

Faking Nature

1. Faking Nature: A mining company plans to dredge up a natural dune area for minerals, but promises to restore the dunes once they are done. Assume that the restoration is so exact that it would be difficult to tell, on close inspection, that the area had ever been destroyed. (Or, imagine other cases of, say, clear-cutting a forest and then re-planting it; diverting the course of a river and engineering the new section to have the same vegetation, etc., as before.) The mining company claims that nothing of value is lost. Are they right? If so, we might assume the following:

The Restoration Thesis: The destruction of something that has value is perfectly compensated for by the creation (or, re-creation) of something indistinguishable.

The general consensus has been that this thesis is true, and any conservationists who oppose such projects are seen as irrational, or stubborn, etc. But, are there any rational grounds for rejecting The Recreation Thesis?

2. The Value of Origin: The assumption of the miners seems to be that, if there is no discernible, detectable difference between two things, then they are of equal value. But, is that right? Is it ever possible for there to be an UNDETECTABLE loss of value?

Imagine that I burn down Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, and then replace it with a perfect replica—down to the last detail so that even under a magnifying glass, each brush stroke, each blob of paint, is indistinguishable from the original. Is my "restoration" of equal value to the original?



Seemingly, NO. For, my restoration is a FAKE, a FORGERY—and for this reason, it has less value than what was destroyed.

Similarly, Elliott's position is that, when a natural area is destroyed and later restored, the restoration is not of equal value to the original because the replacement doesn't have the same ORIGIN. For instance, those who opposed the mining (and later restoration) of the dunes of Fraser Island, Australia, said, "the overall impression of a wild, uncultivated island refuge will be destroyed forever by mining."

What's so special about the "original" nature? Elliott proposes that we value some things—e.g., forests, rivers—in part because they are untouched, UNSHAPED by human hands, and thus are a means of connecting with nature, or the part of the world is outside of our dominion. He writes,

"My claim then is that restoration policies do not always fully restore value because part of the reason that we value bits of the environment is because they are natural to a high degree."

In short, The Recreation Thesis mistakenly assumes that the value of a thing has nothing to do with any of its non-observable properties, such as genesis or history.

Consider some further examples: Imagine that you own an ancient artefact—say, a small white, decorative, ceremonial bowl. It is very valuable to you, until one day a collector informs you that the bowl is made from part of a human skull, from someone who was murdered in ritual sacrifice for the purpose of making the bowl. The item then becomes repugnant to you. Nothing about its OBSERVABLE properties have changed. But you have now become aware of one of its unobservable properties: Namely, its origin.

[A Personal Example: I recall visiting the Governor's Mansion in Colonial Williamsburg, constructed in 1710, and thinking, "Wow, Thomas Jefferson slept under this very roof, walked through this very doorway, etc." and being in awe. ...Until they let me know that the original mansion had actually burned down in 1781, and that I was standing in a perfect replica of it, erected in 1934 in the same spot—based, in large part, on Jefferson's meticulous drawings of the building. "Lame," I thought, as my awe entirely dissipated.

Or, is this related to Elliott's point? Growing up, Michael Jackson's Thriller was my favorite album. Every track is amazing. But, we now know that, in all likelihood, Jackson molested many children in the 80's and 90's. Elliott's remarks about the human skull artefact feel familiar here. He says, "I regard it as in some sense sullied, spoilt by the facts of its origin."

Other potential examples: (a) Imagine that I produce a perfect, indistinguishable copy of a \$100 bill on my printer at home. Is this piece of paper worth \$100? By definition, it is worthless counterfeit, right? (b) We have learned how to create diamonds in laboratories that are only distinguishable from "real", or natural, diamonds with specialized equipment. Yet, demand for synthetic diamonds remains low (about 98% sold are natural) and they continue to sell for 30 – 40% less than natural diamonds, which formed in the Earth's crust about 3 billion years ago.]

He concludes, "What these examples suggest is that there is at least a prima facie case for partially explaining the value of objects in terms of their origins, in terms of the kinds of processes that brought them into being."

Clarification: (1) Elliott is NOT claiming that ALL natural things have value. Diseases are *natural*, but should of course be eradicated if possible. All he is claiming is that, “within certain constraints, the naturalness of a landscape is a reason for preserving it, a determinant of its value.”

(2) He is NOT claiming that altering a natural landscape ALWAYS decreases its overall value. Rather, it merely decreases ONE DIMENSION of its value. For instance, taking a barren, ecologically bankrupt natural landscape and improving its biological diversity, its aesthetic beauty, and so on, would clearly increase its value along those dimensions—even while it decreases its value with respect to its naturalness (i.e., history absent of human interference). The result will likely be that the OVERALL value is INCREASED.

(3) Finally, he is NOT claiming that we ought not restore an ecosystem after it’s been destroyed. We SHOULD restore a habitat after, say, an oil spill. That’s surely better than leaving the pollution untouched. (Or imagine simply “[rewilding](#)” a long-settled area, or reintroducing species that once lived there.) He’s just saying, it would be EVEN BETTER if we didn’t sully the land in the first place such that it needed restoration.

3. Objections: For starters, we might just think that we shouldn’t TELL people about restoration. Had the museum visitors never found out about the Van Gogh replica, the collector never found out about the human sacrifice, had I never found out about the mansion being burned to the ground, or Jackson’s horrible deeds, we’d all have been none the wiser (and much happier than finding out).

Reply: Elliott disagrees, claiming that people (or things) can be deprived of value, even without knowing it! In these cases, he believes there would be a loss of value, without that loss being perceived—which would lead to valuations that are mistaken due to ignorance. If the museum displayed the Van Gogh forgery without anyone realizing this, everyone has simply been duped! Hoodwinked! Defrauded! Consider a series of cases:

- (a) **Experience Machine:** Abby is, unbeknownst to her, hooked up to Nozick’s experience machine, having the experience of walking through a pristine, old growth forest.
- (b) **Fake Plastic Trees:** Betsy is walking through what she believes to be a pristine, old growth forest, but is really a cleverly designed “forest” of fake plastic trees.
- (c) **Restoration Project:** Clementine is walking through a forest, which—unbeknownst to her—was once the site of a strip-mining operation, which demolished the pristine, old-growth forest that had stood there for thousands of years, and later restored it with the same species.
- (d) **Natural Wilderness:** Darcy is walking through a pristine, old-growth forest which has stood there, untouched and unspoiled by human activity for thousands of years.

Elliott's claim is this: While each story is an improvement over the last, Abby, Betsy, and Clementine are all having impoverished experiences, deprived of some value. Everyone but Darcy has been "short-changed", he says. Only Darcy's experience has the fullest possible value. [*Do you agree?*]

Brainstorm: Elliott has selected an example that suits his purposes. Sure, a clever forgery of a painting is less valuable than the original. But, with other sorts of objects, an indiscernible duplicate is just as good. For instance:

- I drop your \$100 bottle of Lagavulin 16-year scotch, and it shatters on the floor. "I'm sorry," I say. And I make it up to you by buying you another one just like it.
- I spill wine on your favorite shirt. "I'm sorry," I say, and set to washing it with a special stain remover that completely erases the stain. "As good as new!" I say.

The cleaned shirt IS "as good as new", isn't it? And I DID completely make it up to you by replacing the scotch, didn't I? The point is that SOME things can be destroyed and replaced, or sullied and then unsullied, without a reduction in value across any dimension. Perhaps natural landscapes are like that? (*Do the following matter? The Lagavulin replacement is not a forgery, it's the REAL thing. It's just a different real thing. Similarly, it IS still the original shirt, and only the stain has been removed. Discuss.*)

[Keep in mind also that Elliott has granted for the sake of argument that restoration projects return to us an ecosystem which is qualitatively indistinguishable from the original. Of course, this is never the case, and "restored" areas are often impoverished severely in their biological diversity and aesthetic beauty, compared to the original.]

[Elliott says, "What the environmentalist insists on is that **naturalness** is one factor in determining the value of pieces of the environment", adding that, "For present purposes I shall take it that 'natural' means something like 'unmodified by human activity'."

(Antonym: Artificial) But, then, arguably, there is NO SUCH THING as a 'natural' piece of the environment—for ALL of the environment has been modified by human activity, at least to some extent (e.g., due to anthropogenic climate change), and is therefore artificial. So, then, is there no longer even such a thing as "environmental ethics"?

How about the following definition instead? Nature = Everything that is the product of biological, chemical, or physical processes. Now, it seems as if ALL human activity is 'natural'. For, the antonym of THIS definition seems to be only "SUPER-natural".

How should we respond? Is there a suitable definition of 'nature' worth preserving? Should environmentalists abandon the term and adopt an ethic that aims to preserve something else instead?]