

EXPERIENCING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT:
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN “AESTHETIC” AND “SPIRITUAL”

Master’s Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is to show that the aesthetic experience of the natural environment can have a spiritual dimension; i.e., aesthetic qualities perceptually constituted from physical qualities can induce an experience of a deeper layer of reality. My attempt is to sketch a scenario when and under what circumstances such situations could occur by using and connecting theories by William James, Jan Mukařovský, Edward Bullough and Arnold Berleant to outline a scheme of the transformation of sensory stimuli in aesthetic qualities, which are subsequently enriched with symbolic meaning. Berleant's aesthetics of engagement creates a model of working with sensory stimuli that fulfills the aesthetic potential of the natural environment. That the aesthetic can become spiritual and even coexist in one situation at the same time is supported by Jan Mukařovský's conception that no area of human experience has a fixed exclusive function. The theory of Edward Bullough demonstrates that even a situation in which physical immediacy reaches us can be perceived aesthetically, and that we are able to preserve the acquired aesthetic material from its dissolution in the field of practical perception. However, the aesthetic proposal prepared in this way will not succeed in its transformation into spirituality when spirituality is understood from a closed, predominantly religious sphere. I will therefore use the concept of spirituality by William James; i.e., spirituality as open and realized in the individual experience.

Through such an interconnection of the theories of these authors it will be possible to outline the concept of the aesthetic spiritual experience which attempts to appropriately reflect the dynamics and processuality of the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions in one experience.

I will try to do something that has not been given much space in theory so far, this work therefore serves as an input for further investigation of this issue.

KEYWORDS:

experience, spirituality, aesthetics, senses, immediacy, nature, environment

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1. Introduction

Imagine yourself in the middle of a forest. You feel the fresh air imbued with damp soil, the gentle cold wind needling your face. You are surrounded by tree giants, witnesses of times you can only read about. Dignified green towers built from millions of individual articles in inexorable harmony and in unwavering and omnipresent order. You notice the wide range of colors that surround you, the many kinds of surfaces and crusts with all shades of brown, white and black. The leaves fall to the ground, each a one-of-a-kind canvas for colors to play their unique game. Your imagination is awakening. What you see reminds you of something else, as if everything you had known so far did not have a clear physical identity. The boundaries of beings coincide like a mad carnival; a stone looks like an animal, a cloud like a human head. A leaf reminds you of a beetle; tree trunks have faces. You can hear the treetops to which the wind lends voice in irregular rhythms; you hear the birds, whose speeches you cannot decode, but the melody of their singing is still clear and penetrating. You hear your own footsteps, the crackles of the branches fallen on the ground. You are touching wet moss, a rock warm from the sun. You dip your hands in a cold stream; you are burying your fingers in slimy mud. You breathe deeply and each fragrance has its source, the link of an endless chain of relationships and mutual influences. All visual phenomena are also active or patient components of this massive orchestra; all sounds have a tangible representation. Close your eyes and the sounds come to the fore; plug your ears and the scene becomes overwhelming in its silent speaking. Forget what you had for breakfast and what email you must send by Monday. You are now and here; your universe is filled with present sensory stimuli that draw you into itself. You find yourself in the aesthetic experience of the natural environment¹, the moment you become

¹ Arnold Berleant on the account of descriptive writings about the aesthetic experience wrote: “Efforts at aesthetic description occur most often as parts of other kinds of writings – novels, poems, nature writing, criticism, philosophical aesthetics. These passages are not merely self-indulgent effusions but serious attempts to enlarge the understanding of the aesthetic domain by guiding our perception through it. Descriptive aesthetics combines acute observation with compelling language to encourage the reader toward vivid aesthetic encounters.” Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 25.

an observer and part of the observed, the viewer and the actor at the same time. Then think of the moment when you are in a place in nature that seems to have overcome you with its mysterious sanctity. It can be a glade in the middle of a dark forest lit by a sharp sun beam brightening green shades of dew-freshened grass, the top of a rocky hill blazed by heavy winds alone in its irresistible majesty, the mysterious shore of a misty autumn lake vulnerably innocent and sneaky at the same time, a big granite stone suddenly soaring in the middle of an endless steppe almost totemically significant and dangerous. From ordinality, you are ripped off by an entrancing quality, a fragment of ultimate and omnipresent goodness through which the unknowable is whispering a hint of its presence; the sense-outlined message of a higher ideal is disclosing. The engrossing power of some unwavering correctness engulfs you, as if you paused in time to realize your being in a dematerialized form in an elevated, but at the same time somewhat serious atmosphere, through the lens of the primordial ideal that you sometimes forget, and which now reaches you more urgently. The scenery unfolding in front of you is so satisfying that you would hardly believe it is a result of a chance and chaos. This place seems to be an ambassador, mediator, and guide who has found you (or you have found him?) to communicate to you in a language that does not belong to the reality you normally experience. This spiritual experience of the natural environment that I describe leads us to turn to ourselves, guided by some kind of force and forget, for a moment, everything else. Now, imagine that these experiences overlap, and in their fusion their power is all the more intense and massive that our knees are breaking. What was at first a coincidence, a mere random grouping of interesting colors and proportions self-sufficient in satisfying, contrasting combinations would now be enriched with a symbolism of ultimate wisdom, the hidden news that we are not in the clutches of relentless luck—that the world, after all, falls under a sort of order, a wise principle.

The non-exact nature of aesthetic and spiritual experiences makes possible to depict all kinds of variations of interactions between them, opening up space for creativity and sketching. On the other hand, it also carries the risk of bankruptcy into biased and distorted assumptions, being no

more than—in Berleant’s words—“self-indulgent effusions”. Hence, in order to outline the somewhat experimental merging of the aesthetic and the spiritual experiences on a stable ground, it is necessary to follow a well-established apparatus for understanding them and setting them in a light in which their fusion makes at least theoretical sense. Yet, precisely for their non-exact character (where universal formulas and definitions do not apply), it is needed to grasp these phenomena through the lens of such a theory for which human experience is an essential measure and source of understanding. Human experience permits escalation, scaling, differences and variations, yet one cannot be said to be more relevant than the others. Instead of the normative determination of what is valid and what is not, I map a possible variant of human experience—the aesthetic spiritual experience of the natural environment—which, however, exists alongside other various alternatives.

The aesthetic experience must be understood as the experience of the whole individual—body and soul—actively absorbing all the sensory stimuli that are offered to him in the nature. Such aesthetic experience differentiates the natural environment from the others by directly calling for active involvement. The aesthetic potential—its liveliness, dynamism, borderlessness and interconnection with us—is not otherwise fulfilled in all its splendor. The natural environment also offers a unique spiritual experience different from that found in a church: seated in a pew, passive and active only when permitted and strictly directed. In addition to the subject's involvement in the environment crystallized in Arnold Berleant's theory of aesthetic engagement, it is necessary to understand spirituality as an area open and unlimited by conventionally prescribed rules and regulations, independent of religion, and as such, it is presented to us by William James. James placed great emphasis on human experience instead of doctrinalized, pre-set dogmas.

As will be later shown in the theory of Jan Mukařovský, any experience is realized by the act of the subject, and without the subject's position it does not exist. (Logically, the experience must be

someone's experience; similarly, for a rumble to be a rumble, someone must hear it and indicate it as a rumble. Otherwise, it is merely a mechanical ripple in a matter environment that is capable of producing an auditory sensation.) Naturally, the question arises as to whether spirituality (i.e., the transcendental “reservoir” floating invisibly everywhere around us, deeper reality and similar human interpretations) is of the same ontological nature as spiritual experience, existing only in human consciousness and therefore an anthropological construct. Is there spirituality without humans? Is it universal and transcendent, revealing itself to us in the form we can grasp as human beings with our language and terms, explanations and faiths? Or is it no more than the beforementioned rumble? Either way, spirituality will be treated here as a relevant area of human experience. Similarly, the natural environment will be treated as originally a human-independent environment, even though little today is not directly influenced or created by humans.

Although we relate to what we believe are transcendental ideals, we recognize them through our human experience, and in no other way. These experiences primarily concern our psychological processing, making the resulting outcomes immaterial and abstract. While having these experiences, we do not exploit and abuse the object of our interest; we do not interfere with it. We work with reality as it is, while attributing it deeper values at the level of mere abstraction. These experiences are the source of transcendental and inviolable connections, while maintaining complete exclusivity in its actual realization in our life. They form a space for dialogue, human acknowledgement and respect towards the natural environment —elements that, until recently, were largely lacking in the coexistence of human and nature. Such experiences support our psychological maintenance at a time when one’s soul is lost in the confusion of artificial conventions of modern society, causing us to lose connection with the roots and thus to cease understanding ourselves. Both spheres cultivate our perception, our relationship to ourselves and our relationship to our surroundings; consequently, they affect our ecological activities. Their psychological significance makes them an important yet undervalued component of our lives.

In their immateriality resulting into vagueness they become difficult to comprehend and even acknowledge by some. There is no guide for achieving spiritual or aesthetic experiences of the natural environment. As they take place on the levels of individual consciousness, we can only symbolize them (for example in art), descriptively capture their particular examples, or induce them in a shared experience. However, individual consciousness can never be as transparent as we might wish in this case, and therefore a shared experience will, to some extent, remain only a symbolic attempt to grasp aesthetic and spiritual experiences.

This, and more, is probably standing behind the neglect of these areas in the context of generally known and common experience. At the same time, I believe that the mutual thematization of these areas that this work focuses on has not been paid so much attention to in theory so far; therefore, I hope that by sketching their possible coexistence in one's experience, I will outline a perspective that will be opened for further exploration.

2. Understanding of terms

Before exploring the relationship between aesthetic and spiritual experience of the natural environment, it is first necessary to outline the interpretative framework of the areas to which these experiences relate. Their ambiguity and confusion, as drawn in the introduction, must be addressed in this work. To theorize about the special type of experience they can create in their fusion, we need to understand their individual basics, and they need to be explained at the angle at which they are unproblematic for their synthesis.

2. 1. Spirituality

“Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*²

2. 1. 1. Differences between the religious and the spiritual: William James and contemporary authors

Trying to define what spirituality means is not an easy task. The abundance of literature and interpretations indicates that this is not a trivial question and one can hardly hope for a clear definition. Spirituality will therefore be explained in relation to similar areas, resulting in several characteristics that can be attributed to spirituality. I will introduce a conceptual apparatus in which spirituality is understood as an open sphere of experience of dematerialized being.

Probably the most often confused pair of terms is spirituality and religion. To distinguish between the two, this work will borrow the ideas of American psychologist and representative of a

² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (South Australia: eBooks@Adelaide, 2009), 27, https://csrs.nd.edu/assets/59930/williams_1902.pdf.

pragmatist philosophy William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*³. James established a cornerstone of how the concept of spirituality is understood to this day, especially by those who do not identify with any religious groups. The book consists of edited lectures James delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland between 1901-1902. His ideas formed an essential framework for the development of thinking about theology in the following century.

First, it should be noted that the distinction between the terms “spirituality” and “religion” has not yet been established by James' time and thus he only operates with the term “religion” (as we can see in the excerpt from his book at the beginning of this chapter). However, being aware of the rigidity of the term “religion” as unsatisfactory for a range of experiences of rather personal and unspecified character, James attempted to compensate for the conceptual limitation by introducing a distinction between religion as the subject of doctrinal and personal interest. In the modern sense, this is how religion and spirituality can be understood.

In the case of doctrinal religion, interest is directed to an institutionally-presented god or deities (the Judeo-Christian Abrahamic God in the Western tradition). Further attention is focused on certain canonizations and organized practices—ceremonies and the like—often in a collective and hierarchized form, all reinforced by a generally established and forwarded history, tradition and complementary artifacts such as buildings, works of art, literature. Emphasis is placed on adherence to established rules and first of all is the acceptance of the appointed and proclaimed god according to the particular religion. Religion exists as a system independent of a given subject. An individual can, however, enter into this system by following given rules. The term “religion” in this conception, however, is not able to cover experiences on the level of individual consciousness that does not revolve around the above-mentioned religious phenomena. Yet, it still has significance for one’s inner being, connecting him to an ultimacy based on the organic relationship between the

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (South Australia: eBooks@Adelaide, 2009), https://csrs.nd.edu/assets/59930/williams_1902.pdf.

subject, his setting and his relation to the world. Thus, James is introducing another category, that is, a religion as the subject of personal interest. It is not an institution; it is rather an immediate experience.

This experience emanates from humans as beings with individual needs and interests connected to the deeper dimensions of reality, whether within or outside religion. Based on the individual setting of the individual human being, the experience revolves around what one considers the most ideal in his non-sensual universe. This “most ideal” can be described as ultimate harmony, order, goodness or “the other”. The presence of such an ideal gives individual’s live a certain sense he craves. As Lia Naor and Ofra Mayselless point out for example:

“For many people, religious and spiritual beliefs are at the core of their meaning systems, informing their beliefs about self and the world (...). From this perspective, spiritual and religious belief structures are held as one of the most common and comprehensive meaning frameworks that helps people make sense of their lives and experiences by sustaining a sense of higher purpose and direction while maintaining a sense of sacredness and value (...).”⁴

In James’s conception, a spiritual individual does not have to be religious, but a religious individual is hardly not spiritual. Spirituality contains elements essential for the life of religious practice. The organic relationship of the subject to spiritual components is the basis for realization in a religious system. The "healthy" interconnection of the subject and spirituality then finds its application in the religious mechanism, making the religious life of humans alive and lived. Important to note is that the "quality" element (the source of the "virtuous" qualities contained in religious experience) is contained precisely on the personal level of religion in James’s understanding.⁵ Given his pragmatist

⁴ Lia Naor and Ofra Mayselless, “The Therapeutic Value of Experiencing Spirituality in Nature,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, Online First Publication (2019): 3.

⁵ It is unfortunate that James did not provide clearer non-religious examples of such experience, but instead confined himself to the several examples of spiritual experience that resonate with a particular (Christian) religion. Their distinction thus becomes more difficult to identify from his examples. And because examples of Christian practice might somewhat obscure our efforts to define spirituality in the most transparent way possible, such examples will not be used in the work.

and empirical orientation, James considers doctrinal religion as something mediated, distanced, stemmed from tradition and customs, and de-personalized. He describes personal religion as:

“The relation [that] goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker.”⁶

It can be summed up that the fundamental difference between personal and doctrinal religion rests on two factors: degree of adaptation to personal needs and feelings, and level of immediacy of experience. It was explained that by its nature that personal religion is the rudimentary type of experience from which doctrinal religion emanates. Openness and indeterminacy of the object of personal religion concede that the center of our personal religion may also be a particular (institutional) god or the deities. The distrust of (doctrinal) religion derivable from James’s thoughts is a widespread phenomenon. Its origins lie in a more complex cause than in James's (some could say arbitrary and personal) opinions. Historically, distrust of religious organizations, according to Richard King⁷, is dependent on the following factors:

“In the modern era the separation of the Church and State and the process of secularisation has precipitated a movement away from traditional patterns of organised religion. Migration of ethnic groups as a result of colonial expansion, the rise of individualism and modern capitalism have also resulted in a much greater awareness of the multi-cultural nature of society and an emphasis upon personal choice with regard to issues of religious affiliation. One consequence of these trends within the Western world has been the tendency to conceive of religion as essentially a private rather than a public matter.”⁸

⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 26.

⁷ Richard King, “Mysticism and spirituality,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 306-322.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

Susan Baker and Robin Morrison describe, in accordance with James in their article⁹, the difference between spirituality and religion:

“Spirituality and religion are often used interchangeably, but the two concepts are different. Spirituality involves human’s search for meaning in life, while religion involves an organized entity with rituals and practices about a higher power or God. Spirituality may be related to religion for certain individuals, but for others, such as an atheist, it may not be (...). Nonreligious individuals also have spiritual needs in relation to the search for meaning and purpose in life. In short, we take spirituality to be a much broader concept than religion.”¹⁰

Also in accordance with what has been said, a collective of authors¹¹ in a study “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy” indicates that spirituality was not distinguished from religion until the end of the 19th century, confirming that secularism had a fundamental influence on their division. The authors also notice difficulties in attempting to come up with a closed definition of spirituality in that it is necessary to respect a scale and variability of the spiritual experience in its source (the stimulus), in its course (the intensity, length, frequency, but also the impact on our lives), in its ideological base, etc. They are equally as satisfied as James with the characterization of spiritual experience as boundless and enthusiastic, immediate and unaffected by artificial conventions.

Nowadays, the division between religion and an open area of spirituality is an established approach. Furthermore, contemporary streams of philosophers and theoreticians operate with understanding religion and spirituality as different areas, often referring to William James and his contribution in this context. Based on works explicitly covering this topic, we can name Todd W.

⁹ Susan Baker and Robin Morrison, “Environmental Spirituality: Grounding Our Response To Climate Change,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 4 (2008): 35-50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹¹ Brian J. Zinnbauer et al., “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (1997): 549-564.

Fergusson and Jeffrey A. Tamburello¹², Annie L. Booth¹³, or Nils G. Holm¹⁴. They all share the understanding of spirituality as “the most inclusive case”¹⁵, pointing to “the personal, subjective, non-institutionalized, and unmediated experience with [the] sacred”¹⁶ and notice that the term has been “dissociated from religion”¹⁷. Religion, on the other hand, is broadly understood as something “institutional, mediated, and communal”¹⁸, referring “specifically to the big, organized collection of beliefs”¹⁹, and “something more or less rigid and static, something antiquated and unnecessary” while “spiritual development is seen as something positive”²⁰. Similarly, Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall²¹ draw attention to the issue of possible exclusion and elitism that certain religions bring. Here, Zohar and Marshall build upon the already mentioned rigidity of a religious model:

“Religious organizations and religiously based cultures have undoubtedly built some genuine spiritual capital. But they have done so within the limitations of belief systems that exclude those who hold other religious beliefs and those who have no religious belief. The broader kind of spiritual capital needed for organizations, communities, and cultures participating in today’s pluralist and global society must draw on deeper, nonsectarian meanings, values, purposes, and motivations that might be sacred to any human being.”²²

Hence, the spiritual experience is nowadays commonly understood as a very inclusive concept: as something that everyone should be entitled to, regardless of their (non)religion, and at the same time something very variable and individual. Spirituality becomes a broader concept from which a particular religion comes out. Finally, what our spiritual experience resonates around is precisely

¹² Todd W. Ferguson and Jeffrey A. Tamburello, “The Natural Environment as a Spiritual Resource: A Theory of Regional Variation in Religious Adherence,” *Sociology of Religion* 76 (2015): 295-314.

¹³ Annie L. Booth, “Does the Spirit Move You? Environmental Spirituality,” *Environmental Values* 8 (1999): 89-105.

¹⁴ Nils G. Holm, “Mysticism and Spirituality,” *Postmodern Spirituality* 21 (2009): 61-71.

¹⁵ Booth, “Does the Spirit Move You?” 90.

¹⁶ Ferguson and Tamburello, “The Natural Environment as a Spiritual Resource,” 297.

¹⁷ Holm, “Mysticism and Spirituality,” 61.

¹⁸ Ferguson and Tamburello, “The Natural Environment as a Spiritual Resource,” 297.

¹⁹ Booth, “Does the Spirit Move You?” 90.

²⁰ Holm, “Mysticism and Spirituality,” 67.

²¹ Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *Spiritual Capital, Wealth We Can Live By* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004).

²² Zohar and Marshall, *Spiritual Capital*, 3.

what we consider genuinely relevant and appealing. Immediacy and unconditionality of such spiritual experience is its important constitutive feature.

2. 1. 2. The difference between morality and spirituality: William C. Spohn & William James

“When the outward battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, [spirituality] redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty vase.”

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*²³

The position to question of the difference between spirituality and morality varies. Intuitively, one can feel that spirituality and morality are not the same. Although, both areas are somewhere in the abstract sphere of our lives while underlying our individual personalities. Some identify spirituality and morality as the same, while others believe that their identification is incorrect. Zohar and Marshall, for example, understand spirituality and morality as the same thing seemingly unproblematically, stating:

“Spiritual intelligence is our moral intelligence, giving us an innate ability to distinguish right from wrong. It is the intelligence with which we exercise goodness, truth, beauty, and compassion in our lives.”²⁴

Zohar and Marshall here attribute different areas of our perception (moral, aesthetic and emotional stimuli) to the same cognitive process. Although all the judgments in these areas are generated on the level of human consciousness, their identification on that basis is somewhat too general and a

²³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 39.

²⁴ Zohar and Marshall, *Spiritual Capital*, 3.

bit clumsy.²⁵ However, identifying morality and spirituality is not completely unthinkable. After all, it would be difficult to follow our spiritual conviction that would conflict with our moral principles.

William C. Spohn²⁶ presents a more sophisticated theory. Spohn first explains that in order to immerse into the spiritual experience it is essential to realize that there are levels of reality that are not sensually obvious. Personal integration into this sensually unrecognizable level of reality is then necessary, and this is precisely what spirituality and morality have in common. Unless we are sincerely and personally involved in these areas, they do not find much representation in our lives. Both spirituality and morality are not something that everyone must fulfill. Both spheres then have individual forms in the lives of each of us. Spohn then deduces:

“Since this quest is usually directed to the highest value in the individual’s belief system, spirituality has direct reference to morality...”²⁷

Spohn introduces distinctions between lived and reflected spirituality, which he puts in analogy with morality and ethics. Lived spirituality—analogue to morality—indicates the immediate relationship of an individual to the core of his spirituality. Reflected spirituality—analogue to ethics—provides a framework (historical, theological and anthropological) explaining human experience from a broader perspective. Similarly, morality is the internal and individual realization of what we regard as virtues, while ethics functions as an outer conceptual canon. Although spirituality and morality have similarities, Spohn refuses to identify them:

“Morality and lived spirituality overlap inasmuch as devotional practices often seek to inculcate virtues and pursue moral values to their ultimate depths. However, morality and lived spirituality cannot be identified, because spirituality often addresses regions of experience that seem ‘off the

²⁵ Think of Kant who in *Critique of Judgment* distinguished the judgment of aesthetic taste from the judgment of what we consider to be morally good. These are two different types of qualities we focus on when making these judgments.

²⁶ William C. Spohn, “Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 109-123.

²⁷ Spohn, “Spirituality and Ethics,” 110.

scale' of ordinary morality... In addition, morality does not emphasize personal transformation and holistic integration to the degree which most forms of lived spirituality do."²⁸

It can be deduced from Spohn's thoughts that spirituality and morality similarly relate an individual to the depth of his inner, non-sensory world. However, the areas of these deeper worlds do not overlap completely. The spiritual foundation operates with a broader spectrum of experience and activity than morality—here it would be appropriate to specify the activities, which Spohn unfortunately avoided.

It would be convenient to say that spirituality and morality are different from each other in that morality refers to our behavior towards others, while spirituality forms our inner life in relation to the overall context of our existence. However, it cannot be settled for this alone because many religions transmit morally-tuned commandments into their system (think of The Ten Commandments). In this matter, William James offers an interesting perspective on how to understand the relationship between spirituality and morality that fills the empty space Spohn left in his theory. According to James, moral power is the first instance we turn to when we find ourselves in a difficult life situation. However, there are moments when this first line of our means runs out and we find ourselves at the mercy of the situation. Spiritually based individuals have at that point, according to James, an indisputable advantage because they can turn to their inner world. Spirituality here is then another instance. Where we cease to be sufficient as people with our given abilities, we turn to what we believe that transcends us. In a sense, it is an extension of our reality and freedom within it. In this respect, the spiritual dimension is unique and irreplaceable. Again, it emerges from this pair as an area more open and adaptable to individual needs.

To sum up, morality is categorized as a first layer, while spirituality is the second and absolute instance. In Spohn's words, " 'off the scale' of ordinary morality." Spirituality is to some

²⁸ Ibid., 112.

extent parallel to the morally good, but the scope of the spiritual realm is not exhausted. Spirituality as extended reality remains unique sphere of human experience.²⁹

2. 1. 3. Spirituality and mystical experience: William James

“There are moments of sentimental and mystical experience—we shall hereafter hear much of them—that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come. But they come seldom, and they do not come to everyone; and the rest of life makes either no connection with them, or tends to contradict them more than it confirms them.”

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*³⁰

Spiritual and mystical experience are, once again, related but not equal spheres. Both suffer from certain vagueness and dubiety resulting from their primarily personal and abstract character; both are burdened with several attributed yet undesired meanings.

According to James, it is impossible to communicate mystical experience in words, meaning that one can only understand what is happening by experiencing it, and it cannot be shared, described, learned, or otherwise explained. Nevertheless, these experiences have a strong noetic character which is, however, exceeding our given intellectual capacities. It is knowledge that is close to a certain kind of revelation, something that is not self-evident and hardly graspable by ordinary intellectual and communication apparatus. This knowledge could also be described as a kind of ultimate truth or wisdom. In this sense, we can also speak of a certain approach to unity: unity with the ultimate. This revelation comes from a deeper world that is not sensually recognizable. As James describes it:

²⁹ It may be argued that religion, for example, is also capable of fulfilling the function of extended reality. However, we have explained that spirituality (James' “personal level religion”) is the fundamental building block of religion (the doctrinal religion). Thus, religion may serve as an extended reality, but—psychologically speaking—through (on the level of) the spiritual component.

³⁰ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 16.

“Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”³¹

James attributes great importance to the noetic aspect of this experience,³² which might be—although not necessarily—related to the spiritual or religious area.³³ Another characteristic feature of the mystical experience next to being impossible to describe by words and bringing strong noetic component with them is its ephemerality. Situations of mystical character fluctuate in intensity and usually are not sustained for a long time. However, at the same time, they constantly influence and update our being. That is, despite their short spontaneity, they leave something in us that affects us throughout our entire lives. Finally, James identifies in mystical experiences that the subject in such situations is rather passive; i.e., the experience is “out of body”³⁴—in Plato's rhetoric, it could be

³¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 287.

³² Many papers from the field of neuroscience have been written on the connection between our brain activity and experiences of mystical nature, especially in connection to the limbic system in our brain structure that operates with emotions, memories and also spiritual experiences such as the mystical state. Connection between the mystical experience and its cognitive aspect has been thematized by many scientific studies and researches. See:

Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Jonathan S. Miller, “Mystical Experiences, Neuroscience, and the Nature of Reality” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2007), 1-135.

Mairo Beauregard and Vincent Paquette, “Neural correlates of a mystical experience in Carmelite nuns,” *Neuroscience Letters* 405 (2006): 189-190.

M. A. Persinger, “Vectorial Cerebral Hemisphericity as Differential Sources for the Sensed Presence, Mystical Experiences and Religious Conversions,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 76 (1993): 915-930.

Patrick McNamara, *Neuroscience of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Robert K. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

Shahar Arzy et al., “Why revelations have occurred on mountains? Linking mystical experiences and cognitive neuroscience,” *Medical Hypotheses* 65 (2005): 841-845.

³³ James in this manner scales mystical experience from a basic characterization, such as sudden realization, to an intense moment of meeting God. Although James somewhat democratizes mystical experience by scaling it from a very common phenomena in which we simply realize something to an experience of religious revelation, we might ask whether James does not interpret the term mystical in its mildest manifestation too openly. For example, he talks about alcohol intoxication in this context too: “I refer to the consciousness produced by intoxicants and anaesthetics, especially by alcohol. The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the YES function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth.” James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 292.

³⁴ “A much more extreme state of mystical consciousness is described by J. A. Symonds; and probably more people than we suspect could give parallels to it from their own experience. ‘Suddenly,’ writes Symonds, ‘at church, or in company, or when I was reading, and always, I think, when my muscles were at rest, I felt the approach of the mood. Irresistibly it took possession of my mind and will, lasted what seemed an eternity, and disappeared in a series of rapid

said “rising upwards”—detaching from the world of matter, and entering to the world of ideas, dematerialized and dehumanized. Only with the strongest suppression of oneself it is possible to experience the absolute.

The spectrum of mystical experiences is wide, and all together, this whole area is not entirely analogous and overlapping with the spiritual one (although we can conclude that much of it is spiritually related). The cognitive aspect is, however, specific precisely for the mystical experience. Indeed, there are some characteristics that mystical and spiritual experiences share; e.g., both can significantly affect our lives while being difficult to describe and communicate due to their ephemerality. However, in the spiritual experience, the subject is usually vital and an active element, while in mystical moments, one is passive.

sensations which resembled the awakening from anaesthetic influence. One reason why I disliked this kind of trance was that I could not describe it to myself. I cannot even now find words to render it intelligible. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self. The universe became without form and void of content. But Self persisted, formidable in its vivid keenness, feeling the most poignant doubt about reality, ready, as it seemed, to find existence break as breaks a bubble round about it. And what then? The apprehension of a coming dissolution, the grim conviction that this state was the last state of the conscious Self, the sense that I had followed the last thread of being to the verge of the abyss, and had arrived at demonstration of eternal Maya or illusion, stirred or seemed to stir me up again. The return to ordinary conditions of sentient existence began by my first recovering the power of touch, and then by the gradual though rapid influx of familiar impressions and diurnal interests. At last I felt myself once more a human being; and though the riddle of what is meant by life remained unsolved I was thankful for this return from the abyss—this deliverance from so awful an initiation into the mysteries of skepticism.’ ” James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 290-91.

2. 2. Aesthetic experience

In the following part, aesthetic experience will be described based on the theories of Jan Mukařovský and Edward Bullough, supported by that of Vlastimil Zuska. The authors place great focus on analyzing the subject's psychological setting when approaching reality aesthetically. All of them thematize aesthetic attitude instead of explicitly working with aesthetic experience. However, in order to obtain the aesthetic experience, a certain mindset is necessary. James, after all, also did not start with spiritual experience straight away, and instead explained what is happening in our psychological setting in order to experience some form of spirituality. Hence, it is necessary to explain what aesthetic attitude is, starting with the work of Jan Mukařovský.

2. 2. 1. Jan Mukařovský: distinction of four attitudes

The ideas of linguist and aesthetician Jan Mukařovský³⁵ revolve around the position and activity of the subject and the way the subject relates to perceived reality, similar to the case of William James. As mentioned, Mukařovský does not have an experience theory; however, it will be shown that experience is implicit in his theory of aesthetic attitude. The subject plays a key role in Mukařovský's aesthetic system: it is realized in the subject's self-assertion through which his experience becomes aesthetical. Experience is inherently contained in what follows from the self-assertion of the subject towards the world around him. Reality has features ("functions" in Mukařovský's terminology) one chooses to see, qualities that one focuses his attention on. Whether something is practical, spiritual or aesthetic is realized through an anthropological position. In Mukařovský's conception, an individual is the measure of all things, and the dynamics of aesthetic and non-aesthetic takes on the forms that an individual attributes to it. The practical can become aesthetic, and aesthetic can be practical, etc. Nothing is fixed; it all depends on the act of the perceiver. Each area of human experience can be

³⁵ Jan Mukařovský, *Studie z estetiky* (Praha: Odeon, 1966).

aesthetic, but it can also have different functions. Moreover, according to Mukařovský, the individual functions can coexist. That means that something can be practical and aesthetic at the same time, or even spiritual and aesthetic. This is important to note because following Mukařovský's theory on functions allows us to work with aesthetic and spiritual aspects together.

There are different "sets" of qualities to be found while having different attitudes towards reality. Depending on the attitude, the diverse functions of the things come to the fore. Mukařovský explains what the aesthetic attitude is by defining it in relation to other attitudes. We have a different attitude to reality when we approach it utilitarianly (practically), scientifically (theoretically), spiritually and finally aesthetically.

When maintaining the attitude of practicality, the goal is to change reality through intervention, and activities are arranged with respect to that goal. Mukařovský gives an example of a forest, which is for a carpenter's practical attitude only relevant in context of its usefulness for his particular goal—as a source of material for a new piece of furniture he wants to make. The forest has a quality or function—being a stock of wood—which is relevant for achieving a certain goal. Without wood, the forest is not useful for the carpenter. Without the necessary qualities, a tool is not useful anymore; in fact, it is not a tool in this manner at all. In this practical situation, we are not interested in the property of the object itself, but in how we could use such a property. It is something we aim to achieve through our intervention, through our input. In short, a forest is not a subject of our interest for its own sake. It only interests us in context of our goal we aim to achieve through some intervention. This is the core of the practical attitude.

Within the framework of the theoretical approach, reality is again a tool for us—namely a tool for knowledge. To go back to our example, we are only interested in the forest in context of the information and knowledge that we can obtain. Then we generalize and classify individual information under general summaries. We observe the life of flora and fauna in the forest so that we can then draw a general conclusion about life in the forest. The reality is a material for our

intellectual processing and categorizing under a wider context. It interests us only if it is a relevant object of our cognitive interest. Again, we are not mainly interested in the immediate reality (the forest), but in what we create by working with it: knowledge.

When we perceive reality through a spiritual approach, individual objects of reality become signs referring to abstract phenomena linked to the core of our spiritual beliefs. Graspable, identifiable stimuli become signs of what we cannot clearly imagine. These signs interest us only in connection to what they refer to. They hold certain meaning, linking to something outside themselves, and we are interested in that external entity to which the sign refers. The forest here might be a sign of natural deities or some form of ultimate harmony, and only in that context do we care for the forest while maintaining a spiritual attitude. Particular natural objects or areas (a stone on top of a hill, a glade lit by the sun in the middle of a dark forest, a hazy mysterious surface of the lake) then serve as a sign that connects us with something transcendental, mysterious and unknowable through the senses, and the signs refer to supernal entities, a higher power. The physical qualities of the environment play an important role in how we perceive it and what we attribute to it. They become signs of abstract ideas. Through sensory qualities, we recognize the non-sensory. As indicated earlier, the natural environment has especially suitable dispositions for establishing spiritual connections because it naturally abounds in a wide range of sensory sensations. Moreover, the connection with the transcendental is all the more intense the more the environment is perceived as "untouched", somewhat "unbiased" and consistent in itself, counterbalancing what humans have in their power and what they shape according to their wishes and desires. Finnish artist Saija Kivikangas, who in her artistic and theoretical practice also deals with the relationship between natural spirituality and aesthetics, once wrote to me:

“That is clear. Nature is beautiful. Nature is perfect. Like a giant organism which self-nurtures and maintains itself. What could be more natural than nature? It has been worshiped, praised and feared

throughout human history. Every stroke of nature also has its own aesthetic value, hurricanes, forest fires, volcano eruptions, tsunamis.”

The aspect of the presence of uncontrollable forces is something that provokes astonishment in people and the feeling that such a force has to do with something superhuman and universal. It inspires respect, precisely because it refers to something that we think transcends us and perhaps to some extent also controls us without being aware of it. The moments of realizing this power of nature are hidden in spiritual experiences rooted in the natural environment, often characterized by feelings of wonder and awe. By adopting a spiritual attitude, we are exploring a higher (hidden) context of an experienced environment or object. The reality acquires a symbolic meaning by our spiritual activity. It becomes a sign referring outside of what is by the senses knowable. We create a sign whose meaning refers to something that is transcendental. This need and ability to create a sign of this nature mirrors that we humans are or want to be part of: a higher order, or something we believe is ultimate and omnipresent. It is what is present in us and what we want to realize in our spiritual experience.

Like the spiritual attitude, the aesthetic attitude does not approach reality in order to change it in some immediate way³⁶. Therefore, the aesthetic attitude is also a sign attitude because we approach reality by transforming it into a sign; that is, the whole process of interaction takes place on the mental level, and there is no direct intervention and alteration of the object of our interest. Nevertheless, the spiritual sign and the aesthetic sign are still quite different. While the spiritual sign refers to something else besides the subject and the physical object (the setting or environment), the aesthetic sign refers to the relationship between the subject and the center of his aesthetic interest. The aesthetic sign is a sign of our relationship to the experienced reality of the moment when we see it aesthetically. It refers to our aesthetic preferences, how we construct an aesthetic object and

³⁶ In the case of the practical attitude, the change is pretty much clear. In case of the theoretical attitude, the change is non-physical but rather a change on the level of the information value that the object contains. We abstract from it information that we transform into new, wider and more general information.

what feelings we experience in the aesthetic experience of given qualities and their combinations. The aesthetic sign is the sign of our own aesthetics, which we seek and fulfill in the world around us. It is a sign of our relation to the world in this unique way. Thus, while a spiritual sign refers to something outwards, an aesthetic sign refers to something inwards. In the same way it can be said that while in a spiritual attitude we are looking for something outside of us, in an aesthetic attitude we turn to ourselves. The aesthetic attitude in this respect is strongly reflective. Being interested in aesthetic qualities (e.g., harmony, dynamics, balance, elegance and brutality), we turn to ourselves and observe the impression these qualities leave in us.³⁷

At the same time, certainly in the case of the natural environment, the sensory material that we process transform into a sign, and we further work with it on a psychological level that is also essential for the aesthetic attitude, just as it is for spiritual attitude. We observe the apparent softness of the mighty stone; the silky, milky smoothness of the mist above the lake; and the strange warm friendliness and kindness of the sun-warmed, golden-colored glade in the midst of a dark, dangerous wet forest. We examine the physical qualities, abstract the aesthetic qualities, and observe how we feel about the aesthetic pleasure we experience.

The sensory qualities of the natural environment reflected on the mental level thus acquire more sign dimensions, both becoming an aesthetic sign and a spiritual sign. At the same time, the need to establish a spiritual connection with supernatural entities stems from within us and is present within us (if it is not, we simply would not seek spiritual experience). This need is often demonstrated in the passion for certain physical qualities found in the natural environment to which we attribute deeper meaning. At this point of entry, as I will show later, the aesthetic attitude is strongly present and greatly assisting, as it seeks sign-interpretable qualities and creates material that can ultimately acquire transcendental value in the transition to a spiritual attitude.

³⁷ It should be noted that aesthetic qualities exist only on the level of our consciousness. We abstract them through our mental activity from physical qualities of particular objects of our aesthetic interest.

2. 2. 2. Edward Bullough's psychological formulation of an aesthetic attitude

As an entry input following the spiritual experience of the natural environment, it is necessary to explain in more detail how the aesthetic attitude is maintained. I will do so through the interpretation of aestheticians Edward Bullough and Vlastimil Zuska.

In his famous work "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle"³⁸ Bullough introduces a psychological mechanism that can be understood as a formulation of an aesthetic attitude. He calls it "psychical distance". This psychical distance lies between our "self" and what our "self" experiences—its affect(s). The affect is an emotional reaction to an external impulse. The source of these affects can be any object or idea. The focus of our aesthetic interest is not only our selves-as-subject, nor the object, but the relationship of our selves to the affect that the object is the source of (as mentioned, the aesthetic attitude is hence a reflective attitude). In the words of Vlastimil Zuska³⁹:

"The aesthetic attitude differs from the pure intentional focus on oneself (for example in Buddhist meditation) by the object, the so-called second-order object, which is our relation to the primary object of (perceptual) interest. (With respect to the literary work, I place the "perceptual" in parentheses.) Thus, the recipient does not completely close himself to the immanence of Ego, but focuses on his own relation to the external object in its qualitative aspects; our practical self disappears, and is replaced by a neutral self-consciousness—by observing how part of our self is related to affects. Part of myself, therefore, focuses on what the other part of myself experiences in the 'mode of neutral modification of consciousness.'⁴⁰ (translated from the original Czech)

This dense but very precise paragraph further develops Bullough's formulation of the aesthetic attitude. Through the onset of psychical distance, we "forget" the practical reality and focus on the

³⁸ Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle," *The British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): 88-118.

³⁹ See: Vlastimil Zuska, *Estetika. Úvod do současnosti tradiční disciplíny* (Praha: Triton, 2001).
Vlastimil Zuska, *Mimésis-Fikce-Distance* (Praha: Triton, 2002).

⁴⁰ Zuska, *Mimésis-Fikce-Distance*, 122.

relationship between our selves and its affects. We focus on our relationship to what the object evokes in us. This relationship is thus referred to by the sign in the aesthetic attitude discussed in the previous chapter. The practical importance of the observed stimuli is not important to us. This whole layer fades completely. We perceive only new (aesthetic) qualities that arise due to the onset of psychological distance (aesthetic attitude). Zuska further elaborates on this process as follows: with the onset of psychological distance, an aesthetic object is created. The aesthetic object arises in the mind of the perceiver. For its existence, the act requires a perceiver and a carrier (for example, some physical object). The reflecting “self” constitutes an aesthetic object on the basis of the relationship of the reflected “self” to the carrier (the actual object). The aesthetic object is understood here as a mental construct created on the basis of the two-phased reflection of its carrier; i.e., a physical object, or an idea, etc.

“In self-reflection, consciousness splits into a part that reflects, i.e., an active reflecting consciousness that focuses on a certain part of itself and a part that is the subject of that consciousness, i.e., a partially reflected consciousness.”⁴¹ (translated from the original Czech)

Without the onset of psychological distance, i.e., cleft to reflecting and reflected self, it would not be possible to create an aesthetic object. We cease to be active drivers within the real, living world. We don't interfere with it. We only accept its impulses on the basis of which, in the aesthetic attitude—i.e., through psychological distance—we create an aesthetic object. That means that we see (for us) new aesthetic qualities. All the activity of the perceiver in this process takes place at the level of his consciousness.⁴² The external stimulus can be an incentive for any of our senses or a combination

⁴¹ Zuska, *Estetika*, 41.

⁴² Bullough's theory has met with a wave of reactions. Various authors (Oscar Hanfling, George Dickie, Allan Casebier, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Arnold Berleant) somehow modified or denied Bullough's theory or defined themselves against it some other way. I will not deal with this issue in this work, but perhaps I will just briefly argue: the most common mistake is confusing physical distance with psychological distance, however, the former is only a factor that affects the latter. Spatial (physical) and temporal distance (between the viewer and the creation of the work) are factors that influence the onset and intensity of psychological distance, which only works on the level of consciousness. Psychological distance is a mindset that rather than a normative theory we shall understand as a psychological formulation

of them. Especially in the aesthetic appraisal of the natural environment, the combination of sensory perceptions plays an essential role for our aesthetic experience, which environmental aestheticians began to notice with the emergence of this discipline in the 1960s. The condition of being able to adopt an aesthetic attitude in connection with any initiative is the ability to mentally distance oneself from these stimuli in the way as it was described before. It is not always easy as it depends on how urgent, personal, emotionally charged or physically pleasant stimuli are. The more they tend to be so, the harder it is for us to perceive them aesthetically. Rather, we tend to approach them through some of the other attitudes, most often the practical one.

2. 3. Aesthetic appreciation of natural environment

“One first thinks of stunning scenery: snowy mountains and surging waterfalls, immense tundra and teeming rainforests, sweeping grassland vistas and stark deserts. But other senses are involved too, particularly those of touch, smell, and hearing. Parks are very tactile places, where one is encouraged to feel nature at an intimate scale, to thrust one’s hand into a bed of moss, or let beach sand run through one’s fingers at seaside, or feel the rocks beneath one’s feet on a rugged trail. Odors and aromas—pine pitch, animal musk, wildflowers, campfires—add irreplaceable texture, and, when recollected, often set off a whole succession of memories that make a park experience unforgettable. Combine all this with the sounds of nature—birdsong, wind whistling down a canyon, lapping waves, the dripping of water from a desert seep, and, perhaps the rarest and most priceless of all, the perfection of silence, of total quiet—and one comes away with an aesthetic experience that far surpasses any human contrivance in terms of variety and complexity.”⁴³

It has been outlined several times that spiritual needs are particularly related to the natural environment because it is especially colorful in terms of sensory stimuli interpretable into symbolic meanings. The input moment is captivation by the sensory quality, and before we begin to establish

of an aesthetic attitude in the sense that it describes a cleft into a reflected and reflective part of our self. This cleft constitutes and allows us reflection, which is necessary for any of the aesthetic approaches that are offered in aesthetic theory (whether artistic or environmental) because it enables us to analyze our immediate experience and infer judgment from it.

⁴³ David Harmon, “Intangible Values of Protected Areas: What Are They? Why Do They Matter?” *Schemantic Scholar* 1 (2004): 15, 16.

a symbolic meaning, the passion itself is initially in the form of aesthetic passion. The aesthetic approach of an individual to reality is the gateway to the realization of certain ideals. If the forest landscape is harmonious and balanced, chaos recedes while order and some ultimate meaning come to the fore. The aesthetically pleasing qualities refer to the presence of transcendental principles. Hence, the aesthetic experience in the nature plays a constitutive role in this process. It is necessary to explain what the experience looks like, what form it can take, and how we can navigate it.

Art is the imprint of the human soul; it is a product of an individual's expression. Nature, on the other hand, is a self-sufficient and existentially independent entity, a reality that is equal to a human being. As such it is more convenient to relate to an individual's aesthetical and spiritual needs when it comes to mixing them together. It is a qualitatively different area to which one pursues these attitudes, and the experience arising from it has a completely different character than the experience of the art. In that connection, spiritual and aesthetic experience of the natural environment as something which was not originally created for aesthetic and spiritual purposes can provide a clearer and more unbiased testimony of ourselves in relation to these experiences.⁴⁴

Especially in the second half of the last century, attention in aesthetic discourse began to diversify and the more-or-less dominant position of the artistic field began to weaken in this respect. A new branch of the aesthetic approach called environmental aesthetics was born, or more precisely, the already-existing aesthetic experience of the non-artistic field has found its theoretical background and relevant conceptual framework. As already indicated in the previous chapter on aesthetic attitude, its existence is not determined by the predetermined qualities of objects, but by the psychological act of the perceiver. In this spirit, anything can have aesthetic potential, and it is up to us to turn it into an actual aesthetic experience. This fact is reflected in environmental aesthetics

⁴⁴ Of course, it is easy to ask what the situation is today when one has managed to influence a lot of natural processes, and often it is he who is responsible for the destruction or well-being of the natural environment. However, this is not so because it should naturally be so; nature has been there before and will be there after our human "era". Humans appropriate and subdue their individual fragments, but nature as an element remains independent. Therefore, in terms of its creation and thus its foundation, I do not understand the realm of art to be qualitatively on the same level as the natural realm.

and its focus on the environment in its entirety; i.e., it can be understood as the universe that surrounds us. As Allen Carlson sums it up: environmental aesthetics covers a wide range of areas, from “wilderness, through rural landscapes, to cityscapes, neighborhoods, shopping centers and beyond.”⁴⁵ The environment can be understood, indeed, as anything: a valley surrounded by mountains covered with trees and shrubs, a cornfield behind the city, a street, a garden, a parking lot, an office or a desk. As Arnold Berleant states:

“In its largest sense, environmental aesthetics denotes the appreciative engagement of humans as part of a total environmental complex, where the intrinsic experience of sensory qualities and immediate meanings predominates. The experience of environment as an inclusive perceptual system includes such factors as space, mass, volume, time, movement, color, light, smell, sound, tactility, kinesthesia, pattern, order, and meaning. Environmental experience here is not exclusively visual but actively involves all the sensory modalities synaesthetically, engaging the participant in intense awareness. Moreover, a normative dimension suffuse the perceptual range, and this underlies positive or negative value judgments of an environment. Environmental aesthetics thus becomes the study of environmental experience in the immediate and intrinsic value of its perceptual and cognitive dimensions.”⁴⁶

“Environment” in its broadest sense is an absolute and completely inclusive area of aesthetics. There are no limits, no boundaries. Thus, environmental aesthetics focuses on the possibilities of aesthetic experiences of the available daily reality around us through all the senses involving the whole person, taking into account all imaginable relationships, processes and qualities that interact and arise from each other. From such an aesthetic approach, we then create certain qualitative judgments depending on how the perceptions affect us. It is not only a confused being in the middle of everything, but an absorption of perceptions and their subsequent qualitative evaluation in the form

⁴⁵ Allen Carlson, “The scope of environmental aesthetics,” *Environmental aesthetics* (1998), doi:10.4324/9780415249126-M047-1.

⁴⁶ Arnold Berleant, “What is Environmental Aesthetics,” (2017).
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317369665_What_is_Environmental_Aesthetics

of an aesthetic judgment. As already pointed out, this work focuses specifically on an area that, by its very nature, is not a human creation or an artifact. I will therefore focus from this wide range of environmental aesthetics on the aesthetic experience of the natural environment.

Again, in the words of Arnold Berleant:

“Just as humans are not distinct from nature nor especially favored by nature, aesthetic values are embedded in natural conditions. Our experiences with the natural world are suffused with aesthetic values, from the greening of the grass in early spring to the ever-changing cloud formations in the sky. We find delight and renewal in these simple perceptions, not to mention the poignant intimacy of a flower and spectacular vistas across the landscape. And it is well that we recognize these aesthetic values. They bring free delight to our lives and may evoke a sense of our ephemeral participation in those processes. This pleasurable awareness has been called ‘the aesthetic appreciation of nature’.”⁴⁷

Although it has been said that nature is understood in this work as an element by its existence independent of humans, it would be a mistake to conclude that humans are independent of nature. In a certain way, it is impossible to determine the boundary between nature and humans. Without environment, including the natural one, of course, we could not exist.

2. 3. 1. Deformation of the aesthetic experience of the natural environment by seeing it as art

With the emergence of environmental aesthetics, it was necessary to formulate the aesthetic approach to nature and separate it from the aesthetic approach to art. It was only natural to do so to emphasize the difference between the experience of nature and related experiences and those associated with art. There is consensus on the level of awareness that nature and its potential deserve a separate discipline that will address its aesthetic concept. Presently, opinions begin to diverge when we are about to define the factors and qualities that should be in our interest during aesthetic

⁴⁷ Berleant, “What is Environmental Aesthetics,” 2.

evaluation. This problem concerns aesthetic evaluation in general, and in the field of art, as in the field of aesthetics of natural environment, it raises a number of discussions. The issue as such stretches over both areas but varies in specific questions. For example, non-human agencies have different origins than artworks. Except for theological and various holistic interpretations⁴⁸, we do not understand nature and particular natural objects and landscapes as being a work of an individual. In this work, the concept of the natural environment is applied as something that used to be, or originally is, in essence not a product of human management (regardless of whether, for example, a specific forest was planted by someone 300 years ago or not, such a forest could basically be seen as an artifact, and the whole aesthetic situation would change). I will leave the issue of what real wilderness even means today aside. The question of relevance of authorship for our evaluation is therefore meaningful in the case of art but outside the context of the natural environment with its individual components.

The works of art, besides being a work of *someone*, are also equipped with certain elements that guide and, in some way, lead our aesthetic attention. These include the frame, pedestal, etc.⁴⁹ These elements help us to identify what should be the center of our aesthetic interest, whereas this aesthetic interest realized in the aesthetic attitude is supported by their nature of distance. By creating a certain physical distance, they enforce the psychological distance whose principle I have explained before. However this is not the case with the aesthetic appraisal of the natural environment. If we find ourselves in the middle of a certain natural environment (in the forest, meadow, mountains, etc.), nowhere is it determined what should be the center of our aesthetic interest. Because natural objects are essentially not made for us to evaluate them, their existence (outside of human influence) is not constituted in connection with our aesthetic perception. Instead of distance factors, there lies an unstructured range of sensory possibilities that draw us into themselves that penetrate our bodies,

⁴⁸ Susan Baker and Robin Morrison, "Environmental Spirituality: Grounding Our Response To Climate Change," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 4 (2008): 35-50.

⁴⁹ Bullough refers to them as "distancing factors." Bullough, "Psychical Distance," 105.

becoming “us”. Such experience, as Emily Brady⁵⁰ points out while citing lines from Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem “The Prelude” (1850), tends to lead to a positive impact on our overall well-being, while showing strong aesthetic indications:

“O there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
Whate’er its mission, the soft breeze can come
To none more grateful than to me; escaped
From the cast city, where I long had pined
A disconnected sojourner: now free,
Free as a bird to settle where I will.
What dwelling shall receive me? In what vale
Shall be my harbor? Underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home? And what clear stream
Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
The earth is all before me. With a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about; and should the chosen guide
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way, I breathe again!”⁵¹

The incomprehensibility of the natural environment as an environment then participates in certain supernal principles that we attribute to it, seek in it, and which we are astonished to realize. Natural environments-are inherently beyond our control and our ability to objectify and limit them. It is something that inspires respect and interest in us. The size and strength of the natural environment, its spreading, and its highly complex relationships that we cannot even comprehend in its entirety—or at least not at once—is something that makes it mysterious and symbolic. At the

⁵⁰ Emily Brady, “Aesthetics in Practice: Valuing the Natural World,” *Environmental Values* 15 (2006): 277-291.

⁵¹ Brady, “Aesthetics in Practice,” 287.

same time, however, it provokes a strong interest in us becoming a part of it through our sensory sensations, through our physical presence in this entire universe. The natural environment becomes an inviting and welcoming stimulus for our immersion in the aesthetic experience. We do not see it as a potential danger, but rather we see it in a new form deprived of what we as people in a practical attitude attribute to it. As Bullough poetically once said:

“Imagine a fog at sea (...). Abstract from the experience of the sea fog, for the moment, its danger and practical unpleasantness, just as everyone in the enjoyment of a mountain-climb disregards its physical labor and its danger (though, it is not denied, that these may incidentally enter into the enjoyment and enhance it); direct the attention to the features ‘objectively’ constituting the phenomenon – the veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as a transparent milk, blurring the outline of things and distorting their shapes into weird grotesqueness; observe the carrying-power of the air, producing the impression as if you could touch some far-off siren by merely putting your hand and letting it lose itself behind that white wall; note the curious creamy smoothness of the water, hypocritically denying as it were any suggestion of danger; and, above all, the strange solitude and remoteness from the world, as it can be found only on the highest mountain tops: and the experience may acquire, in its uncanny mingling of repose and terror, a flavor of such concentrated poignancy and delight as to contrast sharply with the blind and distempered anxiety of its other aspects.”⁵²

No practical intervention is happening from our side; our attention is not distracted by the vision of scientific knowledge, and there is no practical immediacy that breaks the sign and causes the object of our interest to become an immediate tool for achieving a practical goal. We are captivated by the play of sensory stimuli, the play of imagination, as if we were looking at the world through the eyes of a newborn. Immediacy works at the level of perception of sensory stimuli, but our intervention, our attempt to alter, does not occur. As Ronald W. Hepburn⁵³ points out:

“Some sort of detachment there certainly is, in the sense that I am not using nature, manipulating it

⁵² Bullough, “Psychical Distance,” 88, 89.

⁵³ Ronald W. Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,” in *Wonder' and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1984), 9-35.

or calculating how to manipulate it. But I am both actor and spectator, ingredient in the landscape and lingering upon the sensations of being thus ingredient (...).”⁵⁴

The aesthetic interest in the natural environment, of course, often results in institutionalized environmental management (and by management I mean some kind of manipulation), and also enhances ecological interest and awareness (this topic will be addressed later in this work). These are, albeit important, secondary consequences of the aesthetic experience. The primary direct effect takes place immediately on the psychical and physical level while experiencing the aesthetic qualities of the natural environment. I say the psychical and physical level because the aesthetic experience of the natural environment, as previously outlined and as will be explained in more detail later, is experiencing all the sensory stimuli with the whole body, which we evaluate on the psychological level.

Allen Carlson’s⁵⁵ elaboration on the distinction between the aesthetic appraisal of nature and of the arts forms a kind of pillar to which the discourse of the natural aesthetic often refers to. In his work “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” he classifies the most common and inadequate approaches to nature distorted by the approach to art into two groups (models). He calls them the object and the landscape model. These models approach nature as if its individual objects were works of art (the object model), or as if its particular landscape, “cut-out” in our field of vision, was an “image” (the landscape model). In the case of the object model, our attention separates a certain fragment of the natural environment—the object that is a part of it—and we treat it as an independent, autonomous object. This happens on an imaginary, mental level, but also literally, manifested in a stone from the forest displayed on our mantelpiece, as Carlson exemplifies⁵⁶. In both cases, according to Carlson, we make a fundamental mistake, which is the treatment of the object as

⁵⁴ Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics,” 13.

⁵⁵ Allen Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1979): 267-275.

Allen Carlson, “Appreciating art and appreciating nature,” in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 199-227.

⁵⁶ Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” 268.

“an aesthetically self-contained unit”⁵⁷. Aesthetically self-contained units are often many works of art for whose environment does not matter for their aesthetic evaluation. They have no aesthetically relevant links to anything around them; they are autonomous and complete in themselves. However, according to Carlson, we cannot say that about our stone on the mantelpiece. This stone represents and is physically a part of an endless chain of relationships, natural processes and a complex development of the environment. Its fullest quality is that it is part of something much greater than itself. Taking this into account, our aesthetic reception of such a stone in its natural environment is quite different from a stone devoid of context and history, built into an environment with which it has nothing to do with. By distorting natural objects into the role of works of art, we deprive us of an aesthetic experience unique and specific to the reception of natural objects in an adequate way, that is, as natural objects.

A similar situation occurs with the landscape model. Such a situation usually involves us standing somewhere aside, observing from a certain fixed place the landscape sweeping ahead of us as if it was a picture. There is a kind of flattening of what is happening before us in our minds. A dynamic environment full of motion, transformation, relationships, actions and reactions becomes a two-dimensional surface as if stopped in time. Again, there is some distortion of the perception of the natural environment to the way of perception of art, and instead of the unique aesthetic experience of the natural environment that we could not otherwise gain, we get an incomplete and somewhat imperfect aesthetic experience similar to that from art, but not quite. It is important to proceed to the natural environment as something natural and non-human—and therefore “non-art”—and at the same time as an environment—a dynamic and relational system with no frame and flat-image stiffness.

“What is important is to recognize that nature is an environment and is natural, and to make that recognition central to our aesthetic appreciation. Thereby we will aesthetically appreciate nature for

⁵⁷ Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” 269.

what it is and for the qualities it has. And we will avoid being the person described by Hepburn who ‘will either pay very little aesthetic heed to natural objects or else heed them in the wrong way,’ who ‘will look- and of course look in vain- for what can be found and enjoyed only in art’.”⁵⁸

And as Yuriko Saito⁵⁹ notes, in accordance with Carlson:

“No doubt the visual surface of nature is an integral and necessary element of our aesthetic appreciation. However, this exclusive attention to its pictorial surface falsifies nature’s aesthetic value. (...) The predominantly visual experience of nature thus can be characterized as our selective hearing in comparison with the richness of nature’s gift to us.”⁶⁰

In short, to evaluate nature as art means to distort and to qualitatively reduce the aesthetic experience acquired in this way. Nature's conditions must be respected, otherwise the aesthetic experience unique to nature would not be gained. Just as spirituality was distinguished from religion, morality and mystical experiences, it is necessary to clarify the differences between the aesthetic approach to art and nature. The natural environment offers other possibilities of experience than man-made art.

2. 3. 2. Understanding nature as nature: respecting the boundaries between nature and humans in their coexistence

After a critical reflection of the two most common art-distorted approaches, Carlson offers a third, environmental model of aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment. According to Carlson, the most conscious approach to nature is one that approaches it precisely as nature. To take such an approach, we need to know something about nature, or more specifically about its given fragment, which is the center of our attention. This knowledge is primarily of a scientific nature. As Saito, who in her already-cited text refers to Carlson, notes:

⁵⁸ Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” 274.

⁵⁹ Yuriko Saito, “Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms,” *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998): 135-149.

⁶⁰ Saito, “Appreciating Nature,” 137.

“The facts about nature which are independent of human involvement, Carlson claims, are provided by scientific/common-sensical knowledge of naturalists and ecologists. Such knowledge helps us determine the story that nature tells of itself through its sensuous surface.”⁶¹

It is in place to ask whether such a condition does not exclude those who do not possess this knowledge from the field of aesthetic experience (that is, to be inclusive and accessible to everyone). However, let us leave this issue aside and look at Carlson's model through the lens of this work to enumerate possible approaches to the aesthetic appraisal of the natural environment. While Carlson's motivation lies in the adequacy and “cognitiveness” of a given aesthetic experience based on scientific facts, Saito is more concerned about moral dimension of such an approach. According to her, the right and morally harmless approach to nature must be one that does not take human motives and human history into account and does not forcibly push it into natural history. “Morally harmless” can therefore be in her concept understood as respecting certain boundaries and differences.

“The appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature, I have argued, must embody a moral capacity for recognizing and respecting nature as having its own reality apart from our presence, with its own story to tell.”⁶²

However, the question is to what extent human history is truly separated from natural history. Given the evolutionary interdependence of human and the natural environment, to not understand ourselves as part of it seem at least quite unreasonable. What Saito probably means however is the problematic situation of reducing nature to a sub-element of our human history, resulting into a lack of respect towards nature from our side.

⁶¹ Ibid., 142.

⁶² Ibid., 148.

Hepburn⁶³ mentions a stream that does not exactly sympathize with the desire to “humanize” nature, not in qualitative kind of sense as Saito refers to, but in terms of trying to be in spiritual unity with it. This stream rather promotes taking into account only the sensory qualities that can be observed and on the basis of which an aesthetic judgment can be brought. The stream distances itself as far as possible from “vague” spiritual concepts in which it is not clear what exactly constitutes our experience, which qualities we are talking about, and where the boundaries are between the object and the subject of the aesthetic situation. Spiritually-oriented and motivated aesthetic approaches towards natural environment, in context of such understandings, are questioned for their process is indeed limited by the perception of sensory qualities and subsequent aesthetic judgment. These doubts are exactly what this work seeks to refute. Hepburn does not entirely reject this spiritual approach but notices a certain setback in terms of our emotional experience. Hepburn notes that the feeling of oneness with nature may be conditioned with a certain emotional identification with it. In other words, we look for emotions that we feel as humans and for which we have terms that are expressible to us in the manifestations or situations observed in the natural environment. Hepburn argues that often while being in nature we encounter events that go beyond the spectrum of human emotions for which we have concepts that are familiar to us, which we are able to identify, describe and somehow understand.

“Aesthetic experience of nature may be experience of range of emotion that the human scene, by itself, untutored and un-supplemented, could not evoke. (...) To be ‘one’ with nature in that sense was to realize vividly one’s place in the landscape, as a form among its forms. And this is not to have nature’s ‘foreignness’ or otherness overcome, but in contrast, to allow that otherness free play in the modifying of one’s everyday sense of one’s own being.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics,” 17.

⁶⁴ Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics,” 20.

Thus, to accept and integrate difference as such into our experience and to be in harmony with disharmony can improve our experience. As Hepburn continues, instead of “humanizing” nature, one can speak of “naturizing”⁶⁵ the human.

Carlson's cognitive model of aesthetic valuation of nature is interesting, though not entirely appropriate in the context of this work which approaches experience as immediate, sincere, inclusive, and unaffected by the external. Carlson's cognitive model and the aesthetic area is analogous to religion in relation to the spiritual area. Scientific knowledge here serves as a regulatory, predetermined and assumed dogmatic canon. As in the case of religion, we follow a certain defined procedure: what is written, what is established and what is generally shared. What could be summarized from Saito and Hepburn's remarks is that instead of trying to subdue nature and place it in our existing categories of emotional and historical understanding, we should rather leave these categories for a moment, enter into the unknown, respect it and experience it. As such, we may assume that it may be an interesting source of what is called the “aesthetic spiritual experience”.

2. 3. 3. Arnold Berleant's aesthetics of engagement: being a living part of the experienced

It has been mentioned several times that sensory stimuli plays a crucial role in the aesthetic reception. In the modern context, we also know that the limitations of the senses of sight and hearing as well as the physical distance from the object of our aesthetic interest are somewhat outdated approaches in which the potential of aesthetic experience is not fully realized. Therefore, I will now focus on the approach that Arnold Berleant has been instrumental in promoting. Berleant calls it “aesthetic engagement”. At the moment of an aesthetic experience, the subject is not just a passive viewer; on the contrary, he is an active part of the environment that he aesthetically appreciates. In this context, the interest is also focused on the so-called “lower senses”, which in aesthetic discourse

⁶⁵ Ibid., 21.

refers to senses of smell, touch and taste. Limiting ourselves to visual and sound qualities, according to Berleant, reduces the scope of our aesthetic experience of the natural environment. If we think about the indefinite area of the environment, the intrinsic involvement of the subject in the aesthetic situation makes very much sense. As Berleant notes, we should be referring to the environment as environment, because “the environment” tempts us to perceive it as something objectifiable, separate, graspable and definite. We ourselves are the environment, a part of it; we depend on it, breathe it and take food from it. It would be foolish to regard ourselves as separate units from the environment. The formal, plain “appearance” aspect of the matter loses its primary position; attention is directed to sensory perceptions and actual feelings. Berleant thus points out the need to change the approach in an aesthetic valuation, an approach that must take into account the nature of the environment as environment, and not try to distort it into something that it is simply not. Instead of impartial insight, full engagement is in place. One should accept his existence in its living, dynamic and relational nature—existence that has neither a beginning nor an end.

“Redefining aesthetic appreciation requires expanding other than traditional concepts when they are applied to environment. Beauty, for example, no longer concerns the formal perfection of a prized object but becomes the pervasive aesthetic value of an environmental situation. The value, moreover, is measured less by formal traits than by perceptual immediacy and intensity in enhancing the intimate bond of person and place. The sublime comes into its own as an aesthetic category here. It designates experience that is not so much in contrast to beauty as an aesthetic force that comes from the sense of being part of a perceptual matrix of overwhelming magnitude or power. Creation, often important for the theory of the arts, is transmuted into an awareness and awe of natural processes coupled with the formative contribution of an active, participating perceiver.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Arnold Berleant, “Environmental Aesthetics,” in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by M. Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114-120.

Such an understanding of the field of aesthetics and aesthetic experience ceases to be a rigid appreciation of “what things look like”. The situation is suddenly much more complex and fuller. As Berleant points out, for example on the sublime, that Western metaphysics used to stubbornly separate from and reconcile with aesthetics, running down to the aesthetic area in their intense, overwhelming nature that becomes their virtue in the context of aesthetic qualities. The natural environment is an ideal material for such an aesthetic approach because it abounds in a myriad of sensory stimuli and manifestations of inconceivable power and complexity of processes. Self-awareness in the overall context of the natural environment is becoming an important part of this experience. However, this self-consciousness is cleared of practical and further context and remains impartial in this respect. It is self-awareness in relation to what we are currently sensually experiencing. It is self-awareness in relation to the whole of things and its individual sensory manifestations. Imagine mountain climbing: the physical exertion, muscle pain and itchy sweat covering your body together with the pulsating heat. Notice the cold wind that relieves you of these, but without which there would be no reward. Imagine the joy as you reach the top of the mountain and feel how the physical pain begins to ease. Notice the landscape which suddenly echoes in front of you: the endless ocean of trees, plains and mountains in the distance, the sky with all shades of blue and gray that in the distance merges with the ground so that it is impossible to determine its beginning and end. The pleasure of visual beauty, but also of the cold relief of fresh air fills your whole being. Ascension and euphoria play a symphony with the grace and apparent softness of those austere, uncompromising hills, one of which just allowed you to humbly conquer it. The smell of pine needles, the roar of the wind, the cooling sweat on your back, all of this puts you here and now and you need nothing more. You are amazed at what you are a part of. As David Harmon⁶⁷ notes:

⁶⁷ David Harmon, “Intangible Values of Protected Areas: What Are They? Why Do They Matter?” *Schemantic Scholar* 21 (2004): 9-22.

“One reason why existence values are so deeply held is because they are rooted in a powerful human need for sensual engagement, and no one can deny that the world’s protected natural areas contain many superlative places that delight the senses.”⁶⁸

Now at the end of this chapter, it is time to recapitulate the basic characteristics of the aesthetic experience of the natural environment in the form in which it will be related to the spiritual experience. I would like to stress that there is no reason to believe that there is one right way to approach the natural environment. Some may find it more interesting to have a cognitively-guided aesthetic experience based on the Carlson model. Some simply do not want to get dirty or climb a mountain, and for some it is impossible to get visual data (for example, people with visual impairments). To argue that this or that model is the only correct one and that all others are wrong is inadequate, just as it would be wrong to say that every aesthetic experience of the natural environment needs to lead to the experience of some form of spirituality. We can say that this or that model will highlight some or other qualities for us, depending on what we are interested in. We can also say that this or that model can in some way distort the aesthetic experience each in its own way and distort the character of the object of our aesthetic interest. Even so, it cannot be said that it is wrong if the person so prefers. We can be strict and insist that nature must be respected in its own terms and that it is therefore necessary to approach it through a defined “correct” model of its aesthetic valuation. However, I do not see much reason in that because it is up to each of us to choose our own preferred method as long as it does not hurt nature. The aesthetic interest in the natural environment should be natural, sincere and especially our own; therefore, it may be counterproductive or even pointless to act normatively in this direction. What can be said is that of all the other approaches outlined, the model of engagement is the most promising model for bringing us closer to the spiritual experience as the model takes into account direct emotional, physical and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 15, 16.

reflective engagement in all sensory stimuli. Furthermore, the model also supports an awareness of oneself within the environment as a whole, which I aim to show is the same starting point of the spiritual experience in context of the natural environment.

2. 4. Summary of findings in chapter two

So far I have explained that aesthetic and spiritual experiences are similar psychological processes in that they perceive reality non-directly by processing the given sensory material on the psychological level into abstract qualities. Although these experiences cannot be imposed on everyone, both have an open and more-or-less unconditional character. Both experiences are reflected in the subject's individual setting and mental condition. Through the works of William James and other contemporary authors I have explained the inclusive and personal nature of the spiritual experience and its immediacy. A similar model can be found in the field of aesthetic discourse, introduced by Arnold Berleant under the term aesthetic engagement. I have separated spirituality from doctrines (religion), from the dominance of noetic value (mystical experience) and from the relationship to the external qualitative standards of our actions toward others (morality). All these areas meet spirituality to some extent. Religion would not function without a spiritual setting, just as mystical experiences often relate to certain spiritual and religious motives. I have also pointed out that moral beliefs are naturally in accordance with the spiritual setting, but the area of spirituality is not fulfilled by what morality is revolving around, especially with the example that the spiritual area serves as an augmented reality, a newly attained freedom when moral power runs out. Spirituality distinguished from religiousness, morality and mysticism is an area that can relate to aesthetics separated from cognitivity and other contexts more remote from personal immediate experience formed by the personality and mental attitude of the individual. Especially in the natural environment, these experiences find very suitable conditions because it is varied on the sensory stimuli we work with in these attitudes. Both experiences resonate around the relationship between

the subject and certain ideal principles. Their presence is manifested in the natural environment as an environment originally independent of humans, governed by its own mechanisms and laws. Human institutions must therefore go aside. I work with spiritual experience in the most personal and immediate form, preceded by an aesthetic experience based on the same model. I have outlined the most personal in both experiences in connection with the natural environment as a symbolically full reservoir. That the aesthetic can become spiritual and vice versa is supported by the theory of Jan Mukařovský. No area of human experience is exclusively spiritual or exclusively aesthetic. Aesthetic can become by a change of our attitude spiritual. Mukařovský's theory is themed here as a defense of the assumption that aesthetics may have spiritual potential. Bullough's theory of psychical distance then serves as a model for maintaining the aesthetic situation in the active physical presence in the natural environment.

3. Aesthetic spirituality of the natural environment

In this chapter and subchapters, I decipher the processuality of the concept of aesthetic spiritual experience and focus on the role of sensory stimuli in this context. I will also focus on the symbolic dimension of the natural environment and what role a sense of harmony and connectedness plays for the fusion of the aesthetic and spiritual experience.

3. 1. Sensory data as an initial impulse and the constitutional element

The spiritual potential of sensory qualities in the natural environment has been among others⁶⁹ thematized within the aesthetic field itself by Ronald Hepburn. In his paper⁷⁰, Hepburn notes that the spiritual experiences of nature are induced by specific sensory stimuli, which are an input for initiating a spiritual attitude. The sensory quality provokes interest on the part of the subject and becomes a building component for its integration and formation into a spiritual experience. Lia Naor and Ofra Mayseseless note too, referring to several other studies⁷¹, that sensory experiences in general are an important component of spiritual moments. Awareness of oneself as a physical bodily

⁶⁹ See:

Allison L. Stringer and Leo H. McAvoy, "The Need for Something Different: Spirituality and Wilderness Adventure," *Journal of Experiential Education* 15 (1992): 13-20.

Michael Kim Zapf, "The spiritual dimension of person and environment: Perspectives from social work and traditional knowledge," *International Social Work* 48 (2005): 633-642.

Nick Davidson, *Wetlands and cultural heritage conservation* (Ramsar Bureau: Gland, 2001).

Paul Heintzman, "Nature-Based Recreation and Spirituality: A Complex Relationship," *Leisure Sciences, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 32 (2009): 72-89.

Ulrich Deil, Heike Culmsee, and Mohamed Berriane, "Sacred groves in Morocco: a society's conservation of nature for spiritual reasons," *Forest, culture, and religions* 49 (2005): 185-201.

⁷⁰ Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics," 20, 21, 32.

⁷¹ See:

B. Mc Donald and R. Schreyer, "Spiritual benefits of leisure: Participation and leisure settings," in *Benefits of leisure*, ed. B. L. Driver, P. J. Brown, and G. L. Peterson (State College, PA: Venture, 1991), 179-194.

I. M. Foster and W. T. Borrie, "A phenomenology of spiritual experiences in wilderness: Relating self, culture and wilderness," (2011).

Lia Naor and Ofra Mayseseless, "How personal transformation occurs following a single peak experience in nature: A phenomenological account," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 57 (2017): 13-24.

L. Fredrickson and D. Anderson, "A qualitative exploration of the wilderness experience as a source of spiritual inspiration," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 19 (1999): 21-39.

T. L. Terhaar, "Evolutionary advantages of intense spiritual experience in nature." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 3 (2009): 303-339.

being with actual feelings and states of consciousness that arise directly from an experienced situation is an important moment in immersion in the spiritual experience of the natural environment. Here it is time to recall Berleant's concept of aesthetic engagement because sensory stimuli can be viewed in different ways, and the fact that we experience something physically does not mean that it automatically connects us to the spiritual experience. However, to experience sensory stimuli aesthetically and in an involved way, i.e., forgetting the practical or theoretical context of the situation and immersing fully in the newly perceived situation with the whole body and a clear open mind, is the most favorable setting for us to start constituting from this experience the higher symbolic "divine" contents and connecting to experiences of deeper layers. With such an appropriate mental setting, even demanding physical activities can become "sacred". As Naor and Mayselless explain:

"McDonald and Schreyer's (1991) critical synthesis of empirical studies related to the spiritual benefits of leisure emphasized the unique combination of sensory awareness and extreme states of consciousness elicited in the wilderness leading to spiritual experience and outcome. Sensory enhancement as a common characteristic of nature experience intensified through deep immersion in wilderness and challenging physical activities is supported by various studies involving canoeing (...), hiking (...), rock climbing (...), and solitude (...). These studies emphasize the significance of experiencing deep absorption in the moment and a sense of timelessness and spacelessness resulting in what was described as the dissolving of boundaries between the self and the world and was found to be transformative in many cases (...). In fact, nature is the most common trigger for peak and transcendent experiences characterized by a deep feeling of connection and unity (...)."72

With an aesthetic filter, what is initially a mere bodily sensation in the natural environment gains certain enhancement. The deeper and more aesthetically we plunge into the situation, the more we forget the current context of the situation, the time, and even the actual place we find ourselves in. Usual meanings and practical implications are in the background, and experienced reality speaks to

⁷² Naor and Mayselless, "The Therapeutic Value," 4.

us in its new, yet ultimate, more permeable qualities. The boundaries between what I am and what my environment is become unnecessary. Identification and categorization, as they impede the search for the essence, become unnecessary and artificial. Everything is synthesized and gains momentum in a joint fusion. Naor and Maysel furthermore explicitly thematize the connection between aesthetics and spirituality of the natural environment, also pointing out that the aesthetic qualities hidden in the natural environment refer to spiritually graspable ideals.

“Additional studies attribute the experience of spirituality in nature to the unique and powerful facets of the natural environment; for example, the perspective afforded from the mountain summit (...), the vastness of deserts and the power of raging rivers, thunderstorms, and water in all its guises (...). These studies link the aesthetics, views, and landform diversity of nature to ‘a sense of wonder, humility, and connectedness, all promoting “transcendent states”(...)’.”⁷³

The connection between aesthetic qualities and spiritual experience is thematized in a number of research. Matthew McDonald, Stephen Wearing and Jess Ponting made a study⁷⁴ on aspects triggering peak experiences in natural environments using a method of interviewing several dozen participants about their peak experiences in nature. Participants described that the aesthetic qualities of the natural environment played an essential role of inducing their spiritual experience of the natural environment; in fact, the qualities ended up as the most common factor.

“Watching the sun set, I was alone watching the most beautiful shades of mauve and pink on the clouds near the acropolis; I felt a sense of awe. (Participant, 5)

As we skied up to the head of the glacier, I remember peering over the very edge and saw this other magnificent glacier spill down into the adjoining valley. It was such an incredible sight, particularly for someone who had never seen mountains on this scale before. My first reaction upon seeing this sight was to start laughing; it just seemed so unreal, like I was on another planet. There was no other way to respond, it was such an amazing feeling. (Participant 2)

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴ Matthew McDonald, Stephen Wearing, and Jess Ponting, “The Nature of Peak Experience in Wilderness,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 37 (2009): 370-385.

My most magical experience was whilst sea kayaking in Glacier Bay in Alaska. There were three of us from Tasmania and I think we all experienced a great high at the same time. The fiord was dead calm—like a mirror—wisps of mist around the peaks which rose to 15,000 ft from native forest (Boreal forest) to sea level, glaciers feeding into the bay and icebergs bobbing around in the water. All this was completely different and in extreme contrast to anything before that we had experienced. Suddenly, and this is what produced our peak experience, was a hump back whale ‘blowing’ very close to us. The surroundings were idyllic; the whole surface beside us and the extreme calm of the whole experience was almost beyond description. It was the sort of experience we had travelled 8000 km to hopefully see. (Participant 16).⁷⁵

Through actual sensory data, our immersion in the intangible is strengthened; identifiable qualities reinforce the transition from the physical “real” world to the transcendental one. The aesthetic spiritual experiences in these answers are characterized by astonishment at the size, power and overlap of what one can capture. Natural beauty, balance, combination of colors and contrasts nourish the feeling that we have a chance to taste some of the ultimate correctness, the good of life, natural wisdom and strength. The perfection seen in the natural empire gives us a sense of astonishment because we are amazed at the ability of nature to create something that we humans just vainly try. As Naor and Mayseless point out:

“The natural environment offers various opportunities to experience the mysterious and ultimate aspects of existence, commonly described as the sacred, transcendental, and spiritual dimensions of life (...). These qualities are experienced in nature through boundless and beautiful landscapes, the powerful forces of nature, and extraordinary forms of life (...).”⁷⁶

Christine Valters Paintner⁷⁷ further expands the idea of spiritual entities being expressed aesthetically. Paintner attaches great importance to the aesthetic perception in relation to spirituality,

⁷⁵ McDonald, Wearing, and Ponting, “The Nature of Peak Experience,” 376, 377.

⁷⁶ Naor and Mayseless, “The Therapeutic Value,” 1.

⁷⁷ Christine Valters Paintner, “Responding to Beauty’s Call: The Shape of an Aesthetic Spirituality,” *The Way, a review of Christian spirituality by the British Jesuits, Spirituality, Tradition and Beauty* 44 (2005): 36-47.

because, as she explains, it functions as a kind of “bridge” between human and spiritual entities. Spirituality is shown to us in the aesthetic qualities, and through the aesthetic, the spirituality is thus conveyed to the human world. Aesthetic perception is therefore a way how we get to know otherwise incomprehensible realities. As Paintner states:

“(…) we rely on the aesthetic in order both to express and to interpret the holy.”⁷⁸

Although we may not fully resonate with Paintner's belief that the aesthetic and spiritual approach is necessarily natural for everyone⁷⁹, the significance she attaches to aesthetics in relation to spirituality is remarkable. Aesthetic quality is not only an entry deposit waiting to be translated into spirituality, but also a necessary condition for the spirituality to be known and be seen.⁸⁰

“Human encounter with the divine begins in a moment of aesthetic perception, in that glimpse of radiance, mystery and meaning which we can see in a work of art or in the natural world.”⁸¹

By finding aesthetic qualities in the world around us, we are awakening from drowsiness caused by the monotony of everyday life. The potential of aesthetic quality waiting to be found is an invitation for us to step out of the utilitarian approach and to take a different perspective generating a different experience. Aesthetic spiritual experience reveals the indescribable, the imperceptible and the supreme. It fulfills our longing for a dimension of the unknown—the mysterious ultimacy that fills our life with sense.

⁷⁸ Paintner, “Responding to Beauty’s Call,” 37.

⁷⁹ We may assume that someone rarely leaves his / her practical attitude and therefore these areas and essentially the content of this work are a great abstraction for such person. As already mentioned, I wish not to take any normative position in this context and force the universal validity and form of this experience.

⁸⁰ Even though this work does not aim to state any necessary conditions, but rather it works with concepts of experience as open and variable according to the needs and equipment of individual subjects (aesthetic spiritual experience is here understood as one of the possible types of experience), Painter's approach is a very interesting contribution to this topic.

⁸¹ Paintner, “Responding to Beauty’s Call,” 41.

“Our limited vision is broken wide open, and hope is born.”⁸²

Spiritual experience connecting us to ideals not explicitly manifested in sensuous reality is hence preceded by aesthetic experience, which works with a recognizable reality and translates it to abstract qualities existing at the level of our consciousness.

“We will only see beauty, through contemplating a picture or ‘really seeing’ a flower, if we train ourselves to do so. To peer into a deeper reality is a metaphysical endeavor, requiring that we ‘see’ with more than merely our eyes, and that we sense with more than merely our natural senses.”⁸³

In the moment of aesthetic spirituality, the physical becomes aesthetic and the aesthetic transcendental.

“An aesthetic spirituality invites us into renewed ways of being in the world. All of our senses can be heightened and awakened to a world beneath and beyond surface appearances.”⁸⁴

Todd W. Ferguson and Jeffrey A. Tamburello⁸⁵ made an interesting research aiming to show that the sensory qualities of the natural environment have such a strong potential to embody spiritual meaning that for some people, spirituality practiced in nature becomes an alternative to belonging to religious organizations: certain landscapes and weather conditions influence populations in a way that connect them with the sacred.

“Nature has the ability to be imbued with spiritual power and significance. Forests, lakes, and mountains often invoke a feeling of the divine or inspire a sense of awe. They are a resource that people may use to connect to the sacred and to generate spiritual feelings.”⁸⁶

⁸² Ibid., 45.

⁸³ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁵ Ferguson and Tamburello, “The Natural Environment as a Spiritual Resource,” 295-314.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 297, 298.

The authors focused on the relationship between the number of natural amenities and people officially identifying with church organizations in the United States. According to Ferguson and Tamburello, the influence of nature is so fundamental in this manner that the natural environment as a spiritual resource can alter traditional religious organizations. The situation is clear when we look in the context of the number of attractive natural surroundings at the quantity of religious “nones”⁸⁷, that is, people who understand themselves as spiritual beings but do not want to be part of any religious organization. Ferguson and Tamburello found out that in counties with natural areas containing a lot of amenities (beautiful or somehow interesting landscapes or particular objects), more people identify as religious “nones” than in places where the amount of natural amenities is low. That people have spiritual needs is pretty much clear, but the question is how they choose to meet them. The authors in this context highlight the link between the natural setting and people who fulfill their spiritual needs through the natural environment. The natural environment thus has the power to alter traditional ecclesiastical organizations by its spiritual attractiveness, which can be demonstrated and captured by numbers and exact research. This study is therefore remarkably interesting in this respect. Ferguson and Tamburello examined about 3,107 American counties, investigating the ratio between natural amenities and people identifying with a religious association. Herbert W. Schroeder⁸⁸ congruently points out that spiritual experience can revolve around many situations where the natural environment is a potent setting for it:

“Experiences of this kind can occur in many contexts and settings, both natural and human-made. For many people, however, natural environments seem to be the primary setting for spiritual experiences.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid., 300.

⁸⁸ Herbert W. Schroeder, “The spiritual aspect of nature: a perspective from depth psychology,” in *Proceedings of the 1991 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium*, ed. Gail A. Vander Stoep (New York: Saratoga Springs, 1991), 25-30.

⁸⁹ Schroeder, “The spiritual aspect of nature,” 25.

3. 2. Harmony as a permeating aspect of aesthetics and spirituality

Based on sensory input processing, a new type of experience arises of being in harmony. It is interesting to note that the motif of harmony and unity is a permeating value across aesthetics and spirituality. To feel as if part of something ultimate and omnipresent and appreciate its physical manifestations in nature goes hand in hand. Aesthetics and spirituality are on this ground merging into one experience of appreciation, participation and reflection. As Hepburn states:

“That contemplation is seen as grounded, first and last, in particular perceptions, but as reaching out as to relate the forms of the objects perceived to the pervasive and basic forms of nature; relating it also to the observer’s own stance and setting, as himself one item in nature—a nature with whose forces he feels in harmony though the very success of this contemplative activity itself.”⁹⁰

The dual dimension of natural harmony, being both sensuously appealing and magically transcendental, enables us to sink into aesthetic spirituality. The aesthetic reflection and contemplation of the physical impulses results into an experience of harmony and unity of particular elements.

The situation gains a spiritual dimension when we realize that this harmony —as a principle of being—shows itself from physical manifestations through the senses. We admire the complexity and belonging of natural processes that at the same time dazzle us with their sensory sensations; what is aesthetically pleasant gains symbolic meaning. One of the possible conceptual frameworks is in this context known as “deep ecology”. In her paper⁹¹, Annie L. Booth explores the relationship between human and nature claiming that through spirituality fulfilled in the natural environment, humans gain certain self-understanding as being a part of a whole. In this context, harmony experienced in nature is an actualized experience of us

⁹⁰ Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics,” 31, 32.

⁹¹ Booth, “Does the Spirit Move You?” 89-105.

being a part of “everything”. In this respect, deep ecology is an approach that offers a method of widening the boundaries of our understanding and approaching the universe around us. Its cognitive aspect is centered somewhere between self-reflection and sensory processing; more precisely, it provides means for connecting them with a promise of experience of harmony or connectedness. Focusing on elements of harmony and belonging, we look for qualities relevant to us in this manner, and from aesthetic qualities we constitute and abstract references to what we consider having spiritual meaning. Deep ecology hence offers a mental environment very suitable for inducing aesthetic spiritual experiences with the natural environment as it focuses directly on those qualities which are leading us to experience harmony. Why should this experience be interesting for me, one might ask? The answer is simple: the experience of harmony makes us feel good. Through the constitution of aesthetic qualities attributed with transcendental meaning, we find ourselves in an elevated state of pleasure and astonishment. Their cognitive aspect then makes our consciousness and perceptive capacity wide open.

“Deep ecologist accepts spiritual relations with the natural world as necessary and natural. Devall and Sessions argue that spiritual growth allows us to transcend narrow human definitions and to begin to join with wider, wilder world.”⁹²

Booth connects this experience primarily to the natural environment as an environment in which we forget our practical selves and look at the overall state of things. The natural environment—with its parts, objects and elements—is in the concept of deep ecology a web of signs with a potential to link us with a unity we seek. There are certain conditions that we must respect in our approach; more precisely, we must embody them into in how we approach nature. We must approach nature as it is in its own terms as we pointed out also earlier in case of Yuriko Saito’s contribution about aesthetic appraisal of the natural environment. Accepting a difference that is found in nature—a contrast or

⁹² Ibid., 95.

a peculiarity in a human context—promises a qualitatively more saturated aesthetic spiritual experience.

In this context, Kathryn Williams and Dawid Harvey made a noteworthy study on transcendent experiences in forest environments.⁹³ Williams and Harvey focus on the experiences that people describe as the “ultimate happiness”, the “feeling of connection” or “ecstasy” that they have experienced in forest environments. These authors seek to contribute to the theoretical coverage of the spiritual value of natural places and focus on various aspects of the experience they call “transcendental”. Williams and Harvey describe some key characteristics of such moments, such as “strong positive affect on human psyche”, “feelings of overcoming the limits of everyday life”, “a sense of union with the universe or some other power or entity”, “absorption in and significance of the moment” and “a sense of timelessness”⁹⁴. At the same time, this experience is particularly characteristic in the natural environment for its physical qualities and the activity of the subject provoked by such environments.

“Csikszentmihalyi (1992) believes the core qualities of transcendent experience—a sense of union, power, timelessness and overcoming limits of ordinary experience—arise when attention is completely focused on a pleasurable task. During the resultant state of ‘flow’, the usual distinctions between self and object are lost. Instead, internal and external worlds are fused into a single stream of being, as defined for that period of time by activity.”⁹⁵

A kind of momentary forgetfulness of the practical ego and the merging into the natural environment are phenomena characteristic of the aesthetic experience of the natural environment, and it is appropriate to assume that aesthetics is present in such a situation. The aesthetic mindset creates the mental environment that allows us to view a given natural reality with a clear, open look. Again, it

⁹³ Kathryn Williams and David Harvey, “Transcendent Experience in Forest Environment,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 21 (2001): 249-260.

⁹⁴ Williams and Harvey, “Transcendental Experience,” 249.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

is a tool for processing sensory material depriving it of practical and other contexts, as well as depriving one's self of unnecessary layers of daily reality and then providing such a situation with symbolic meaning.

Naor and Mayeseless also note that the aspect of interconnectedness experienced in nature built and mediated by the aesthetic experience and leading to spiritual experience has undeniable therapeutic effects on the human soul and that such spiritual experiences can contribute into overall well-being. The natural environment is an area where unity or some kind of order is especially present. To feel as a part of such order then positively affects human psychological setting. We find lost balance and peace; we feel uplifted and purified. Through the perception of a certain unity, it is as if we find our original selves. Hence, harmony as an aesthetic quality has also a spiritual aspect.

“The findings link this form of spiritual experience to significant therapeutic effects, including the experience of nature’s immensity, which contributes to an expansive perspective; experiencing interconnectedness, which elicits a sense of belonging to the vast web of life; and the reflection of internal nature and truth by external nature as an accepting setting, which contributes to the discovery of an authentic self. These results are discussed in consideration of current perspectives on the psychology of spirituality, which further our understanding of the therapeutic effects of spirituality that may be evoked and implemented through nature.”⁹⁶

Nature as “a live uncontrollable setting providing symbolic, physical, and sensory material to work with”⁹⁷ is a very powerful source of aesthetic spiritual experience, for it is an independent self-sufficient and *natural* environment, a counterbalance to what human has in his power of which the human is the creator of what is human “deviation”. As Paintner sums up:

“Spiritual and aesthetic experience are ultimately linked. Both reveal the unutterable, the invisible, the transcendent. (...) Spirituality is about a longing for this God, for a connection to life’s dimension of mystery, to the ultimacy that fills out world with meaning. An aesthetic spirituality is one that

⁹⁶ Naor and Mayeseless, “The Therapeutic Value,” 1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

recognizes this longing as a response to a call already issued, to an invitation always present in the world. We are called to awaken beauty, to see more deeply, to cultivate practices of attentiveness.”⁹⁸

3. 3. Ecological impact of spiritual and aesthetic experience

It has been outlined in the introduction that the aesthetic and spiritual experience of the natural environment influences our ecological activities. In the last part of this work, I will devote a few words to this positive outcome through a work of a collective of authors⁹⁹ called ”Aesthetic and spiritual values of ecosystems: Recognising the ontological and axiological plurality of cultural ecosystem ‘services’.” They are aware of the link between aesthetic and spiritual areas; however, they do not seek to bring them closer. Rather than philosophical or psychological issues, they are interested in environmental and moral impacts connected to aesthetic and spiritual values. In addition, what aesthetic and spiritual approaches have in common plays a positive role in this context. The authors emphasize that these approaches are the background for a more ecologically responsible approach towards nature and perceive this output as more important than the aesthetic and spiritual experiences themselves. They are supportive elements that nurture and cultivate our effort to behave more conscientiously towards nature.

“We recognize that humans do benefit from their aesthetic and spiritual experiences of nature. However, aesthetic and spiritual understandings of the value of nature lead people to develop moral responsibilities towards nature and these are more significant than aesthetic and spiritual benefits from nature.”¹⁰⁰

The authors too point out that by their character, the spiritual and aesthetic approaches are different from the practical, utilitarian approach. When we maintain these approaches, we focus on realities other than the practical one.

⁹⁸ Paintner, “Responding to Beauty’s Call,” 38.

⁹⁹ Nigel Cooper et al., “Aesthetic and spiritual values of ecosystems: Recognising the ontological and axiological plurality of cultural ecosystem ‘services’,” *Ecosystem Services* 21 (2016): 218-229.

¹⁰⁰ Cooper et al., “Aesthetic and spiritual values of ecosystems,” 218.

“Ontologically, in the realm of aesthetics and the spiritual, as in these social science investigations of communities, humans are immersed in nature and nature is not conceived of as a sort of machine that humans manage in order to for it to generate products.”¹⁰¹

The authors do not deal entirely with the relationship of these areas in its core, but rather compare them as a whole with the approaches of others and emphasize certain moral positives that these areas bring and have in common. The fact that they elicit a certain moral interest in nature means that these experiences leave some traces in us. Therefore, they are not negligible and their importance is next to psychological as well as practical. The authors also note the clear differences in how theories are devoted to these areas. The most obvious difference is also that these areas are supported by completely separate theories taught in separate fields. Thus, the theoretical material is causing their clearly distinctive understanding. However at the same time, they add that in practice these experiences often coincide.

“Aesthetics is an academic discipline very different to religious studies or theology, usually allocated to disparate university departments. Our analysis in this section retains this distinction, but in practice the distinction is hard to maintain.”¹⁰²

The similarity of these approaches is more thematized by the authors in relation to our activity or position in the given situation. Nature does not become something we want to use for practical purposes in the optics of these approaches. It is something that we approach in a non-interventional way and what we mentally conceive. We work only with what is, and abstract out of it certain transcendental values. In the ideal concept, we do not change things nor destroy them. We learn to value things as they are.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 225.

¹⁰² Ibid., 222.

“However, either way, aesthetic evaluations are dominated by the conception of humans as the assessors of natural beauty, rather than as recipients of products or benefits.”¹⁰³

In the case of an aesthetic approach, this is somewhat obvious and clear. In the case of the spiritual, our activity is based on our awareness of the impact of our actions. We do not want anything from nature; on the contrary, we turn to ourselves and evaluate our hitherto performed and upcoming activities. In this context, we are then motivated to morally regulate our behavior towards nature. Similarly, Susan Baker and Robin Morrison¹⁰⁴ also thematize the relationship between spiritualism and environmentalism. In their work, they point out that spirituality not only leads us to reflect upon ourselves, but also influences and sets the course of our actions, while the former being a necessary step to realize the latter.

“A spiritually motivated environmentalism embraces a cultural awareness of the interrelationship, some would even say kinship, with a dependence on the natural environment for the continuity of all life.”¹⁰⁵

Probably in the context of the Western world, a defense or justification of natural spirituality is understandable. However, in the practice of tribes and societies of the indigenous people, natural spirituality is nevertheless an element so intrinsically present and evident that their existence is conditioned by it and its direct impact on nature conservation is even legally confirmed. Prompassorn Chunhabunyatip, Nophea Sasaki, Clemens Grünbühel, John K. M. Kuwornu, and Takuji W. Tsusaka in an article “Influence of Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs on Natural Resource Management and Ecological Conservation in Thailand” discuss this topic stating that a specific way

¹⁰³ Ibid., 223.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Baker and Robin Morrison, “Environmental Spirituality: Grounding Our Response To Climate Change,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 4 (2008): 35-50.

¹⁰⁵ Baker and Morrison, “Environmental Spirituality,” 48.

of life of indigenous people with all their rituals and traditions is reflected in the law and leads to the conservation and reservation of certain natural areas in which the tribes live.

“Indigenous people in some parts of the globe are entitled to specific rights to collectively use and manage natural resources, predicated on their historical, social and cultural connection to a particular territory. (...) Following such traditional practices as beliefs, taboos, myths, and songs, the indigenous people of Ashanti communities in Ghana, for example, have been able to conserve their forests for generations. Access to any sacred forests in Ashanti communities is governed by strict customs, which include the practice of rituals and sacrifices before obtaining the permission to harvest certain tree species. (...) In addition, as some parts of rivers or streams and forests are considered sacred, and fishing and hunting are forbidden unless special rituals are to be performed.”¹⁰⁶

Nature protection and its relation to its aesthetic and spiritual value is, nevertheless, a topic that is in itself quite large and wide. I will remain in this work only for its outline.

¹⁰⁶ See:

Prompassorn Chunhabunyatip et al., “Influence of Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs on Natural Resource Management and Ecological Conservation in Thailand,” *Sustainability* 10 (2018): 2.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to theoretically outline how aesthetic experiences in the natural environment can become spiritual. For such a connection, it was necessary to explain the characteristics of individual areas—spirituality and aesthetic experience in the natural environment—in such a light that their relation would be possible. Spirituality must be understood as opened, unbound, personalized and applicable to the natural environment. The subject is an active article in a spiritual situation. At the same time, the subject does not have to acquire any special knowledge during this experience. It was therefore necessary to define spirituality against religion, morality and mystical experience as these areas carry problematic specifications that could obstruct the spirituality experienced in the context of natural aesthetics. Spirituality relatable to the aesthetic experience of the natural environment should be based on immediacy. The whole spiritual area was therefore conceived through the theory of William James.

The whole emphasis on the immediate and personal character of the spiritual experience is put precisely so that it is appropriate to approach the natural environment in terms of an aesthetic experience therein. It has been acknowledged that no model of aesthetic approach to the natural environment can be given exclusive status. Only in this way is the area of natural aesthetics treated in the optics of the same openness in which the area of spirituality was viewed. However, this work works with a scenario for which Arnold Berleant's theory is most appropriate. Berleant's model of aesthetic engagement is perceived in this work as an approach whereby we consider and work with all sensory sensations that are available to us in the natural environment and that we have the opportunity to experience the aesthetic experience of nature in its fullness, complexity and variety. The role of knowledge or the approach to art as factors that shape our aesthetic approach to nature had to go aside, just as religious, moral and mystical specifics had to be set aside in the case of spirituality.

The pursuit of absolute transparency in this paper is to facilitate theorizing—unchallenged by dogmas, customs and fossilized knowledge—in the framework of this thesis as it has not yet been fully mapped. Only through such pure material can one examine in its essence the psychological impact on us, because everything else is an added value, a superstructure that complicates efforts to connect these areas. Spiritual and aesthetic experience must therefore be completely open and adaptable to the subject and the environment. Of course, the problem is that the materials used in this paper are themselves adopted theories and thus can be clouded by assumptions and artificial notions. This thesis does not start from an immediate experience but from literature on the subject, some written more than a century ago. This problem the thesis accepts, and at the same time it is understood that further research and exploration is necessary. In the field of theory however, the works chosen in this thesis deal with the idea of immediate personal experience.

The possibility of active and often physical involvement in the aesthetic view of the natural environment is supported by Edward Bullough's theory of psychological distance, which is a psychological formulation of aesthetic attitude. Aesthetic attitude as an internal reflection of our relation to perceived affects and therefore disconnection from practical attitude is, as a purely psychological process, capable of working with any form of the “real” situation. Theoretically, such an attitude (process) is initiated towards everything. Hence, to the objection that physical movements in nature and a bodily interaction with natural objects cannot be viewed aesthetically for their immediacy, aesthetic attitude is colloquially a “filter” through which we can see everything, precisely because it operates only on the level of our consciousness, and external conditions affect but do not condition it. The aesthetics of actively experiencing nature is thus supported.

It was necessary to support the very possibility of switching from an aesthetic to a spiritual attitude. Jan Mukařovský's theory played in this manner significant role. Aesthetic experience and spirituality are not only open areas, but at the same time such attitudes are sign attitudes. We are not trying to change reality or use it in any way. Instead, we constitute abstract values in the field of our

consciousness on the basis of the immediate perception of its given qualities. Our attitude is of a sign character, while the object of our interest is also a sign. In the spiritual case, it is a sign referring to the deeper realms of reality; in the aesthetic case, it is a sign of our relation to reality. Since in both cases we work with our consciousness, it is possible to assume that the transition from aesthetic to spiritual attitude can be smooth, when interest turns from an immediate sensory experience to what we consider to be transcendental. The subject and the experience play a crucial role in this situation as he determines what qualities he sees in that situation. Nothing is fixed and nothing is given in advance. Aesthetic and spiritual qualities are constituted by our intellectual activity whereas our consciousness determines their presence in specific situations. The aesthetic can be spiritual by the change of attitude on the part of the subject. What we appreciate for the visual qualities and deal with the reflection of this valuation, we are suddenly able to view in relation to symbolic meanings beyond our individual existence. Mukařovský's emphasis on the anthropological position therefore serves as a supporting theory for the assumption that aesthetics can take on a spiritual dimension, for everything is given by our perception.

Aesthetic and spiritual materials convenient for the purposes of this thesis was created and the circumstances of their combination has been explained. So far, the focus has been on the subject and his psychological set-up, but it is time to look at the external conditions or circumstances for a situation in which the aesthetic and spirituality come together. Sensory stimuli play a primary role in this, especially in the natural environment. Of course, sensory stimuli are also present outside the natural environment, but what is unique in this case is its original independence from human and thus their different ontological status than art or architecture. Although nature is deeply affected by humans nowadays and many of its fragments are directly created by humans, nature in this very sense has not been created by human. Naturally, such a conception of nature also tempts us to perceive it symbolically. The individual physical arrangements give the impression of the presence of transcendental qualities such as harmony or higher order. In spiritual experience we often

appreciate the sense arrangement; respectively, through the passion for physical qualities of a particular natural environment and its contemplation beyond the practical attitude, we come to its symbolic interpretation. We can then assume that the aesthetic experience of the natural environment, namely the experience engaged and involving the subject fully, can act as the input torque for the connection.

Sensory qualities in the natural environment find intensive and full aesthetic application and integration into the subject's experience through the Berleant model of immediate aesthetic engagement. Bullough's concept of aesthetic attitude confirms that aesthetics is not denied by such an immediate situation. The tension between the urgency of the stimuli and the aesthetic potential is thus present, but will not burst. Mukařovský's theory shows that such aesthetic material can be seen as spiritual material, accentuating the subject's position in this situation who becomes a guarantor of a possible transformation of the aesthetic to the spiritual. In addition, James's conception of spirituality as an open sphere of human experience opens the door to the aesthetic experience of the natural environment, which in James's spirituality lies a possibility of transformation. This whole situation can be called the "aesthetic spiritual experience", and the thesis of the possible relationship between aesthetic and spiritual experiences is thus sketched theoretically and ready for further development.

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