

Science, nature and Moore's syncretic aesthetic

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ABSTRACT

In *Natural Beauty*, Ronald Moore presents a novel account of our aesthetic encounters with the natural world. In this essay, I consider the relation between Moore's 'syncretic aesthetic' and rival views of the aesthetics of nature, particularly the view sometimes called 'scientific cognitivism'. After discussing Moore's characterization of rival views in general, and scientific cognitivism in particular, I rehearse his reasons for rejecting the latter view. I critique these arguments, but also suggest that scientific cognitivism and the syncretic aesthetic need not, after all, be viewed as incompatible notions.

Science, nature and Moore's syncretic aesthetic

In his book *Natural Beauty*, Ronald Moore presents a novel account of our aesthetic encounters with the natural world. This account is rich in detail, and broad in the scope of issues and topics that it addresses. Moreover, Moore's account opens up some stimulating and fresh perspectives on issues that have seen a good deal of debate. Since my fellow commentators describe some of these new avenues of investigation, I won't dwell on them here, except to note that they are evident even in the title of Moore's book, *Natural Beauty*. By my count, this is the seventh full length volume dedicated to this topic by a philosopher, but the first to *not* employ either of the words 'aesthetic' or 'environment' in the main title. This difference of phrasing is not insignificant: it is indicative of the book's provocative challenge to some predominant ways of conceptualizing this subject matter.

In my comments, however, I am not going to focus on the new view developed by Moore *per se*, but rather on how it relates to some of the aforementioned theoretical debates that have taken place in the aesthetics of nature in recent years. Though perhaps less exciting, I think that this is a necessary exercise, because ultimately what we want to know about Moore's view of the aesthetics of nature is whether we should believe it (or, if it comes to something different, whether we should accept it). To know that, we need to know what its rivals are, and why it is supposed to be preferable or superior to them.

In the early chapters of *Natural Beauty*, Moore describes and critiques some other more established views on the aesthetics of nature and develops his own view, which he calls the 'syncretic aesthetic', by way of a contrast with them. More specifically, Moore divides contemporary approaches into two groups, conceptualist and non-conceptualist theories, and argues that each kind is 'seriously flawed' (25). He then presents the syncretic aesthetic as preserving what is true and valuable in these approaches while rejecting their excesses and false claims.

So what is 'conceptualism' and what is 'non-conceptualism'? According to one gloss, conceptualism is the view that 'aesthetic regard for natural objects is mainly a matter of . . . understanding', whereas non-conceptualism is the view that it is mainly a matter of 'imagination, or something like it'. (30). In the former camp, we have philosophers who have emphasized the

role of a scientific understanding of nature, notably Allen Carlson and Marcia Eaton. In the non-conceptualist camp we find Emily Brady, Noël Carroll, and Arnold Berleant.

Before turning to Moore's consideration of these views, I have a quibble with his terminology here. I found the use of these labels, particularly 'non-conceptualism', confusing. The reason is that non-conceptualism, as glossed above, is supposed to have it that aesthetic regard for nature is mainly a matter of imagination (or something like it), but imagination (and things like it) are not non-conceptual. On the contrary, imagination is a paradigm case of a mental activity that involves concepts. To imagine yourself dating George Clooney, or living in Paris, you clearly need to have, and employ, concepts: dating, Paris, and so on. Moore's explication of this position on the aesthetics of nature is not helpful, for it lurches back and forth between these incompatible terms—'imaginative' and 'non-conceptual'—without resolving the tension between them. At times, Moore seems to acknowledge that concepts are involved in the non-conceptualist view—he says, for instance, that non-conceptualist approaches do allow for 'cognitive content' to play a role in aesthetic regard (26), although he refuses to describe this 'cognitive content' as involving concepts (at times one gets the sense that Moore wants to reserve the word 'concept' for use only in scientific contexts, but this is confusing, since there are plenty of concepts that are not scientific in any reasonable sense of the word: dating and Paris for examples). But at other times, Moore describes non-conceptualists as espousing 'aconceptual appreciation' (25; *cf.* 176), and traces their views back to Kant's notion of a 'free beauty' that pleases 'apart from concepts'.

'Non-conceptualism' is confusing as a description of Carroll's view also, since Carroll was careful to distinguish his view from Kant's, insisting that it, unlike Kant's, *does* involve concepts (Carroll, 1993). Perhaps the only one of Moore's three 'non-conceptualists' that merits the label is Berleant, given his view that aesthetic responses involve a melding of subject and object into a kind of unity. The aconceptual nature of this melded state is brought out nicely in Cheryl Foster's description of what she calls the 'ambient' dimension of aesthetic experience of nature. In describing this kind of aesthetic experience, which is a development of the sort endorsed by Berleant, Foster says that 'the environment as an index of conceptual frameworks recedes' and that 'the usual habit of cognitive separation into categories dissipates' (Foster, 1998, p. 133).

This point about terminology is, as I say, somewhat of a quibble. However we label them, it certainly is possible to divide contemporary views into more or less the camps that Moore does: Carlson and Eaton in one, and Brady, Carroll, and Berleant in the other (in fact, this is how commentators usually sort them). But what divides these camps is not that one favours using concepts and the other favours not using concepts, but that one favours the use of a *specific sort* of concept: concepts from the natural sciences. In the past, I've found the term 'scientific cognitivism' useful as a way of describing this view (see, for example, Parsons 2002). On this way of speaking, we can say that Carlson and Eaton defend scientific cognitivism, whereas the other thinkers object to it. I've never really been fond of the label, since it sounds ponderous and unlovely. But I can't think of a better one, and since it does have the virtue of being less confusing than Moore's terminology, I will use it in what follows.

What, then, is scientific cognitivism, and what does Moore think is 'seriously flawed' about it? At some points in Moore's text, it sounds as though scientific cognitivism is the claim that scientific understanding of nature is necessary for aesthetically appreciating it. Moore glosses it, at one point, as the view that 'concepts and categories...provide us with a necessary (although certainly not a sufficient) condition for appreciating, judging, or simply contemplating [natural objects]' (24). Against this view, Moore points to cases where our aesthetic experience apparently does not involve any scientific concepts or categories. He writes:

I may care very little whether the birds whose graceful pattern I observe are swifts or larks...My aesthetic attention is drawn to aspects of the natural spectacle that stand importantly apart from any category or concept...I am delighted by the particular way—there is no word for it—that the birds, twisting in their flight, catch the light just so, and then just so again. (29; for further examples see 156)

At other points, Moore seems to understand scientific cognitivism as the quite different claim that scientific understanding always, or generally, *enhances* or *stimulates* our aesthetic enjoyment of nature. He attributes to Carlson the more general claim that 'aesthetic appreciation is always enhanced by what we *know* about its objects' (157). And many of the cases that he presents in refuting scientific cognitivism seem directed at refuting such a claim: of garden flowers, he notes that it is 'hard to think that we would necessarily be in a better position to appreciate them aesthetically if we knew their names' (29). He also points out that 'sometimes,

knowledge spoils [aesthetic] experience' (29). 'Our knowledge that a given object of our attention is *only* a chicory plant', he suggests, 'may detract from our awareness of its particular beauty in this light, under these circumstances...' (29)

I think that Moore is perfectly correct in saying that these two views—the view that scientific understanding is necessary for aesthetic appreciation of nature and the view that scientific understanding always, or generally, enhances our aesthetic enjoyment of nature—are false. However, neither of these views ought to be or, so far as I know, is held by the philosophers who have endorsed scientific cognitivism. The principal claim that they have defended is that scientific understanding is necessary for the *appropriate* aesthetic appreciation of nature. We can explain this claim by distinguishing between two distinct issues regarding aesthetic experience: first, the issue of what makes aesthetic responses more or less enjoyable or intense; and second, the issue of what makes aesthetic responses more or less correct, apt, or appropriate (see, e.g., Walton, 1970). This first issue is a matter of psychology, whereas the latter is normative in nature. And the chief claims of scientific cognitivism are, first, that aesthetic responses to nature, at least in some cases, can be more ~~and~~ **or** less correct or apt, and, second, that for them to be more correct or apt, we need to employ categorizations from the natural sciences.

Clearly, the points that Moore raises in rebutting the two views I discussed above do not refute *this* claim, for it is a normative claim about how we should aesthetically appreciate nature. The fact that we can appreciate nature without employing concepts does not entail that it is correct or appropriate to do so. Nor does the fact that employing such concepts does not always make our aesthetic experience more enjoyable entail that we ought not to use them. To take the familiar Borgesian example from the realm of art, I might get more enjoyment from *Don Quixote* by imagining that it was written by a jaded French academic in the 1940s, but this does not mean that the correct way to appreciate *Don Quixote* is by pretending that it is a twentieth-century novel. On the contrary, to appreciate it this way is to obtain a distorted conception of its aesthetic achievement.

There are some points in *Natural Beauty* where the normative dimension of scientific cognitivism does surface. In a later chapter, Moore again takes up Carlson's view, arguing that 'there are many *appropriate* natural beauty judgments in regard to which scientific information is irrelevant...' (244; my emphasis). As examples Moore offers our aesthetic delight in a sunset,

the beauty of a zinnia, and the aesthetic appeal of zebra stripes (ibid.). These examples, perhaps, are intended to be putative counter-instances to the claim that appropriate aesthetic appreciation requires scientific understanding. They would be so if they were cases of correct or apt aesthetic appraisal. Thus, Moore is asserting that to aesthetically delight in a sunset correctly or appropriately, no scientific understanding is required.

Moore's counter-examples here would be persuasive, so long as we understand 'aesthetic delight' in quite a narrow fashion, as referring to an appreciation of something like vividness of colour, say. Perhaps to apprehend this aesthetic quality of a sunset correctly is just to savor the raw visual character of the event. If so, this aesthetic quality can be appreciated appropriately without employing scientific understanding.

But surely the aesthetic delight that we can take in a sunset is not limited to this. We can delight in the gradual revelation, as twilight deepens, of a vast solar system, held together across immense distances of empty space. Or, as the sun slides below the horizon, we can attend to the dramatic visual display of the Earth's rotation, a sight that appears somewhat uncanny when we remember how our daily experience testifies to the Earth's immobility. Or we might appreciate the way in which the sky's shifting colours reveal both the normally invisible composition of our atmosphere and the constant streaming of photons of light from the surface of the Sun, eight minutes away. Alternatively, we could delight in imagining the colours of the sunset as the effect of the Hesperides' apples, as the ancient Greeks did. In any event, there seem to be many different kinds of visual pleasure that, with knowledge, time and imagination, we can get from watching a sunset. But once we understand the aesthetic delight of sunsets in this more broad way, it is not obvious that we can have the *correct* or *appropriate* responses without employing scientific understanding. The scientific cognitivist claims that we cannot, and we need a reason to reject this claim. Thus, Moore's examples, on their own, do not show that scientific cognitivism is false.

We could, however, turn the issue around and ask instead why we ought to believe that scientific cognitivism is true—why accept its normative constraint on aesthetic appreciation, after all? One prominent argument for scientific cognitivism holds that we are required to employ scientific understanding of nature in appreciating it on ethical grounds: to reject this understanding is to fail to display a certain form of respect for nature. To do so, it is argued, is to fail to show regard for nature as an autonomous thing, with a character of its own. Carlson offers

a version of this argument, and it is developed at greater length by Yuriko Saito in defending a view that is somewhat more general than, but importantly related to, scientific cognitivism (Saito, 1998 and Carlson, 2000, pp. 66-8).

At points this argument does surface in Moore's discussion. He is rather dismissive of it, however; he writes, for instance, that scientific cognitivism 'comes close to confusing beauty with respect' (p. 214). But this is unfair: whether the argument is persuasive or not, I don't think that any of its proponents are confused about the difference between beauty and respect. It is clearly *possible* to confuse beauty and respect, since the word 'beauty' is often used to express our praise or commendation for something, rather than to describe appearances. When someone describes Mother Theresa as beautiful, for instance, she probably isn't making an aesthetic judgement about Mother Theresa, as we would assume her to be if she said 'Garbo was beautiful'. Perhaps she principally means, in saying this, to express her admiration for Mother Theresa's character or her good works. Since 'beauty' is sometimes used to report both kinds of evaluation, it is possible to mix up them up and confuse what is really an expression of respect for an aesthetic judgement.

But as I say, I doubt that any of the defenders of scientific cognitivism are guilty of this elementary mistake. Saito, for instance, is emphatic about the fact that aesthetic judgments are *not* simply expressions of praise but descriptions of the 'sensory surface' of things. She insists that she isn't arguing that 'the ecological value of the object should wholly determine its aesthetic value. [This] neglects the sensuous experience that substantiates the aesthetic value; our aesthetic experience *begins and ends* with the sensuous surface' (1998, p. 146). So Saito's claim is not that respect is beauty: it is that there is a specific relationship between respect for the environment and our judgements of beauty, such that the former constrains (normatively) the latter.

Moore's quick disposal of the respect argument stems, perhaps, from his particular conception of the relation between aesthetic and ethical matters, at least as far as nature goes. For Moore, respecting the environment and aesthetically appreciating it are separate matters. He writes:

respecting the world of natural beings, the values of endurance and sustainability, and so on is an enormously important and worthwhile mission. But respect for

nature no more entails or circumscribes natural beauty than respect for a national flag entails or circumscribes its artifactual beauty (215).

The idea here seems to be that respect is merely a matter of action, not attitude: as long as we treat nature respectfully, not harming it or wantonly destroying it, we can regard it however we please without thereby disrespecting it.

The flag analogy is worth pursuing. Moore's position seems to be that, in the case of the flag, as long as one doesn't stomp on or burn the flag, one could mock it as ugly wallpaper, or a garish scarf, without disrespecting it. But if that's the idea, the analogy seems unconvincing. For surely someone who derides a nation's flag as ugly wallpaper, ignoring its true character as a symbolic expression of events, values, and ideals cherished by a nation, *is* disrespecting that flag (anyone in doubt might try the following experiment: during the anthem at a football game shout out 'I wouldn't put *that* garish monstrosity up on my bathroom wall!'). In short, attitudes, as well as actions, can express disrespect. That's why aesthetic appreciation, even though it doesn't involve inflicting direct physical harm on nature, can express disrespect for nature.

At the outset I said that in order to evaluate Moore's syncretic aesthetic, we need to know what its rivals are, and on what grounds it is supposed to be superior to them. I have criticized Moore's arguments against one supposed rival, scientific cognitivism, but I want to conclude by suggesting that perhaps we shouldn't see these views as true rivals after all. Perhaps we ought to regard the syncretic aesthetic not as addressing the *normative* dimension of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, as scientific cognitivism does, but rather as a theory of the *psychological processes* involved in it. This interpretation would shift our focus to, and make better sense of, many of the innovative elements in Moore's account, such as his emphasis on processes of personal growth and development in relation to aesthetic experience. This would be to the good, as Moore's rich exploration of these neglected topics promises to open up intriguing new dimensions in philosophical discussions of our aesthetic experiences in nature.

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