, ecoaesthetics is defined as the theory of ecological aesthetic appreciation.[1]

With ecoaesthetics as my research horizon, there are at least two reasons for me to pay special attention to American philosopher Arnold Berleant's conception of aesthetic engagement and his aesthetic theory based on it, an aesthetics of engagement. The first is our shared theme, which is the critique of modern aesthetics. The second reason is more complex for it involves the crucial question of the proper manner of aesthetic appreciation. From the perspective of ecoaesthetics, the contemplation of objects by a separated perceiver, an approach that is based on the modern philosophical dualism of subject and object, is unsatisfactory and inadequate. Berleant's aesthetic engagement is a more satisfactory account of appreciation that is aesthetic and ecological. This emphasizes the ecological continuity or interrelatedness between the human appreciator and objects.

Of course, any theory can occasion critique and development. Based on Berleant's idea of aesthetic engagement, I would like to propose Ecosophy C. This can be contrasted with Ecosophy T proposed by the Norwegian, Arne Naess, and with traditional Chinese aesthetic wisdom. In contrast with these, I would like to develop my own view of ecological understanding. In order to construct a more comprehensive and reasonable ecoaesthetics, my Ecosophy C contains eight points that are crucial in building an ecological model of aesthetic appreciation for this period of ecological crisis.

### 2. Aesthetic engagement as a model of aesthetic appreciation and its revolutionary significance

Arnold Berleant's idea of "engagement," later specified as "aesthetic engagement," started to appear in the literature in the 1970s and '80s. His 1991 book *Art and Engagement* offers a detailed discussion about the idea and challenges the entire tradition of modern aesthetics, especially its dualism of subject and object. Berleant asserts that the concept of aesthetic engagement "claims continuity rather than separation"[2] and proposes that this conception of aesthetics centers on appreciative "experience characterized by continuity, perceptual integration, and engagement." [3] With his criticism of modern aesthetics' reduction of experience to a subjective response, he emphasizes "experiential continuity" and even calls his aesthetic theory based on this idea as an "aesthetics of the continuity of experience." [4] In contrast

with the dominant approach of contemporary aesthetics that focuses mainly on art, Berleant proposes moving "through intuition and empathy to involvement and engagement,"<sup>[5]</sup> it is possible to go beyond the aesthetic realm of art to investigate other kinds of experiential continuity, such as environmental experience. Indeed, Berleant has received international attention for his work in the area of environmental aesthetics. So for Berleant, the central aesthetic issue now is not the difference between art and non-art but between aesthetic and non-aesthetic. The prevalent practice of equating aesthetics with the philosophy of art is thus transcended.

In order to support his new aesthetic conception of experiential continuity and its related idea such as empathy, Berleant borrows the idea of intellectual sympathy from Henri Bergson, the idea of *Einfühlung* (empathy) from Theodor Lipps, and the idea of "the interaction of the live creature with his surroundings" from John Dewey.<sup>[6]</sup> In brief, Berleant's aesthetics of engagement is based on his key idea of the continuity of appreciative experience, which asserts that artist, object, appreciator, and performer are no longer understood as separate constituents but become functional aspects of the aesthetic process.

From the perspective of my ecoaesthetics, I want to raise a more fundamental question: how should we understand philosophically some key terms contained in Berleant's aesthetics of engagement, such as continuity, empathy, and process? Is it possible for us to interpret them from the perspectives of scientific ecology, philosophical ecology, and ecosophy so as to support the ongoing project of constructing ecoaesthetics? Ecosophy C will offer an answer to that question from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetic wisdom.

### **3. Key points of Ecosophy C**

In order to understand Ecosophy C as proposed in this paper, it is necessary to know something about Ecosophy T as proposed by the Norwegian Arne Naess. Naess is most famous for the idea of deep ecology. The opposite of the word 'shallow,' the word 'deep' expressed "the most general and basic views."<sup>[7]</sup> As a branch of the field of biological research, ecology is an interdisciplinary scientific study of the living conditions of organisms in interaction with each other and with the surroundings, organic as well as inorganic. As compared with the science of ecology, the essence of deep ecology is to ask "deeper questions" and the adjective "deep" stresses the point that we ask "why" and "how," i.e. questions related to value theory. So, ecosophy or deep ecology involves "a shift from science to wisdom."<sup>[8]</sup>

Given the hard fact that *Homo sapiens* is a kind of organism, Naess raised a "deeper" question. Do all possible studies of humankind's relations with all possible kinds of surroundings belong to ecology? This question inevitably implies a philosophical pursuit rather than scientific inquiry into the place of humanity in nature.

In response to this philosophical pursuit, Naess realized clearly the limits of ecology and proposed what he called

*ecophilosophy* or *ecosophy*. In Naess's understanding, ecosophy is combined of the prefix "eco-" found in economy and ecology, which has a broader meaning than the immediate family, household, and community and means "earth household;" and the suffix "-sophy" found in philosophy, which denotes insight or wisdom. So ecosophy becomes "a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere."<sup>[9]</sup> Given that every situation is unique and specific, Naess introduced Ecosophy T to denote his own ecosophy. The 'T' referred to Tvergastein, a mountain hut where he wrote many of his books. He encouraged his audience to develop his or her own systems of guides, say, Ecosophies X, Y, or Z.

Inspired and encouraged by Naess, I propose my personal ecosophy, Ecosophy C. 'C' here means eight expressions with the capital 'C:' 1. Chinese culture, which is my cultural background; 2. Confucianism, which I view as the cultural symbol of a global cultural ecosystem; 3. Continuity of being, the metaphysical and ontological promise of Chinese aesthetics; 4. Creating life, which is viewed as the great virtue of Heaven and Earth expressed significantly in one of the Chinese classics, *The Book of Changes*; 5. Compassion, which is mainly embodied in Zhuangzi's philosophical story of appreciating the fish's joy and means to have the faculty to share empathy with all life; 6. Cheng Hao, a philosopher in the Song Dynasty, whose aesthetic thought represents the most systematic expression of ecological appreciation in Chinese aesthetics; 7. Community, a key term in ecology, based on which Leopold developed his idea of ecological conscience; and 8. Cultural evils, a key idea proposed in Cheng Xiangzhan's aesthetic theory, an aesthetics of creating life. Within the context of this paper, the following section only discusses points 3, 5 and 7.

First let's talk about point 7, community. In today's ecological theory, 'community' is a general term applied to any grouping of populations of different organisms found living together in a particular environment. In his 1947 essay entitled "The Ecological Conscience," Leopold defined ecology as "the science of communities" and consequently defined ecological conscience as "the ethics of community life."<sup>[10]</sup> He asserted that what is lacking in philosophy, ethics, and religion is ecological conscience and a change in philosophy of values should be promoted. In order to develop his land ethic, Leopold put the community concept in the central place. The single premise of all ethics is that an individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His land ethic simply enlarged the "boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals or, collectively, the land" and affirmed the right of these resources to "continued existence in a natural state."

In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. <sup>[11]</sup>

It is clear that Leopold's statement is not a view of scientific ecology but an ecosophy: an ecological philosophical view

about values. Based on his emphasis on the concept of community, Leopold expressed his value standard in a widely cited maxim: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."<sup>[12]</sup> Scientifically speaking, from the perspective of geological time or scale, say 10,000 years, the planet earth is continuously changing dramatically. There is no integrity or stability at all. However, philosophically speaking from the perspective of human civilization, humankind *should* take preserving the integrity and stability of the earth as its value orientation. Only by doing so can humankind face the challenges of the global ecological crisis.

Compassion generally means sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. However, with the awareness of the community concept and an ecological conscience based on it, it would be most reasonable to understand that "others" should include any individual member sharing the same community, no matter whether it is a plant or an animal. What is more, we can reinterpret the meaning of the word 'compassion' positively to investigate the possibility of sharing others' joy or satisfaction and not only the negativity of their sufferings or misfortunes. There is an appealing philosophical story about the joy of fish in *Zhuangzi*, the Chinese classic of Taoism:

Travelling with Huizi over a bridge on the Hao River, Zhuangzi said, "The fish is swimming at ease. This is how the fish enjoy themselves."  
Huizi said, "You are not a fish. How do you know the fish are enjoying themselves?" Zhuangzi said, "You are not me. How do you know I don't know about the fish?"

The philosophical question here is related to what we call intersubjectivity applied here to the relation between human beings and non-human things. Is it possible for us to know a fish's joy or not? If yes, how? Zhuangzi did not answer these questions directly. He just said that from a bridge on the Hao River, he could know the fish's joy. The key here is how to understand the word 'know' as a human activity. We may "know" something scientifically, philosophically, or aesthetically. It is reasonable to think in biological terms that when a fish's desire for survival is satisfied by its living environment, it can experience a kind of joy, satisfaction, or absence of stress. To some extent, it is a natural faculty of humans to understand or know this point. I argue that from the perspective of today's ecological ethics, mankind should respect non-human things' intrinsic value and their right to enjoy their lives. Briefly, the positive feeling of compassion is a kind of human ability and sensibility based on ecological ethics, which exemplifies the aesthetic intersubjectivity between human beings and non-human life.

Community as a key term in ecology shows the interconnectedness or connectivity among community members, and compassion shows that the boundaries between things may disappear to some extent. How, then, should we understand connectivity and compassion philosophically or metaphysically? From the perspective of Chinese philosophy,

we may propose the concept of "the continuity of being," which is the title of an essay by Tu Weiming, a Harvard professor of Chinese history and philosophy. In his paper, Tu introduces Chinese visions of nature and asserts:

The Chinese belief in the continuity of being, a basic motif in Chinese ontology, has far-reaching implications in Chinese philosophy, religion, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics.<sup>[13]</sup>

This belief is based on the Chinese mode of thought about cosmogony as an organismic process, that thinks, in F. W. Mote's words, that "all of the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process."<sup>[14]</sup> The most basic stuff that makes up the cosmos is a vital force or vital power, *ch'i* (i.e., matter-energy). This kind of metaphysical assumption is significantly different from the Cartesian dichotomy between spirit and matter. In the unified cosmos consisting of *ch'i*, all modalities of being, from a rock to heaven, are integral parts of a continuum that is often referred to as the "great transformation" (*da-hua*). Within the continuum, "the chain of being is never broken and a linkage will always be found between any given pair of things in the universe....The continuous presence of *ch'i* in all modalities of being makes everything flow together as the unfolding of a single process."<sup>[15]</sup>

Briefly, if we follow the way of thought proposed by deep ecology and always ask deeper questions, we will finally meet metaphysical questions. We may explore Berleant's ideas, mentioned earlier, of "experiential continuity" and of "aesthetics and the continuity of experience" in this way and raise a question: what is the philosophical or metaphysical foundation of continuity? To some extent, the Chinese mode of thought about *ch'i* and the cosmos consisting of *ch'i* is very close to the worldview interpreted through today's science of ecology and philosophical ecology, which emphasizes the connectivity and interrelatedness between community members.

#### **4. Ecological appreciation: from aesthetic engagement to ecological engagement**

The strategy of this paper is to reinterpret Berleant's theory of aesthetic engagement from the perspective of ecosophy C so as to develop an ecological model of nature appreciation: ecological engagement.

I define ecoaesthetics as the theory of ecological appreciation. The basic assumption behind this working definition of ecoaesthetics is the following statement: we can appreciate something aesthetically and ecologically. Based on Berleant's aesthetic engagement and aiming at the construction of an ecoaesthetics, I shall rewrite the above statement as follows: we can engage with something aesthetically and ecologically. So aesthetic and ecological engagement are the core of my ecoaesthetics. The following section of the paper will explain ecological engagement from the perspective of ecosophy C.

First, ecological engagement inquires into the question of "why:" Why should we appreciate nature with respect and awe

and believe that everything enjoys its intrinsic value rather than have only instrumental value? The answer is that ecological engagement is based on the ontological assumption that everything within a community enjoys connectivity and continuity (the continuity between mind, body and world) with each other. Community may vary according to different geological and spatial scales, from a small pond to a mountain area, from the planetary earth to the entire universe. Scientifically speaking, the inherent tie among all things in the universe is energy (or *ch'i* the Chinese philosophical term), which means that the whole universe is a great process of the transformation of energy and everything within it is an intrinsic part of that process. Ecoaesthetics should rest its philosophical base on this ecological worldview. An important part of ecological literacy, which includes an enhanced respect for and deeper feeling of connectivity with the different parts of the natural world, should be cultivated by ecological education.[16]

Second, ecological engagement inquires the question of "how:" how are we able to appreciate nature? With the ontological assumption and worldview just described in mind, to engage with something ecologically means to be able to experience compassion for all life, human and non-human. Human beings' natural ability to have compassion for others' positive joy or negative sufferings should be explored scientifically, psychologically, and philosophically.

Third, ecological engagement inquires into the question of "what:" what should we appreciate in the natural environment? The answer to this question is that we should be aware of and appreciate the great transformational processes of the universe. This means that the perception of a landscape is not simply the awareness of scenery but of the complex and dynamic fields of energy transformation that are present. In terms of Chinese aesthetics, it is the appreciation of nature's vitality (*shengji*) or spirit resonance (*qiyun*). We have arrived at a new model of nature appreciation. In brief, as an ecological model of nature appreciation, ecological engagement may be called a "why-how-what" model of nature appreciation, which is the core of my ecoaesthetics.

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## Endnotes

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[1] Cheng, Xiangzhan, "On the Four Keystones of Ecological Aesthetic Appreciation," in *East Asian Ecocriticism: A Critical Reader*, eds., Simon C. Estok and Won-Chung Kim (Macmillan, 2013), 213-228.

[2] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), xiii.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17

[7] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. and revised by David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 28.

[8] George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1995), p. 27.

[9] Naess, p. 38.

[10] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 340.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 204.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

[13] Tu Weiming, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature," in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, eds., Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, (Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 105.

[14] *Op. cit.*

[15] Tu Weiming, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[16] Laura S. Ronald and Matthew C. Cotton, *Empathetic Education: An Ecological Perspective on Educational Knowledge* (London: Palmer Press, 1999), pp. 162-73.