Subjective and Objective Aesthetics in Natural Environment

In 'Aesthetics and the Value of Nature', Janna Thompson proposed that the natural environment has many characteristics similar to most great works of art. For this reason, the natural environment has “objectively aesthetically value” same as the works of art. According to the description of Thompson, objective value refers to the value not judged by people's will. It has no relation with people's appreciation and attention and is universal. Whether people value respect or not, the value exists. The subjective value is based on people's regard. The subjective value is closely related to people's will and emotion. Only things that people value or respect are valuable (Janna Thompson, 1995). Under the condition of the establishment of objective aesthetically value, any attempt to destroy beauty should be condemned morally. Therefore, destroying the environment means destroying the objective beauty and the eternal objective value, thus supporting the environmental protection.

The point of view that human beings have the moral obligation to protect the environment by Thompson is based on the objective aesthetic value of nature. I do not fully agree with Thompson. In my point of view, the theory that nature is objectively aesthetically valuable does not completely hold water. In what follows, I will argue that any aspect of the natural environment is not completely objectively beautiful, instead, should be both objectively and subjectively beautiful because beauty is the combination of the subjective and the objective, rather than complete objectively.

In the appreciation of natural aesthetics, the cognition of beauty is more from personal or emotional level. In 'Aesthetics and the Value of Nature', Thompson proposed that nature is beautiful, because it, like great works of art, “provides an inexhaustible feast for the senses, the intellect, and the imagination” (Janna Thompson, 1995). Many of the things that we humans think is beautiful have existed for thousands of years before human existence. They are also beautiful before they are discovered and perceived by aesthetic human beings. But their beauty, from Thompson’s aesthetic point of view, was meaningless at that time, because it did not “sharpens the senses and lifts the spirit” before they were discovered (Janna Thompson, 1995). So, the so-called beauty seems to be a kind of feeling of human beings and a product of creation in the long process of human evolution. The created beauty shows the relationship between subject and object where the subject is human, and the object is something with aesthetic value.

If beauty is such a relationship, then the root of beauty lies not in the object of beauty, but in the subject, that is, human beings. This can also be a good explanation for why in the long river of human development, beauty has always been changing, and there is no standard answer to the understanding of beauty. For example, in the Tang Dynasty of China, people regarded fat as beauty, while in today's era, on the contrary, people regarded thin as beauty. The main reason for this difference is that the subject is different - although all of them are people, but because the environment of different times gives people different feelings of beauty, resulting in differences in aesthetic value. As a result, it can be seen that beauty depends on the emotional level of the subject to a great extent, so it has great subjectivity.

Thompson mentioned, the magnificent scenery of the Grand Canyon in North America, the eucalyptus forest in southeast Australia with rich sensory experience, “walking through a forest, catching the whiff of eucalypt on a warm breeze, or hearing a bell bird” all makes the sensory experience more joyful and therefore beautiful (Janna Thompson, 1995). All these obviously have great subjective elements, and in the judgment of natural aesthetic value, the objectivity of judgment is not fully guaranteed. As I mentioned before, the root of beauty depends on the subject, and because the subjectivity of the subject leads to the ever-changing beauty. In book History of Beauty, Umberto Eco talks about two kinds of beauty in ancient Greece, Apollo and Dionysius. The beauty of Apollo represents the quiet harmony and glorifies the eternal and perfect world. The beauty of Dionysus, on the other hand, was dangerous, disturbed the harmony, and was always satisfied in the changeable and uninhabited (Umberto Eco, 2004).

Obviously, from the perspective of Apollo style beauty, the magnificent scenery described by Thompson and the behavior of feeling nature such as walking in the forest are beautiful. But for Dionysus’ beauty, what Thompson describes is not beauty at all. Two kinds of opposite beauty in ancient Greece further confirmed that beauty has strong subjectivity. Since beauty is not completely objective, the saying that natural environment is objectively aesthetically valuable will not be fully established.

However, just regarding beauty as related to human's emotional thinking and completely controlled by human's subjectivity is also not tenable. Beauty has certain objectivity. Beautiful things, although not to make everyone feel beautiful, but often most people think it is beautiful. For example, Van Gogh's paintings or the leaves changing colors with the seasons mentioned in Thompson's example, the vast majority of people support that they are beautiful. In addition, the famous golden section, from ancient times to now, generally gives us aesthetic feeling.

Obviously, beauty is universal. Sometimes it has nothing to do with whether people appreciate it. In other words, beauty has certain objectivity. If “a judgment of value that is merely personal and subjective”, there is “no way of arguing that everyone ought to learn to appreciate something, or at least to regard it as worthy of preservation” (Janna Thompson, 1995). The reason why there is the beauty accepted by most people such as the example of golden section and colorful leaves I mentioned before, and the similar ability to appreciate the aesthetic value possessed by most people is because of the existence of aesthetic objectivity.

In conclusion, Janna Thompson's view that nature is an objectively aesthetically valuable is not entirely convincing. Beauty is a psychological behavior, a manifestation of the relationship between the subject, that is human, and the object, that is anything with aesthetic value, rather than an external physical gratification. The aesthetic value of nature comes from the aesthetic relationship between human and natural environment. It is a kind of spiritual effect in the subject's psychology due to the interaction between the subject and the object. Subjectively, some subjective factors, such as different times, different cultures, or different personal experiences, will lead to different understanding of beauty. Subjectivity gives us the variability of beauty and the connection with people's will. Objectivity gives the universality of beauty and provides various basic conditions for the acceptance of beauty by most people. As the famous writer Zhu Guangqian said, if beauty is all in things, everyone should be aware of the beauty of beautiful things, and there should be no great difference in artistic taste; if beauty is all in the heart, then beauty becomes an abstract concept, and why it is limited to things (Zhu Guangqian, 1982). Consequently, beauty is a combination of objective and subjective. The existence of the objectivity and subjectivity of beauty makes the natural environment have the characteristics of

the coexistence of objectivity and subjectivity. Instead to say nature is objectively aesthetically, I believe nature is both objectively and subjectively aesthetically.

1. Janna Thompson. (1995). Aesthetics and the Value of Nature.
2. Umberto Eco. (2004). History of Beauty. Secker & Warburg. the University of Michigan
3. Zhu Guangqian. (1982). Zhu Guangqian’s Aesthetic Anthology. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House