

Exploring philosophy: faking nature

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Week 1: Originals and copies

Introduction

In this free course, *Exploring philosophy: faking nature*, you will examine the restoration thesis. But what is the restoration thesis?

Watch the following video that introduces the idea of the restoration thesis.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Introduction](#)



This week you are going to look at the broad question of originals and copies. In many circumstances, originals are valued more than copies even if there is no obvious difference between them. Why is this? Is it just snobbery? If it is not just snobbery, what is it that makes an original more valuable? This ties into the broader question of why details of something's history should make a difference to how it is thought about *now*.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A853 MA Philosophy Part I](#).

1 Key questions

When is it right to restore something that has been damaged? In 1982, the philosopher Robert Elliot raised this question in regards to the natural environment. However, the issue has wider ramifications, centrally concerned with the key issue of authenticity. The issues of restoration and authenticity raise a number of key questions:

- Can damage ever be made right? Can restoration ever make anything 'as good as it was before'?
- When a piece of nature or a damaged building is restored, does it become something authentic, or is it a fake? Can nature or buildings ever be restored and *not* faked?
- Should objects be restored to 'as good as new' or only to how they were immediately before they were damaged?
- Is it always better to have an original than it is to have a copy?
- If it is impossible to have the original, is a copy better than nothing?
- What is valuable about originals anyway?

2 Your views

You'll start by doing a quick check on your views on restoration before doing the course. At the end, you will be linked back to this and you will be able to consider whether your views have changed. Answer the questions in the activity below. Although the issues are complicated, try to keep your answers simple (a sentence or two, or simply 'yes' or 'no') as that will make it easier to compare your views now with those you will have later.

Activity 1

Spend around 5 minutes on this activity.

In the text box below, make some brief notes on your views in response to the following questions.

- 1 Can damage ever be made right? Can restoration ever make anything 'as good as it was before'?
- 2 When a piece of nature or a damaged building is restored, does it become something authentic, or is it a fake? Can nature or buildings ever be restored and *not* faked?
- 3 Should objects be restored to 'as good as new' or only to how they were immediately before they were damaged?
- 4 Is it always better to have an original than it is to have a copy?
- 5 If it is impossible to have the original, is a copy better than nothing?
- 6 What is valuable about originals anyway?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

3 Fake objects and real experiences

Over the next three weeks, you will look at the discussion of the restoration thesis in Robert Elliot's classic article 'Faking Nature'. You will do this in the company of a range of experts from philosophy and architectural history.

You will begin by examining a phenomenon that is entirely a matter of being a 'copy' rather than an authentic original, and explore what people might enjoy about it. The video below was filmed in early 2017, and looks at 'The Guns N Roses Experience'; a 'tribute band' who perform as if they were the iconic rock band Guns N Roses.

Activity 2

Spend around 15 minutes on this activity.

Watch the following video and make some notes in the text boxes below under the three headings. You can compare your notes to the feedback for each question.

Video content is not available in this format.

Tribute band: [The Guns N Roses Experience](#)



1 What can a tribute band provide for its audience?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- (a) Unlike the original band, the tribute band is available, cheaper, and enables the audience to have a good night out they might otherwise not have had.
- (b) The quality of the music is good.
- (c) The band performs the tracks that the audience wants to hear, which the original band might not do anymore.

2 What can a tribute band *not* provide for its audience?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- (a) The magic of the original band – atmosphere cannot be recreated.

3 Why would someone think the original band was better than the tribute band?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- (a) The work actually belongs to the original band. They created the music – the tribute band just copies them. There is something incredible about the original.

4 Elliot: Part I

In this section, you will start reading Elliot's classic article about the restoration thesis. In the article, Elliot mentions some historical examples, but you don't need to know the specifics of these to understand the overall point he is making. However, he mentions something which may be new to you: the 'familiar ethical system' of utilitarianism. (In the first paragraph, he uses the term 'utilitarian' in a non-technical sense – he is saying that people consider the dunes to have value apart from them being useful.) He considers two versions of the ethical system: 'preference utilitarianism' and 'classical utilitarianism'. Generally, utilitarianism provides a method for deciding what ought to be done in a given situation: it claims that you ought to do whatever maximises 'the good'. Preference utilitarianism holds that 'the good' (what you ought to maximise) is the satisfaction of people's preferences. That is, you should do what will give most people what they want.

Classical utilitarianism holds that 'the good' (what you ought to maximise) is happiness. That is, you should do what will make most people happy.

Elliot's article is divided into four parts. Part I, which you will read this week, introduces the problem.

Activity 3

Spend around 30 minutes on this activity.

Read Part I of '[Faking Nature](#)' by Robert Elliot (1982, *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25. no.1, pp. 81–93).

Then answer the questions below.

- 1 Does Elliot think rebutting the restoration thesis will be a 'knock down argument' against environmentally disruptive policies?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 No he does not. He acknowledges that there might be counteracting arguments which show that the environmental disruption should go ahead (pp. 82–83).

- 2 Does he think opposition to the restoration thesis can be shown to be rational?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 2 He does. If he is correct, he will show that environmentalists are 'not merely silly, or emotional, or irrational' (p. 83).

- 3 What does Elliot think is wrong with utilitarian objections to the restoration thesis?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 3 He thinks they 'do not reflect the underlying motivation of the conservationists' (p. 83).

Elliot has set up the problem for you. Next week, you will look at his take on the solution.

Summary of Week 1

This week you have looked at the issue of originals or copies. In particular, if you have two things that are perceptually indistinguishable, should they be valued differently just because they have different histories? The answer pulls in both ways. On the one hand, if there is no difference in the experience, how can the experiences differ in value? On the other hand, much of the time, originals *are* valued more than copies.

You can now go to Week 2.

Week 2: Restoring nature

Introduction

This week you will be hearing from some experts (two philosophers and an architectural historian), and then read the important middle section of Elliot's paper, in which Elliot provides his view about what is important about pristine nature, and why the restoration thesis is false.

1 Daisy Dixon

Part II is the heart, and longest part, of Elliot's paper. You will read it in four chunks. Before you do that, listen below to Daisy Dixon – a researcher in philosophy at The University of Cambridge. Daisy considers two answers to the question put to her. You will then answer some questions in the following activity.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Daisy Dixon on restoring nature](#)



Activity 1

Spend around 10 minutes on this activity.

Answer the following questions about the video in the text boxes below, and compare your notes with the feedback provided.

- 1 Why does Daisy Dixon think there might be *no* loss of value?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 She speculates that 'the aesthetic value of that piece of nature hasn't changed because we've just got the very same formal elements that we had originally'.

- 2 Why does she think there might be a loss of value?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 2 She speculates that 'part of what made it beautiful was the fact that that it was untouched'. Obviously, this will not be true of the restoration.

2 Elliot: Part II

In this section, you will return to your reading of Elliot's article.

Activity 2

Spend around 20 minutes on this activity.

Read from the beginning of Part II of [Faking Nature](#) to the bottom of p. 84, then answer the questions below.

- 1 What does the environmentalist need to defeat the restoration thesis?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 As Elliot says, 'The environmentalist needs to appeal to some feature which cannot be replicated as a source of some part of a natural area's value' (p. 84).

- 2 Where does Elliot think the environmentalist ought to look?

Provide your answer...

Answer

2 He suggests they should 'take over a notion from aesthetics': the contrast between 'the real thing' and a 'fake or a forgery' (p. 84).

3 State the objection to his view that Elliot considers.

Provide your answer...

Answer

3 The objection is that the distinction between what is and what is not natural cannot be made out. If this is so, it would not be possible to talk about 'nature' and 'the values of nature' (p. 84).

3 Changing perceptions

Elliot suggests the environmentalist borrows from the world of the arts, where a distinction is made between the value of the original and the value of a copy.

In continuing to read Elliot's article, there is one example you will need to know about: the Hetch-Hetchy valley. If you visited there today, you would see a lake that sits in a stunning setting between the mountains. The lake is artificial: 'an ecological artefact'. It was formed by damming the valley in the first half of the twentieth century. John Muir was the ecologist who led the (ultimately unsuccessful) fight against the dam.

Activity 3

Spend around 20 minutes on this activity.

In [Faking Nature](#), read p. 85 down to the middle of p. 86 (to '...immediately and radically.') and answer the questions below.

1 Can knowledge of an object's history change the valuation of it?

Provide your answer...

Answer

1 Yes. Elliot suggests that his examples show that the value of objects can be explained, at least in part, 'in terms of their origins'.

2 Can knowledge of an object's history change the way it is perceived?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 2 Yes. Elliot says that knowing the history of an object 'affects our perception' (p. 85 – also look at the top of p. 86).

It is important to keep the points in the above questions distinct – although they are related, something can be valued less because it has come to be perceived differently. Both points tell against the restoration thesis. Generally, originals are valued more than copies. If this applies to nature, pristine nature will be valued more than the restoration. More fundamentally, if knowing something about an object's history or origins *can actually change the perceptions of it* then a restoration might not be possible. No matter how much engineers attempt to capture the look of the original, the copy will be perceived differently *just because it is a copy*.

Elliot doesn't say that a restoration or a replica will be always and everywhere wrong ('the replica would probably be better than nothing at all' (p. 85)). If you think back last week, with the audience of the tribute band, the audience clearly preferred that experience of the band to not having an experience at all.

Pause to think about what *can* be restored (Elliot himself mentions species diversity, rock formations, and mountain ash on the top of p. 84). Watch the video below of Jeremy Musson, who is an architectural historian and expert on restorations. He suggests the list might go even wider.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Jeremy Musson on restoring nature](#)



4 The value of originality

The next section of Elliot's article contains its key claim: Elliot's answer to the question of why restoration is believed to entail a loss of value.

Activity 4

Spend around 30 minutes on this activity.

Read now to the bottom of p. 87 ('...restoration policy') of [Faking Nature](#), and answer the questions below.

- 1 Why, according to Elliot, is pristine nature valued?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 Elliot says: 'We value the forest and river in part because they are representative of the world outside our dominion, because their existence is independent of us' (p. 86).

- 2 What two objections to his theory does Elliot consider?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 2 The two objections are these:
- (b) That it is false that 'what is natural is necessarily of value' (p. 86).
 - (c) That the preservation of natural wilderness is 'achievable only by deliberate policy' (p. 87).

- 3 What two responses does he give to these objections?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 3 The two responses are these:
- (c) He is 'not claiming that all natural phenomena have value in virtue of being natural' (p. 86).
 - (d) He concedes this, but it does not damage his claim that what we value is 'causal continuity with the past' (p. 87).

Elliot's claim is that nature is valued because it is 'representative of the world outside our dominion, because their existence is independent of us'. There are two questions to ask about this. First, just because something 'independent of us' (in this sense), why should that make it valuable? Second, how significant is this value? Elliot evidently takes it to be very significant. Humankind has, for thousands of years, survived by extracting elements from the earth. Elliot says this comes at a cost – the cost of damaging something 'outside of our dominion' – which is, in some cases, sufficient to outweigh the benefits to human beings. That is, the cost is heavy enough to weigh against people being able to stave off the cold (extracting fuel) or feeding themselves (clearing forests for farming). The costs of damaging nature that mean people should bear harms that they would not otherwise bear were nature to be damaged. You will return to this idea next week.

5 Erich Hatala Matthes

In this section, you will finish Part II of Elliot's paper.

Activity 5

Spend around 20 minutes on this activity.

Read until the end of Part II of [Faking Nature](#) and answer the questions below.

- 1 Does Elliot think that if it isn't known that it is restored nature, there has been no loss of value?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 No he does not. Something of value can be lost without knowing that it has been (p. 88).
- 2 Do you agree with Elliot that (i) is worse than (ii), (ii) is worse than (iii), and (iii) is worse than what was there originally (p. 88–89)?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 2 Of course, I do not know what you wrote. However, if you do agree with him then his arguments have convinced you (or perhaps just reinforced what you thought already).

The American philosopher, Erich Hatala Matthes, summarises the arguments in the video below. Erich was speaking to over Skype from Massachusetts, so the quality of the video is not quite as good as it might have been.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Erich Hatala Matthes on restoring nature](#)



Summary of Week 2

This week you have explored a number of interesting claims. First, that knowing an object's history can actually change the way that object looks. Therefore the assumption made in Week 1 (that experience of an object is one thing, and its history is another) may not be true. Secondly, you have seen that Elliot's view is that pristine nature is valuable because it is 'representative of the world outside our dominion, because [its] existence is independent of us'. This raises the question of how 'weighty' that value is. Is it weighty enough to be put against the benefits to humanity that might come from exploiting pristine nature?

You can now go to Week 3.

Week 3: Art, nature and baselines

Introduction

In the final week of this course, you will read the last two sections of Elliot's paper. This will provide you the opportunity to reflect on the difference between the appreciation of art and the appreciation of nature, and whether it makes sense to say that it is possible to 'fake nature'. This will lead you to two more issues with the restoration thesis. The first concerns the value of nature: what exactly is it that is valued in untouched nature? The second concerns a problem with restoring either nature or buildings: what is it restored to?

1 Dixon on art and nature

Part III of Elliot's paper discusses his crucial analogy between 'faking' nature and fakes in art. To help you understand the latter better, Daisy Dixon explains in the video below.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Daisy Dixon on fakes and forgeries](#)



You are now ready tackle Part III in the next section. Elliot talks about not being able to tell 'a real Vermeer from a Van Meegaran' (p. 91). Van Meegeren (Elliot misspells the name) forged paintings, convincing many (including Hermann Goering) that they were by Vermeer.

2 Elliot: Part III

The argument in Part III of Elliot's paper is elusive. Elliot considers an objection to his view: namely, that nature and art are not analogous. This lack of analogy between the two is that 'the judgemental element in aesthetic evaluation serves to differentiate it from environmental evaluation' (p. 90). That is, in the case of art, originals are valued over copies not because of the way they look, or how they make you feel, but because of judgements about how 'good' they are. By contrast, the environment is valued principally because of the way it looks or the way it makes you feel. Therefore, the attitude to fakes and forgeries can't be generalised from art to nature. Elliot does not deny there are differences, but he argues that judgements, understanding and appreciation *do* play a role in how the natural environment is valued and perceived. Hence, in this crucial respect, art and nature *are* analogous.

Activity 1

Spend around 20 minutes on this activity.

Now read Part III of [Faking Nature](#) and answer the following question.

According to Elliot, Val Routley and Holmes Rolson believe that some people are better able to appreciate the natural world than others. Why is this?

Provide your answer...

Answer

A number of issues are mentioned, but the reason is one of understanding. People who understand 'the complexity, diversity, and integration of the natural world' (p. 91) are in a better position to appreciate it.

3 Elliot: Part IV

Finally, you have come to Part IV of Elliot's paper. This is only one page long.

Activity 2

Spend around 15 minutes on this activity.

Read Part IV of [Faking Nature](#) now and see if you notice a slightly odd development in the argument.

- 1 What new argument is Elliot using against the restoration thesis?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 He argues that environmental engineering will not be able to make things exactly as they were before: 'there is always the possibility that the trained eye will tell the difference' (p. 92).

- 2 Why does he make this argument?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 2 He says 'it appeals to diverse value-frameworks'. That is, different people who value different things (the look, the ecological richness, the stability and so on) will all be able to object (p. 92).

The development in Elliot's argument is described as 'slightly odd' in the activity above because previously his focus had been on arguing that, even if the restoration was exact, there would be a loss of value. In Part IV, the emphasis is on the argument that the restoration would not be exact – it would not be 'empirically adequate'.

This concludes your reading of Elliot's paper.

4 Two final issues

In this final part of the course, you will look at two issues:

- What exactly is the value of nature?
- If something is restored, what should it be restored to?

4.1 The value of nature

If you remember back to last week, in Part II of his paper, Elliot describes his belief that the value of nature lies in the fact that 'they are representative of the world outside our dominion, because their existence is independent of us' (p. 86). You shall return to this idea in a moment. First, listen to what Erich Hatala Matthes has to say about the value of nature (once more, the quality is not as good as it could have been because it was recorded over Skype).

Video content is not available in this format.
[Erich Hatala Matthes on the value of nature](#)



Hatala Matthes argues that 'we should be pluralists about the value of nature'. Among the values placed on nature is its relative independence of people – as stressed by Elliot – as well as its natural beauty and what he calls 'ecosystem services'.

Focus now, however, on the value that Elliot stresses: on natural things being valuable 'because their existence is independent of us'. In some ways, this is a contradictory idea. Think about what other things Hatala Matthes claimed to be found valuable about nature: its having natural beauty 'available' and the benefits it brings in terms of 'direct impact on

human well-being'. In these instances, nature is valuable exactly because it is *not* independent of human beings; it has a direct effect on people in terms of providing them with beauty, or with clean air and clear water. Given this, how can the value of something reside in it being 'outside our dominion'; in it *not* having a 'direct impact' on people?

This question leads to the heart of the issues concerning value. Are there values that are not, ultimately, just values *for human beings*? This course has been focusing on one example: pristine nature. The argument has been that it has a value that can counter-balance the values that can be extracted from it by, for example, mining or fracking. That is, the value *of being independent* of human beings. Here is another example: historical value. Huge amounts of resources are put into preserving old stuff. Ancient monuments aren't simply knocked down when building roads, or medieval castles destroyed to put up cheap housing. Hatala Matthes states that 'The historical properties of objects offer us a genuine connection to the past. Though we cannot go back in time, the objects and places that were present in the past travel forward in time with us' (Matthes, 2013, p. 61). The claim is that some of the value of both pristine nature and the past is because it exists 'outside our dominion'; independent of whatever needs or desires human beings have just at the moment.

4.2 The 'baseline problem'

Finally, look at a question that the restoration thesis provokes: where should it stop? Should restoration be to perfection (whatever that might be) or just to how things were before? In the video below, Hatala Matthes introduces the 'baseline problem'.

Video content is not available in this format.
[Erich Hatala Matthes on the 'baseline problem'](#)



Activity 3

Spend around 10 minutes on this activity.

After viewing the video, please answer the question below.

- 1 How might the baseline problem undermine the restoration thesis altogether?

Provide your answer...

Answer

- 1 If all aspects of an object's history need to be respected, then that will include the history of it being damaged. So why set the baseline to be before the damage rather than after?

As Hatala Matthes says, this is a real problem. Natural landscapes and historical buildings all have histories: why pick just one moment during that history and freeze the landscape or building then? Here are some thoughts on this from Jeremy Musson. Musson worked for many years for the National Trust, who constantly face issues raised by the baseline problem. As you will see, Musson proposes a solution to this which raises the whole issue as to whether exact restoration would ever be the right thing to do.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Interview with Jeremy Musson](#)



5 Have your views changed?

At the beginning of the course, you were asked some questions. Here they are again. Have your answers to any of the questions changed?

Activity 4

Spend around 20 minutes on this activity.

Take a look back at your answers to these questions in Week 1, from before you started studying this course. Then consider your views on the questions again now you have completed the course. Make some notes in the box below about if and how your views have changed.

- 1 Can restoration ever make anything 'as good as it was before'?
- 2 Can nature or buildings ever be restored and *not* faked?
- 3 Should objects be restored to 'as good as new'?
- 4 Is it always better to have an original than it is to have a copy?
- 5 If it is impossible to have the original, is a copy better than nothing?
- 6 Is a preference for originals, even if they are perceptually indiscernible from copies, just a matter of snobbery?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

6 End-of-course summary

This free course, *Exploring philosophy: faking nature*, has explored an intriguing issue. Usually, things are thought of as valuable because of the effects they have on people – they make their lives better in various ways. By considering the difference between originals and copies, pristine nature and restored nature, you have had to confront the possibility that there bits of the world that are valuable precisely because they have nothing to do with people at all; they are 'outside our dominion'. The view that the value of things can always be cashed out in terms of human experience does not seem able to account for some of the differences there are between originals and copies.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A853 MA Philosophy Part 1](#).

References

Week 3

Elliot, R. (1982) 'Faking Nature', *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25. no.1, pp. 81–93.

Hatala Matthes, E. (2013) 'History, Value, and Irreplaceability', *Ethics*, vol. 124, pp. 35–64.

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