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Place experience, gestalt, and the human–nature relationship

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Abstract

This paper explores some ways in which differing views about the human–nature relationship reflect and are reflected in people's experiences of the places and environments they encounter in their lives. I first describe how ideas of humans being "part of" versus "apart from" nature have appeared in discussions of environmental ethics and management, and suggest how these contrasting views might relate to people's actual experiences of the natural and human aspects of places. Using qualitative survey responses about outdoor places in the midwestern USA to illustrate ideas from phenomenological and gestalt psychology, I show how a sense of the human–nature relationship is conveyed in the gestalt qualities of places and how this may give rise to a feeling of moral responsibility toward nature. I conclude that the experience of human and natural aspects of real places points toward a dialectical view of the human–nature relationship, in which humans can be seen as simultaneously "part of" and "apart from" nature.
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1. Introduction

In this paper, I explore how ideas about humans being "part of" or "apart from" nature relate to people's experiences of the places and environments they encounter in their lives. In debates over environmental ethics and management these two contrasting ideas often appear as dichotomously opposed statements about the character of the human–nature relationship. Viewing humans as being either part of nature or separate from nature in a fundamental sense, however, may not be consistent with how places and environments are actually experienced. Exploring how configurations of human and non-human features in real places evoke varying impressions of the human–nature relationship might point us toward more realistic, less simplistic ways of thinking about this relationship.

Ideas drawn from phenomenology and gestalt psychology may prove especially helpful in doing this. In what follows, I employ Fuller's (1990) account of a phenomenological psychology based on gestalt theory as a framework for understanding place experience. Using examples from qualitative surveys about outdoor places in the midwestern USA, I show how a sense of the human–nature relationship is conveyed in the gestalt qualities of places; how this may give rise to a feeling of moral responsibility toward nature; and how it implies a dialectical view of the human–nature relationship in which humans can be seen as simultaneously part of and separate from nature.

1.1. Concepts of the human–nature relationship

People's judgments about the acceptability of different kinds of human activity in natural environments often seem to stem from an underlying sense of how humans are (or ought to be) related to non-human nature. This question is sometimes framed in terms of a contrast between two basic views. Simplistically stated, these are "people are *apart from* nature" and "people are *part of* nature." The first of these two statements represents a belief that human beings are somehow different or separate from the natural world. This view implies that since humans are not part of nature, the presence of people, their artifacts, and their activities necessarily must diminish the naturalness of an environment. The second statement represents the belief that human beings belong to the natural world and cannot be set off from the natural

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systems with which they interact. Since, in this view, nature includes human beings, it would seem that there is no reason to view human influence, activities, and artifacts as incompatible with natural environments.

Debates over resource management and environmental ethics are sometimes framed in terms of a dichotomy between these contrasting views, with proponents of one management philosophy criticizing other approaches for inappropriately either separating humans and their artifacts from nature or including them in nature. For example, Cronon (1995) attempts to discredit the concept of wilderness preservation by arguing that wilderness is a social construction that wrongly treats people as separate from nature and that conflicts with the historical and ecological facts of human involvement in ecosystems. Katz (2000), on the other hand, seeks to discredit the concept of ecosystem restoration by arguing that restored ecosystems are human artifacts, fundamentally different from natural systems. Katz warns that by blurring the distinction between nature and artifact, ecosystem restorationists may be undermining efforts to protect genuinely natural environments from development and degradation.

Arguments framed in terms of these opposing views implicitly assume that the moral stance people take regarding their behavior and responsibilities toward nature stems from their beliefs about humans being either part of or separate from nature. Schultz (2000) has investigated this assumption empirically. He hypothesized that the type of concern individuals have for the environment depends on the degree to which they view themselves as being part of the natural environment. He found that people who see themselves as more connected to nature score higher on measures of biospheric (i.e., non-anthropocentric) concern and lower on measures of egoistic (i.e., utilitarian) concern with respect to environmental problems.

Schultz assumes that viewing humans as separate from nature entails believing that humans are exempt from the laws of nature and superior to other forms of life (Schultz, 2002; Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004). This is, however, only one of several possible ethical views that would be logically consistent with a sense of separation between humans and nature. Another possibility is that nature could be viewed as pristine and transcendent, morally and aesthetically superior to humans and needing to be protected from their corrupting influence. Conversely, the belief that humans are part of nature could be used as a justification for modifying or destroying landscape features to suit human purposes, since in that view a human-modified landscape could still be considered natural. Thus, a general conceptual distinction between being "part of nature" versus "separate from nature" by itself does not uniquely determine a moral position toward the environment.

Schultz (2002) found that different cultures vary in the degree to which they regard humans as part of nature, but he notes that differences also exist between individuals within a culture. He suggests that believing oneself to be included in nature is not a fixed disposition, but may be influenced by situational and environmental factors (Schultz et al., 2004). For example, people who live in large cities and are distanced from the natural world in their daily lives might come to see themselves as less connected to nature (Schultz, 2001). Schultz (2000) also speculates that a person's sense of inclusion in nature is malleable and might increase over time through visiting places and engaging in activities that foster a sense of connectedness with nature. These observations suggest that concepts of nature and how humans are related to it ought to be examined in the context of the actual environments and places that people experience in their lives.

1.2. The human–nature relationship in the context of place

Much has been written over the last several decades about place experience, sense of place, place attachment, and related topics. This literature is spread over several disciplines and employs diverse methodologies. General reviews and overviews of various aspects of the place literature can be found, for example, in Seamon (1982, 1987, 2000), Low and Altman (1992), Williams and Stewart (1998), Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels (2003), Bott, Cantrill, and Myers (2003), Farnum, Hall, and Kruger (2005), and Patterson and Williams (2005). The multifaceted and complex character of place experience is a prominent theme in this literature.

Depending on where people live and travel, they may find themselves in places that are predominately designed, constructed, and used by humans; places that are largely free of human activity and influence (i.e., "natural"); or places that contain a combination of human and natural characteristics and features.[1] The concepts of humans as part of nature or as separate from nature suggest different possibilities for how people might experience these different kinds of places. For example, a sense of being separate from nature might suggest that a person would feel out of place or like an intruder in a predominately non-human, natural setting. A sense of being part of nature suggests that a person might feel at home or have a sense of belonging in a natural place. In places that have a mixture of human and natural elements, an impression of humans being separate from nature might arise when the human aspects of a place are experienced as contrasting or conflicting with the non-human aspects, while an impression of humans being part of nature might occur when the human aspects of the place are experienced as harmonizing or merging with the natural aspects.

There is no *a priori* reason to assume that these different ways of experiencing the human and natural aspects of

[1] In using the words "human," "non-human," and "natural" to describe places and their features, I am simply referring to the fact that some features of places are a result of human activity and some are not. I do not mean to imply a fundamental dichotomy between humans and nature. Also, I do not rule out the possibility that a place may have features and characteristics that are not clearly classifiable as either human or natural.