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Kirwan, James. Beauty. Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. x + 182, US\$ (cloth), US\$ (paper).

Kirwan identifies three kinds of beauty theory within the Western tradition.

These are: 'in the eye of the beholder' theories; neoplatonic theories; and what he refers to as synaesthetic theories; which he discusses in chapters 2, 3 and 4 respectively. He places himself within the synaesthetic tradition whose emphasis is apparently on the interaction between the beautiful object and the perceiver.

Kirwan, however, does not analyse this interaction. Nor does he concern himself with what makes the experience of beauty possible, nor what characteristics of an object make it beautiful. Instead, Kirwan's theory of beauty amounts to a phenomenology of beauty. Kirwan is interested in "the structure of feeling involved in beauty – with respect to which the division between the perceived object and its ground is more important than any formal properties of either" (p.39).

The feeling of beauty, according to Kirwan, is a "yearning without object, or yearning which suppresses its object" (p.39). Kirwan's theory of beauty consists in finding an analogue for this yearning in the realm of metaphysics

(Ch.4). His is a theory of subjectivity; but a subjectivity in the tradition of Kant's 'universally communicable' subjectivity. In Kirwan's case, however, the basis of this communicability is not spelt out.

Kirwan sets up his approach to the subject in chapter 1 when he writes:

[I]t may be that beauty comes about only through a deliberately selective perception, a perception that is in some way aware of what it excludes, in so far as, for the sake of the beauty of an object, it can deliberately exclude the more complex object which is its ground. (It may even be that beauty exists only in this act of exclusion itself.) Even if this is not the case, to use the phrase 'beautiful object' to describe the true phenomenal ground of the instance of beauty may be misleading, for, though it is this ground which inspires the sensation of beauty in the subject, it is not, as an object, part of the subject's conscious experience of the sensation of beauty (p.12).

At such times, Kirwan's analysis of his own experience of beauty promises to reveal useful distinctions. He does not, however, maintain this analytic vein, opting instead for broad sweeping claims such as that the experience of beauty is the effect of our desire for transcendence, or perfection (p.45). This idea of beauty vindicates the intuition underpinning the neo-platonic understanding of beauty. It is the idea that beauty's manifestations on earth are a mere reflection of

beauty proper, the latter a characteristic of the divine. Kirwan drops the framework of divinity, but it is not clear what he replaces it with. The grounding of his transcendental metaphysics is never made clear.

It is perhaps easier to grasp Kirwan's idea of beauty by considering the kind of construal of beauty that it disallows. The idea that what is beautiful about an object is "quantifiable solely in terms of the properties of that object" (either to the exclusion or inclusion of the particular subject's interpretation of those properties) is incompatible with Kirwan's notion of beauty (p.47). Also the idea that "the pleasure of beauty is, somehow, identifiable with the pleasure attending the satisfaction of specific physiological goals; and that experiences of beauty are qualitatively different from one another ('high' or 'low')" is rejected by him (p.47). In effect then, Kirwan rejects, on the one hand, Clive Bell's 'formalism', and on the other, the idea that everything that pleases through the senses is beautiful. Neither does he entertain what has become a post-modern cliché that beauty is a cultural construct invented to impose mainstream tastes. Furthermore, his theory of beauty makes no assumptions about art (ch.8). Art may or may not be beautiful. Kirwan attempts to untangle the confusion which exists between the nature of art and the nature of beauty without making reference to specific examples of this confusion in the contemporary literature on beauty. Even so, this is a welcome and very useful distinction.

Kirwan, then, recognizes the experience of beauty as an authentic part of what it is to be human but it must be said that what constitutes his 'theory' is left unhelpfully vague. He promises to examine the relation of his theory to three themes traditionally associated with beauty; knowledge, action and morality (in chapters 5,6 and 7 respectively), but we are left no better off regarding the grounds of his theory. One is left with a description of his attitude to beauty rather than an actual theory. For example, in chapter 9, Kirwan sums up: "I have described beauty, and told how the beauty of a thing is always in excess to anything we can hope from that thing, but there will still be beauty. For there is nothing beyond beauty. Everything is as it was. I have nothing to prescribe." (p.124) Such rhetoric, however, is interspersed with some revealing metaphors as when Kirwan reinterprets the Platonic relationship between the sensuous and formless beauty as like looking through the former to the latter with a telescope rather than climbing a ladder from one to the other (ch.7). But such revealing metaphors do not a theory make.

Kirwan attempts to reveal rather than analyse. He attempts to keep the experience of beauty before us as a whole rather than dissect it into parts. The result is, however, that he asserts rather than argues. I am sympathetic to the dilemma of style regarding how best to treat the subject of beauty without reducing it beyond recognition. The problem is, however, that without analysis, what is acknowledged as constituting an experience of beauty needs to be taken as

a given. This will not do because the philosophical literature, not to mention the literature on beauty in the areas of art theory, sociology and psychology, is not consistent on what constitutes an experience of beauty.

Kirwan identifies the locus of the nature of beauty as a subject's response to certain aspects of an object (and a certain construal of these aspects). However, while he explains what he thinks the experience of beauty is like, he presents no compelling argument as to why we should accept his account. At times, he seems to think all deeply moving feelings can be a part of the experience of beauty. According to Kirwan, the more the feeling exhibits a yearning kind of pleasure, a melancholy, the more cultivated the response to beauty is. (He had stated earlier that his theory was incompatible with the idea of high and low forms of beauty but obviously not with high and low forms of the experience of beauty!). Such feelings would preclude, say, the possibility of moral or mathematical beauty, even though Kirwan clearly wants to include moral beauty as a possibility (ch.7).

Kirwan makes little of the ground of judgments of beauty. The fact is that without identifying some grounding for judgments of beauty, there is no way to differentiate between what constitutes an experience of beauty and what can sometimes accompany an experience of beauty. This is an important problem which causes many apparent disagreements about beauty and which Kirwan simply side steps. Furthermore, he does not address the classic problem of

beauty; the problem concerning the basis for the intersubjectivity of experiences of beauty, when there are no stateable sufficient or necessary conditions for beauty. According to Kirwan, 'Beauty is immediately and (despite its felt subjectivity) irreducibly a sensation – it strikes me.'(p.6) But this belies the way judgments of beauty are defended. A configuration not previously perceived in an object by a particular perceiver can be pointed out to that perceiver so as to give rise to the experience of beauty in that perceiver. This suggests that beauty is reducible even though attempts to reduce beauty to principles seem doomed to failure. The way we defend judgments of beauty is hard to reconcile with the fact that we know something is beautiful by how it makes us feel, not by first judging whether it satisfies certain conditions. Kirwan makes a lot of the latter part of this point but rather than address the tension between this and the way judgments of beauty can be defended, he simply ignores one half of the equation. Kirwan's treatise reads like a poetic expression of what one person takes to be an experience of beauty. What his treatise can be said to contribute is yet another example of the difficulty of understanding beauty simply through a nonanalytical reflection on what is apparently a phenomenology of the experience of beauty.

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