

MAKING THEORY, MAKING SENSE

Comments on

Ronald Moore's *Natural Beauty*

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It is not difficult to give an overview of this admirable book. Not only is it well wrought but Ronald Moore regularly casts his authorial eye over the landscape to see that everything is in its proper place. And he just as regularly assures us that it is. His subject is the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, and it would seem that so stable an object would provide a similarly stable understanding. But Moore rightly recognizes that circumstantial factors inevitably obstruct any presumed objectivity. "There is no way of observing natural subject matter except as human conditions permit" (196), he observes, recognizing that the natural world is a social institution embodying perceptions that are conditioned, experiences communicable through language, and social beliefs and conventions. These lead him to call the natural world the "natureworld," emulating the concept of an "artworld." (134 ff., 196-7) Hence, the natural world, as experienced, is actually artifactual. This admission allows Moore to acknowledge the reciprocity of natural and artistic beauty, one indication of the inclusiveness that runs through his theory.

Moore centers his approach around aesthetic experience (98, 221, 252) and he endeavors to be as inclusive as possible. So he translates natural beauty not into objects, he declares, but into "an experience" that gives coherence to the experience of appreciation. (He is not as consistent in this as one might like, but more of this later.) This leads him to develop what he calls a syncretic theory that endeavors to incorporate understanding and insights from the long history of aesthetic reflection: Every judgment is contextual in character because it is made "within a community of discussion and reflection." Aesthetic judgments are processive, developed over time, and theoretical progress does indeed happen by building on the work of past theory.

The theory Moore thus develops has no hard edges; it is a theory that is flexible and adaptable. But this is not to say that it has no bones. Indeed, they form a different kind of structure. His view of natural beauty is broadly inclusive, unconstrained by any particular account. (12) Even though there can be no sharp line between what is natural and what artificial, it acknowledges that judgment rests on more than simple subjective pleasure. It devolves on the features and sensible traits of objects and proceeds through stages, distinctions, and discriminations. Similarly, the scope of natural beauty is not restricted to wilderness and natural wonders but embraces perceptual details that can occur in human-made environments. (13) And even though natural beauty is distinguishable from artistic, the experience of art can enlarge our appreciation of natural phenomena, and conversely.(14) Again, subjective responses underlie aesthetic judgments of natural beauty, but these are not completely internalized, for they involve dispositions to act in ways that favor and encourage them. (83-4) Furthermore, our responses do not occur as simple enjoyments but engage a resonance that is social as well as personal. (84) Further, one must be able to exceed one's personal boundaries and the intrusion of quotidian factors to lose oneself in the experience of beauty. (84) On the matter of cognitive claims Moore is judicious. He finds merit in both cognitivist and non-cognitivist views, in objectivist and subjectivist positions. (134 f.) Finally, aesthetic value does not stand alone but is bound up with other values, in particular moral ones. (85) [Read para. 3 on p. 85]

I hope that these comments provide a fair sense of the theory RM has developed in this book. It is, as I said at the outset, an admirable accomplishment. Moore doesn't succumb to scholarly diffidence but boldly surveys the literature and issues, both historical and contemporary, that aestheticians concerned with the aesthetics of nature, many of them in this room, have written about. He has undertaken not only to order a broad range of issues but to identify what is of lasting value in this literature and, with true intellectual generosity, to synthesize the various proposals into a coherent account. That is why he calls his a syncretic theory.

Moreover, its scope and the constructive character of its treatment give this book substantive value for scholars as well as for students of environmental aesthetics. I marvel at the skill with which Moore has incorporated such a wide range of issues and commentaries into a coherent framework. Such systematic accomplishments have long been rarities on the philosophical scene. I should like to respond in kind to his positive efforts with some observations of my own.

I am surely not the only reader to wonder whether such inclusiveness is truly possible. The hard question is whether one can be both cognitive and non-cognitive, whether one can regard environment as both objective and subjective. Maybe a little more independence and a little less tolerance of presumptive alternatives would help push the theory of natural beauty forward. For example, I find M's consideration of issues involving subjectivity and objectivity strangely inharmonious. He acknowledges that a theory that takes aesthetic experience as fundamental is irreducibly subjective (59, 132, 139-40) because aesthetic judgments rest on individual responses that are personal and immediate. At the same time and for understandable reasons, Moore often moves to an object-orientation, as in his discussion of formal beauty (167 ff.) and his frequent references to natural "objects." Indeed, it is easy to slip into a subject-object framework when writing of appreciation. Speaking of such an occurrence, he writes, "each of these persons...is in a position to have an aesthetic experience involving a natural object, and hence to be in a position to appreciate natural beauty...:" (122) It might seem unobjectionable, indeed unavoidable, to put things in this way if it did not incur irreducible ambiguity about the locus of natural beauty.

A good illustration of this is his discussion of framing, where Moore shifts from objects to scenes to the whole of nature. Since it is a topic that often recurs in the course of the book, it would do the issue an injustice to pick at particular statements as if they stood alone. At the same time the issue is framed with some consistency throughout the various contexts in which it appears. Frames are unavoidable, M. claims: "no one encountering natural beauty in an unframed context should take it to be strictly unbounded." (110) "The fact that there is no frame for the whole doesn't entail the non-existence of framing devices that make its parts

appreciable.” (113) “...*some* measure of bounding and interpretation is needed if the observer is to turn the restless, endless sensory field into appreciable wholes.” (116) “Yet, if he [a person] is to see beauty in nature (and not just gather a general sense of the beauty of nature), he may well see it as inhering in a beautiful *something*...And for there to be a something there to see, some limitation of his awareness must be imposed.” (117)

Frames would thus seem unavoidable, but for all Moore’s efforts to acknowledge the variability of their extent and their permeability, we cannot avoid the fact that frames objectify. Indeed, that is their intent. Thus we rest with the uneasy juxtaposition that framing is necessary but will vary in extent and not impose impenetrable barriers, and at the same time that appreciation is directly personal.

This is another of those philosophical conundrums that allow of no easy determination because the issues are irresolvable as they are formulated. The concerns need to be re-cast and resolved from an entirely different direction. I believe that often the best way to reconcile opposing and equally plausible alternatives is to shift away from the polarity and set the discussion on different ground. Moore skirts a possible solution and, indeed, bends the frame out of shape when he introduces selective attention in the act of appreciation. (123)

This, I think, actually points in the direction of a satisfactory settlement of what is a form of the subject-object dilemma. For we do not have to objectify nature by framing in order to appreciate something. I like to think of the appreciative situation as an aesthetic field, a perceptual field in which several principal factors participate. In this case, there is an appreciator who directs attention and there is the focus of that attention in the natural world: a flower, a brook, a particular scene, a hike along a woodland trail. One does not have to objectify or frame one’s attention in order to focus the awareness of eye, ear, body, and thought. Indeed, I believe that the significance of a frame is vastly overblown. Apart from its practical convenience as protection in shipping and handling a canvas and as a rough guide for placement in viewing, the frame often recedes from consciousness in appreciative experience. In a landscape painting, for example, one need not look *at* the frame but rather *past* the frame and into the space that is depicted. The frame often recedes into the periphery, especially if

one stands close to the surface of the painting and projects oneself into the pictorial space. I have often discovered that the painter actually encourages the process by painting the periphery of the canvas with broader, less articulated strokes, indeed rendering the macular and peripheral vision of the viewer (e.g. van Ruysdael, Hobbema). It is a technique that emulates the actual perceptual experience of nature. An analysis along these lines requires no reference to an appreciative *subject* or an *object* of appreciation but only to these significant aspects of a unified appreciative experience.

I want to talk now about another issue involving opposing camps that, I think, creates the battleground for a misguided conflict. (Perhaps all battlegrounds are similarly misguided.) I am referring to the related debate between the cognitivists and the non-cognitivists. This is a matter that lends itself to controversy, and philosophers (but perhaps not philosophy) seem to thrive on controversy. The issue here concerns the question whether knowledge of a natural phenomenon or object is necessary for its full appreciation. (42, 34, 148, 200 ff.) Some claim that it is, and in Carlson's view, the knowledge must be scientific. It would take us beyond the necessary limits (the frame?) of these comments to present a full account of the issue, although I think that Glenn will have more to say on it presently.

Let me suggest, however, that this becomes an issue by mistakenly objectifying the appreciative situation, as if it were all of a thing, an ideal thing. Appreciation is remarkably variable, among individuals and indeed for the same individual at different times and places. Sometimes we can be distracted by knowledge about what we are appreciating so that it blinds us to the sensible qualities of the experience. This often happens in the arts, where knowledge of art history and stylistic characteristics of different movements can block our sensitivity to the distinctive qualities of a painting, and it happens when the formal analysis of a poem replaces actually experiencing its figurative language. At the same time, knowledge can sensitize us to features we have overlooked and invite them into the appreciative experience. In fact there can be great delight in the enjoyment of an artist's brilliant handling of a technical difficulty – say a modulation in music or the development or variation of a musical theme or an inventive juxtaposition of hues. Would a four-leaf clover afford comparable delight?

I think that Moore is in sympathy with me when I say that there is no such *thing* as appreciation to be had or not. There are only appreciative *occasions*, experiences of aesthetic value that are invariably variable -- occasions that are individual, personal, unique. And when we are aesthetically engaged, our knowledge functions as an integral part of our experience, that is, it takes sensory form. Insofar as that knowledge affects the perceptual experience directly, it is a factor in appreciation: we see, hear, attend differently. If knowledge distracts us from that experience, it inaugurates a shift away from appreciation and mediates in an ongoing cognitive process, which is a different order of thing. Moore successfully avoids the cognitive-non-cognitive polarity when he writes, "...the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects isn't all of a piece, with knowledge of the object a constant quality and other sensible features simply variables that find their experiential places as knowledge accommodates them. Rather it is, like aesthetic appreciation in general, a complex, unregimented process in which, over a period of sustained awareness, a rich variety of elements – some cognitive, some emotive, some associative – may accumulate to produce in the observer an experience that warrants a beauty judgment." (204)

Finally, I want to say a word in praise of Moore's recognition of the complexity of the aesthetic. While aesthetic appreciation has its direct integrity, aesthetic theory offers no simple issues and no simple answers, and Moore constantly recognizes the individual trees in this conceptual jungle. At the same time, for each question raised he responds with a list of points that seem to pin it in a specimen box. Perhaps he may be forgiven for trying to present this complexity as a neat array, but it conveys a misleading orderliness to aesthetic inquiry. I think that the landscape of aesthetics shares with the desk in my study an irreducible messiness, despite persistent efforts to organize it, and that we would do well to restrain our conceptual compulsion for clear vision from suppressing the creative energies of its prolific undergrowth.