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Penultimate draft

Restoring Landscapes: the authenticity problem

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Abstract

Philosophical concerns about restoring landscapes often revolve around two, connected, issues. First is the idea that a restored landscape, even if it is a perfect replica, has lost some of its value. The claim might appeal to a break in the continuity of the landscape and that continuity is part of what is valuable. Alternatively, often in the case of natural landscapes, the appeal is that any human manipulation is inauthentic; here the analogy is sometimes made with the art world and the restoration is deemed a fake. The second problem highlighted in philosophical debates is that the greater the success of restoration projects the more threatened do natural landscapes become: any claim that something must be preserved in its pristine or historically layered state is undermined by the claim that it could be put back again. Initially I discuss two opposing potential responses to these claims: 1. that humans are part of nature and thus cannot be an alien dominating force outside of nature and 2. that nature is itself a social construct. Neither of these positions is entirely satisfactory, but what they jointly reveal is the reality of our fluid and multifaceted relationship to the world. The paper then goes on to show that Elliot's claim of the additional value of pristine nature is actually based, not on an inherent value but is dependent on the human valuation of it. I propose an alternative that places the source of value in the thing itself and thus arrive at a positive role for restoration as the setting in train and guiding of positive relationships above and beyond their social or public amenity value to us.

Keywords: restoration, value, duration,

Introduction

The issue of authenticity has dominated philosophical discussion of restoration. The concern here is that a natural place or ecosystem that has been damaged by human activity is not returned to its natural state by restoration, but is, in fact, made into a fake. It becomes an artefact rather than a natural entity. The value that a natural entity has is lost along with its broken history as a natural place.

I shall initially explore two possible routes to 'restoring the value' to a restoration. One is to say that human beings are part of nature and so their activities are not so dissimilar to those of nature. The other is to say that nature itself is a human construct and thus the value we see as now absent was never there in the first place in quite the way we thought.

I will then show how both these views actually overstate their case and the best means to a reasonable understanding of what is going on in the restoration of a landscape is a view that takes valuable insights from both positions and adds to these an examination of the landscape or ecosystem as the thing it is.

Restoration as artefact

An early influential paper on restoration was Robert Elliot's 'Faking Nature' written in 1982. It was here that he set out the central claim that no matter how successful a restoration is it can never have the same value as the original naturally occurring landscape. (His example was an area of sand dunes removed for mineral extraction and then replaced.) Moreover, the lack of value can be directly tied to the human intervention in the repair or return of the landscape to its prior state. It is human manipulation that makes the resulting landscape "a fake" rather than the real thing that it was before. Moreover, he also claims that the very idea that nature can be restored is pernicious as it opens the way to more of pristine nature being plundered as a human resource *because* restoration will put things to right afterwards (Elliot, 1982, Rolston, 1994:89). These two arguments are what make up the "anti-restoration

thesis". The second argument is largely a matter that can be decided by empirical research and there are certainly indications that restoration is becoming at least a rhetorical device in planning applications. As early as 1992 Eric Katz pointed out that:

the idea that humanity can restore or repair the natural environment has begun to play an important part in decisions regarding environmental policy. (Katz, 1992: 231).

The view that sees the destruction of pristine nature as necessarily implicated by restoration has been argued against by Andrew Light with his distinction between malicious and benevolent restoration: where malicious restoration is that which allows destruction on the basis that it can be put back or compensated elsewhere and benevolent restoration is the rehabilitation of past ills (Light, 2003:401). Although useful, a problem with this distinction is that it does not fully displace the crucial aspect of the Katz and Elliot critique which aligns restoration with attitudes of domination. Nor does it take into account the use of benevolent restoration to provide the expertise and bolster the image and probability of malicious restoration.

However my focus is on the value claims of the anti-restorationists. Before returning to this we need just note here that the second argument (successful restoration leads to further destruction of pristine nature) relies on the first (restoration is a faked nature) being sound because if there is no value deficit in restorations then Elliot would need other reasons to resist restoration as part of resource management or planning. Without the claim that restoration makes X an artefact and artefacts have less value than naturally occurring Xs the developers are telling the truth when they say that X will be as valuable as it was before. A philosophical paper is not the place to explore the relative claims of the efficacy of particular restoration technologies. I shall be assuming a best case scenario that eventually (the time span depending on the type of restoration involved) the restored X will be pretty much like the X it aims to replace, in all but its origins, in order to bring out the key philosophical aspects of the arguments involved. The main focus will therefore be on 1. whether human

intervention makes a landscape an artefact and 2. whether undisturbed nature has a value that artefacts lack.

The human / nature divide

The idea that the actions of human beings are inevitably outside nature and of a different order has some intuitive caché but it is worth unpacking that intuition. Katz and Elliot both see nature and human activity as two completely distinct categories. Indeed this type of distinction is reinforced by the accommodations that inevitably need to be made with regard to the very idea of pristine nature. Elliot allows for two aspect of potential interference; the human activity “drift” such as global pollution or global warming, and the human activity of protecting areas such as national parks from interference. Both of these are discounted as contaminants of pristine nature, because as he says we are always going to be dealing with “degrees of naturalness” (Elliot, 1997:124-5).

There are two major lines of attack on the idea of humans as somehow operating outside nature; one group of arguments rests on the interpretation of human activity as just another aspect of nature, the other conversely argues that nature is just another construction of human culture.

Humans as part of Nature

Human beings as a species are undoubtedly remarkable animals but animals we are. The scientific evidence for our evolution is incontestable and although the cultural dimension of our existence, particularly language, has driven a rift between us and our nearest relatives, the other primates, in many ways we are undeniably still part of the natural world. The rise of socio-biology at a time when it was utilised to support ideologically suspect views (for example, that women should stay at home rather than take part in the public workplace) did little to shed light on the ways in which we are still tied to natural processes inherited from our evolutionary ancestors. However, the more we come to understand everything from the working of genes to contemporary

theories of consciousness the more our embeddedness in the web of nature becomes apparent.

This is not to say that human beings do not also operate in this remarkable realm we call culture, but the very culture we set up as in opposition to nature can find its roots in natural processes. As Crist puts it: “[T]he representational structures people work with are *derived from* the world within which the human species evolved.” (Crist, 2004:9) For example, there are now theories around the development of language that construe it as a clever means of social grooming (Dunbar, 1996). Primates groom one another to reinforce the collaborative ties that ensure their survival. Human beings, as clever primates, have basically solved the problem of how you groom more than one member of your social group at a time, you talk. Such theories suggest a short, in evolutionary terms, jump from removing fleas from someone who might reciprocate or who needs placating to gossiping around the water cooler.

Another area of research that helps to place us as part of nature is the focus on our being, fundamentally, embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). The more we move away from ideas of human beings as basically immaterial souls, spirits or even minds, carried around in material bodies the more we have to see ourselves as arising from and integrated into the material world and in this way as necessarily part of nature.

The upshot of seeing human activity as a part of nature is, of course, to see restoration as a human and a natural activity. In this way the gulf between pristine nature and the restored landscape disappears as the human activity of removing dams or extracting invasive species is itself a natural process. Of course the activities of humans with technology should not be equated with for example, beavers building dams to adapt their environments, there is a huge difference and the very real environmental problems we face arise from that difference. However, something we can take from the ‘humans as part of nature’ idea is the very real sense in which even our culture has developed out of the natural world.

Nature as human construct

The strongest version of the contrary view holds that what we think of as nature is itself just a construct of culture, in this sense there is no nature outside its cultural construal. The social construction of nature thesis has many variants and most are not as strong as is often assumed; they do not claim that nothing exists outside its social construction (Smith, 2001:126). A more typical characterisation is that when we talk of nature we are not talking about the ontological status of a separate entity or realm we are always talking about its meaning for us, and, its meaning for us is what is socially constructed. The ontological status of a world outside us does not feature as a part of the social constructivists' debate, it is not the issue in question, the issue in question is always about meanings.

But how does this point have any bearing on the question of the fakeness or otherwise of restorations? If we assume that a strong social constructivist line has it that there is no nature outside human constructions then we have no reason to make an ontological distinction between landscape A, that is understood by us as in the human category 'pristine river valley', and landscape B, that is understood by us in the human category 'restored river valley in the style of a pristine river valley'. Obviously we can make distinctions between the two but they are distinctions born of our categorisation. What slips away when both A and B are human categorisations is the, for Elliot, extra value of the pristine river valley where the curves are born out of natural processes rather than coming from the decision to 'put the bends back in' to a previously canalized river. Of course, we can easily add some extra value back in on the basis that we have constructed ideas of value around things that we can naively construe as 'natural'. In a sense we play at believing it is natural and what natural means in this context is a particular style just as rococo or classical is a particular style.

A separate, but related, issue around human constructions of landscapes is the problematising of ontological claims with regard to naturalness. Here the claim is not that we can only deal in meanings, it is that our understanding of the world out there, as a world out there, is reasonable, but we are seeing pristine nature in landscapes that have actually been changed by humans, just not in the ways that Western

civilizations change nature. A prime target for this kind of criticism is the North American discourse around wilderness. Thus the prime examples for Elliot of value added landscapes – the Australian bush and the North American National Parks – can be construed as landscapes adapted by their native populations and only later construed by Western ‘discoverers’ as natural. The wilderness admired is not free of a human history it was somebody's home, and was changed, sometimes radically, by its earlier inhabitants. The failure to see that as human interference with nature is a failure to see its inhabitants as human.

Here the position is not one that doubts the reality of nature or the natural world, but points out that what we think of as epitomising nature, the gold standard of the natural – pristine wilderness- is, in fact, a social construct (Cronon, 1995).

To arrive at a preliminary conclusion of the first part of questioning the first part of the anti-restoration thesis - whether human intervention makes a landscape an artefact - we are at least in a position to say it is a lot more complex than a naïve understanding of pristine nature allows.

We are a part of nature and yet the cultural developments achieved by humans do mark them out from other animals. The mix of intentional action and technological advance means that we can impact on the world in a way only perhaps surpassed in scope and power by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. We make distinctions between parts of the world where human activity is strongly evident and emphasised and parts of the world where human activity is less evident and other aspects of the natural world are more evident and find expression. We can make these distinctions and it seems reasonable to do so, but what of the value dimension? Is it reasonable to import into this distinction, between one type of activity and its resulting place and another type of activity and its resulting place, a difference in value?

The value distinction

For the anti-restoration thesis to work as an argument there needs to be a reason or set of reasons why something that has come about without human intervention has a

special kind of value that cannot be reinstated along with the land forms, the flora and fauna etc. of a restoration. The simple claim that natural equals valuable or good does not count as a reason as it has no explanatory force. Thus there needs to be more by way of explanation to make a link between something naturally occurring and some kind of special value that it has. Elliot is alive to the problem that we cannot just declare a connection between nature and value, as he says:

The distinction between natural and non-natural connects with valuation in a much more subtle way than that. (Elliot, 1982:84).

His solution takes us via the art world and the idea of aesthetic value and the distinction between authentic works of art and fakes. Although an interesting idea, the crucial value distinction built in to this arises from *our* preferences with regard to the origins of the work of art or the forest. The naturally occurring floodplain has more value on this basis because *we* value naturally occurring floodplains. Thus Elliot's form of intrinsic value of the naturally occurring floodplain relies on certain relational properties, that is, how valuers respond to it (Elliot, 1997:15). The problem with this for conservation work, as it is normally understood, is that such preferences might change, or, in a democracy, be held by a minority.

If the anti-restoration thesis comes down to the maintenance of human preferences then it can quite reasonably be argued that the natural does become a cultural construction, because the value status of the floodplain is determined by *the meaning it has for us*. This does not change what the floodplain is, ontologically speaking, but what the floodplain actually is has somehow slipped out of the picture.

Return to the things

Putting questions of origins and provenance to one side we are perhaps in a better position to really get to grips with the value of a particular stretch of sand dunes, not primarily in terms of its value for us as aesthetic or leisure resource, but as the thing it is. The enjoyment we have of it is, in this sense, derived from our recognising it as a *source* of value. If we add various cultural meanings that it has for us, of course we

increase its value *for us*, but do we change its intrinsic characteristics? To say yes would seem to lead us back to the idea of a cultural construction, we thus move from the stretch of sand dunes as it is to a stretch of sand dunes as culturally conceived and our appreciation, one could maintain, is no longer of the thing it is, but of the thing we make of it.

There could even be interference effects from the cultural values to our perception of the source of value. A gently curving riverbank with a flourishing outcrop of yellow iris (*Iris pseudacourus*) is a gently curving riverbank with a flourishing outcrop of yellow iris and its ontological status presents us, as perceivers of value, with a source of value. Whether the curve that nurtures the flora was naturally formed or returned to this shape by human action following a period of canalization or is even an entirely new construction where no river previously existed, and whether the iris arrived or were planted, is not relevant to this interplay of bank, water and iris as a source of value. These distinctions might be relevant to humans with particular cultural sensibilities, but they are not a concern for the river bend and, I contend, not necessarily of concern for the person enjoying this parcel of entities and interrelationships and deriving pleasure from recognising it as a source of value. Such a person is free to revel in the sound of rippling water, the burst of joyous yellow and darting of colourful dragon flies. To be overly concerned about notions of provenance in the face of such value could seem almost train spotterish in its concern for what might be an irrelevant aspect of the phenomenon, the 'how it came to be'. Humans care about stories, the natural world does not. We make sense of the world through stories and our very acts of perception are built out of such story making. However, to fail to maintain a clear distinction between what is a source of value and what is a relational value is to write our stories indelibly on the world and to occlude the possibility of perceiving the source of value as the source of value.

Preliminary conclusion in respect of restoration

The foregoing discussion would seem to maintain that there is not a valid distinction between a natural and a humanly created landscape outside of our cultural concerns.

There are, of course, questions of technical delivery; is it really possible to, for example, create a river with all of the value making entities and interrelationships of a naturally occurring river? But these are technical questions. For the anti-restoration thesis we need to remember that its maintenance of a value distinction between a natural landscape and a humanly created landscape is dependent not on an intrinsic quality of the former, but on our interpretation of the former as bearing a special meaning for us. This seems a strange outcome for a thesis that wants to maintain a sharp division between nature and artefact, because here the value bearing aspect of nature that is highlighted – its provenance- becomes valuable only through a human construction of valuing such things.

Moreover, this is not just a technical point, the problem with dealing in relational values based on human preferences is that a) they change, and b) whose preferences are we talking about? The problem for conservationists in this context is that their preferences might not be shared by the majority of the population. If the value derived is to rest on preferences, rather than being something the conservationist is able to *disclose* as a source of value regardless of any human preferences, there might (with a change in fashion) be no reason to preserve, conserve or restore anything of nature.

Duration as a source of value

However, there still seems something counterintuitive about the claim that if we are interested in sources of value then we can make no value distinction between a naturally occurring river and a restored one. One way to reassess, not the claims of the anti-restoration thesis, but the very idea of duration as a source of value would be to explore what it is about, for example, ancient forests or indeed ancient artefacts that we value. It could be that something like integrity over long periods of time is not a relational value (something we happen to like), but something we appreciate because we see in it a source of value.

I will take the example of a cave hollowed out by centuries of waves crashing. Of course, one can stand on a cliff and observe this phenomenon and read into its

geomorphological story a message of one's own temporal insignificance, thus slipping into a well trod line of thought about such experiences and deriving some relational value. But, moving more slowly and exploring the experience could we get more of the rock and wave story and a little less of our own? I can use my experience here in some of its aspects, for example I can feel the spray against my face, sometimes soft and on other days it makes my skin smart as if from small needles. I can move imaginatively to the impact of that action over time. I can feel the hardness of the rock, its imperviousness to my nails and adjust my imaginative picture to one of insignificant impacts that can only build up to changes in the rock over vast periods of time. By focusing my attention on the relationship between wave and rock, rather than on the wave or the rock in isolation my perception becomes one of time itself. I can see through the items to the relationship, the alternate pounding and caressing, over long periods of time. The characteristic contours of the rock is a record of that long relationship. When we see into the natural world and it shows itself as a source of value it is duration (not a static sameness, but a longstanding pattern of interaction) that, for many natural phenomena, is an important part of the source of value.

This does not make duration per se of value, for example one would not want to say that a malign dictatorship that lasts fifty years is better than one that lasts a year or that a barbaric practice is all the better for its long tradition. Time itself is not a value affording property, but in landscapes time allows the establishments of the rich interweaving of relationships that do have value.

This notion of time, as that which affords rich relationships (Holland and O'Neill, 1998), is more in keeping with a realistic idea of restoration as that which can bring about the conditions for a rich interplay of relationships between entities rather than the creation of a set piece that replicates a pre existing state at some historical point as exactly as possible (Bratton, 2000).

Conclusion

Seeing the value in long term patterns allows us to see why we might have an intuitive sense that pristine nature has a special kind of value, but also why the cultural

landscapes of Western Europe such as the fells, dales and downs of England with their palimpsest character of co-evolving patterns can be seen has having a value in and of themselves as well, regardless of any current human preference. The idea that we saw no value in such landscapes in the past, and needed a particular aesthetic or ecological training to see this value, is not proof that such values are always relational. What the development of ecological, archaeological or aesthetic sensibilities can also point to are perfectly sound reasons why we should then be able to see the value that was always inherent in particular landscapes. Exploration of the real nature of that value needs further examination and elaboration. For example, Warwick Fox, in recent work, has developed a clear distinction between sources of value and valuers and developed a reasoned justification for not only ecosystems but even artefacts being sources of value (Fox, 2000). However, the take home message for restoration is that although the long time dimension of both pristine nature and some cultural landscapes cannot be recreated immediately, if we understand the relationships we are attempting to set in train then even that dimension of value will come eventually. The other sources of value that we identify in e.g., an established and naturally dynamic river system are there much sooner and will grow over time, because the river is a river not an artefact or fake.

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