

Review of *Natural Beauty: A Theory of Aesthetics Beyond the Arts*

By Ronald Moore - Broadview Press, 2007.

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This is a thoroughly sensible book on natural beauty. Ronald Moore approaches the manifold problems of developing and defending an aesthetics of natural beauty by using the full resources of the history of aesthetic ideas and a developed aesthetic sensibility. The particular theory he puts forward – the syncretic theory – attempts to combine the reasonable aspects of a number of conflicting approaches while divesting them of the aspects that have been identified as being problematic, either over long periods of scholarship or identified as such in this text. Such an approach is not the way to make friends in an academic field. One's own or one's favoured approach will either be jettisoned or, if it makes it through the process of syncretism, is likely to be somewhat mangled. However, if one is looking for a theory that seems to accord with aesthetic experiences of natural beauty as reported by those experiencing them and helpfully explores how those experiences are nested in complex layers and social contexts then this theory is one to consider seriously.

In the opening two chapters Moore rehearses some of the well known debates in environmental aesthetics in regard to the conceptualist and non-conceptualist positions and the artefact/nature distinction. What emerges at this early stage is that the proposed syncretic theory aims to be more than the sum of its parts and that it will do this partly by maintaining a firm focus on the distinctly *aesthetic* aspects of appreciation. As this is going to be an important claim it is particularly helpful that we are given, in the introduction, a definition of beauty that also helps to define the aesthetic. Moore says:

Although my account is deliberately noncommittal, it doesn't take beauty to be just anything that pleases anyone about any object. I take beauty to be a positive aesthetic virtue found in objects or their traits when attention to their sensible features produces and sustains deep and positive satisfaction, and does so in a way that involves stages of response and distinctions among the satisfactions associated with these stages, leading to a culmination of those satisfactions (p. 12).

Throughout the book the seriousness of aesthetics as a human endeavour is developed and reiterated.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at the historical roots of what will become parts of the syncretic theory. The insightful discussion of the 'subjective turn' is particularly helpful in moderating the view that subjectivism must mark aesthetics out as essentially concerned with aggrandizing humans over nature. The attention Moore gives to Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Alison is important as it helps to bring a fresh focus on the proper historical resources for a workable notion of disinterestedness, and other achievements, from the late 17th to the early 19th century. In these chapters Moore uses classic rejections and responses to identify the chaff but also, importantly for his own project, he appeals to actual experiences and reflection on them to identify what seems sensible enough to retain. As he says, it is possible to "peel the important aesthetic ideas away from their theoretical background and get a reasonably clear picture of their enduring pertinence" (p.71). Four ideas from this long historical period are retained. Firstly, that "aesthetic value judgement necessarily entails subjective responses" (p. 83). Secondly, that a certain enlargement of the self is involved - this is the feeling that in enjoying an experience I also enjoy my ability to enjoy the experience and even something of the prospect of sharing that with others. Thirdly, that one loses oneself in the experience or at least something of our everyday self is put aside in order to attend fully to and enter into the experience. Fourthly, that aesthetic value is often linked to other values, such as moral values. It is not the case that every aesthetic experience has or must have all four aspects to qualify as such; rather, what Moore is doing here is laying out four insights from the past that help to mark out the area of aesthetics and the kind of experiences that do seem to be aesthetic.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss more recent aesthetic debates, particularly around aesthetic experience and the notion of framing. Here Moore demonstrates the way that Noel Carroll's project of retaining a coherent notion of aesthetic experience, by stripping away any contentious ideas, throws out too much. Moore suggests that the remaining features fail to capture what is important about the aesthetic experience, particularly its affective dimension, and aesthetics as an important human endeavour.

Any attempt at looking for a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that something must have to qualify as an aesthetic experience is, for Moore, the wrong direction to take. A term is not automatically incoherent if no set of conditions can be found. Many aspects of life and terms we use are multifaceted and overlapping with no such set of qualifying criteria. Like Wittgenstein's famous example of games, what we have here is a set of related contributory

elements some of which need to be present. To ask *exactly* how many and in *exactly* what combination they must be present in order to count as an aesthetic experience is to ask the wrong kind of question, but that doesn't mean that an answer is ultimately elusive. Guidance is available through a cultural world of engaging in a process of critical reflection with others.

An equivalent of Danto's artworld is set out by Moore in Chapter 7 where he discusses "The Natureworld" but first he usefully illustrates a range of things one might be doing when stating that this or that natural object is beautiful. We might be expressing a simple emotive judgement, or we might be describing the object as qualifying for the judgement of beauty in our particular society whether or not we personally are actually moved by it. Building on these two responses we can see that it is also possible to be saying that X has the qualities that we agree are beautiful *and* that my personal experiencing of X as beautiful is part of what builds that agreement. Going further, we could be using our personal emotive judgement to call into question the established cultural norm. In this case our response would act as a kind of corrective judgement. Going further still, we might reconsider even this last position and make the counter-corrective move of affirming that X is, after all, beautiful. What is of interest here, it seems to me, is not just the embedding in a social context but also the developmental process that this suggests.

Running through the book and the syncretic theory itself is the notion of *development*. This comes across very clearly in the later chapters where the theory is further elaborated and possible criticisms viewed. Moore is writing from the perfectly reasonable position that we grow up aesthetically: we can – in the right circumstances and with the right encouragement – learn to deepen and enrich our aesthetic experiences.

It would certainly be possible to tease out problems here and there with any approach that attempts to combine opposing theories but the strengths of this book far outweigh such quibbles. In short, Moore's book puts the aesthetic experience centre stage and does so by continual recourse to actual aesthetic experiences; it contributes to the discussion of how aesthetic experiences develop as we "grow up" aesthetically; and it appreciates that experiencing natural beauty involves all the senses.

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