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BEAUTY AND MEANING; MUSIC AND MORALITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROGER SCRUTON

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I. BEAUTY

Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics: The nature of beauty is a key topic of aesthetics, and is the subject of your recent book.[1] What is your position in that debate?

Roger Scruton: In my book I develop a sort of Kantian approach, that is to say, I refuse to define beauty as a property of something; rather, I define the interest in beauty as a state of mind of the person observing something. However, the nature of this state of mind lays constraints on its object, and it is those constraints that are the all-important thing to be considered.

Among the first of these constraints is that the search for beauty is a search to be at home with things, not to be standing in an antagonistic relation to them. The interest in beauty is in part about being able to find in the world of things some meaning, which makes it good for you to be among them. I take architecture to be a very important instance of this. You can wander through a concrete jungle like modern

[1] Scruton (2009a).

Shanghai, never feeling that you are a part of this alien landscape. The experience is the opposite on the left bank of the Seine in Paris, where you are at home in every little detail. In the case of visual beauty, it is how something looks that makes you feel at home.

Another constraint on the attitude towards beauty, the constraint that Kant pointed out, is that you are a suitor for agreement. You are not just seeing yourself as one individual who happens to like this kind of thing; you are looking for something that you could share. These are the thoughts that I develop in that book.

PJA: Do you take these constraints as having to do with a universal feature of the human condition, as Kant took them to be, or do you take them to be culturally conditioned? Could a future people find themselves at home among skyscrapers?

RS: They could, but if so, they would be having the same kind of experience that I am trying to define. I don't know the answer to this entirely. However, I take a more Kantian view that all of this is grounded in our nature as rational beings, and in particular in our need to find the ends in life around us, and not just the means.

PJA: What does it mean to say this depends on our nature as rational beings? Does it not also depend on our natural proclivities, on our nature as whole human beings, so to say?

RS: Yes, that also; I think one needs to amplify this and talk about the embodied nature of human rationality. But by mentioning our nature as rational beings, I mean to distance myself from the evolutionary psychologists' explanation. Take Denis Dutton, the author of *The Art Instinct.* He always advocated aesthetic universals, but on evolutionary grounds, saying that our aesthetic choices are connected with our long-standing adaptations from our hunter-gatherer past. That could be true, but in my view it falls short of accounting for the really aesthetic side of these choices, which has much more to do with contemplating something and finding yourself in it. That belongs to our nature as self-conscious rational beings, rather than just with the reproductive needs of our genes.

PJA: The notion of 'meaning' also seems to be essential to your understanding of the aesthetic.[2] Could you say a bit more about what you understand to be the 'meaning' of works of art? Would you connect it to 'meaning' in the 'meaning of life' sense?

RS: This is a really difficult question. I think almost everybody agrees that works of art at least are meaningful. If they weren't, then why all this fuss about them, why do they play this incredible role in our lives? However, I think this has misled many people into giving false accounts of what meaning in art is; in particular people like Goodman who develop semantic theories of artistic meaning. They tend to reduce meaning to something purely cognitive, making it seem as if works of art were ways of offering information to be collected. And I think it's nothing like that. Obviously some works of art do have semantic structure, but the real meaning that we value in works of art lies beyond all that, beyond the mere transmission of information. Importantly, it also lies beyond use. A lot of things that we find meaningful are meaningful because we can use them for our purposes. But the important thing about art is that its meaning is revealed only when we put it beyond use. We try to find an intrinsic meaning in it, meaning which is not reducible either to the information that it conveys or the purpose that it serves. A decorated pinnacle on a buttress conveys the information that this is a sacred building, and it serves the purpose of weighing the buttress down at the critical point. But its meaning as an object of aesthetic interest is something else, something dependent on its specific beauty and the way in which it addresses the eye.

Of course this means that the more that you develop these constraints on what meaning in art should be, the more ineffable that meaning becomes. It becomes less and less easy to say what the meaning of a particular work is. Perhaps it is useful to think of it in the way that religious people think of grace: that God reveals the blessedness of things. Religious people have this experience all the time. And nonreligious people do as well, in a sunset or in a beautiful piece of countryside. It is in a similar way to this that great artists can show you the meaning of something; they take something very ordinary and bring it before you so you can say, yes, this is not something incomplete, this is complete in itself, it justifies itself. That's what I mean by showing the meaning of things.

[2] See Scruton (2007), p. 245.

PJA: So, the meaning that a work of art or a beautiful object has is an indicator for value beyond the material world?

RS: Well, religious people would say that, but irreligious or agnostic people would not say exactly that. They would say the meaning lies in it, but for a genuinely aesthetic sensibility that work would still have a kind of redemptive force. The idea is that the work comes before you as justified, and not just as an accident. I think this is something that people like Kant would try to express in other ways.

Admittedly, this is a rather general account. But it is not meant to deny that each individual work of art achieves this meaningfulness in its own way nor that often one can say what the work is telling you. In particular, works of art give you examples of human life, which are unfamiliar, and which might actually help to educate our emotions by arousing sympathies towards situations which we haven't previously imagined.

PJA: Would you then say that the rejection of the semantic hypothesis does not lead you fully into the idea that the meaning of an artwork is something ineffable?

RS: It does move you towards this idea of ineffability, but it does not mean that you are completely without the ability to say something about a work. My view is perhaps similar to that of Susanne Langer, who uses the notion of 'presentational symbols', by which she means that a work of art is not describing things, is not giving you information about them, it is rather *presenting them.* Here they are in their full and elaborate and presented mode, and now you can understand them.

PJA: Let us move onto the issue of beauty in human relations. In *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* you compare the experience of beauty with the cause of an erotic desire.[3] Do you share Alexander Nehamas' idea of love as inextricably linked with the experience of beauty?[4]

RS: This is not a new theme; it is central, of course, to Plato. I think Nehamas is right that human love in all its forms is not just connected with our interest in beauty, but is in some way inseparable from it. But we know that love exists in many different forms. The love for your parents, for your friend, erotic love, love for a child – these are all completely different things. Erotic love is the one that stands out here. Other

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3 Scruton (1986), p. 250.

4 Nehamas (2007).

forms of love are forms of pure, disinterested attention to another person, but erotic love is not disinterested in any way. It is a desire, and also, it is a possessive desire. If you love somebody as a friend you don't worry that he has another friend; but if you love someone as a lover, her interest in someone else can be a cause of an existential wound. This is a radical difference, and it should be clear that erotic love stands to one side of the other loves.

With regards to the passage in *Sexual Desire* that you refer to, all I wanted to say there is that it is no accident that we use the same vocabulary to describe the object of aesthetic appreciation and the object of love. In both cases we are talking about a non-instrumental and non-transferable relation to an individual. You can't say to a person: 'take Juliet, she'll do just as well', just as you cannot say: 'take this other Mozart symphony; it will do just as well'. I didn't want to make any deeper metaphysical connection of the kind that Plato makes.

But I do agree that there are important connections here, between love, beauty and sexual desire. I am not sure that Alexander Nehamas gets to the heart of the matter; and I am not sure that Plato gets to it. But there is something here to be explored.

PJA: To return to beauty in art, how relevant is it in art today? In you film *Why Beauty Matters?* as well as in your book, you seem to be pretty sceptical towards the value of contemporary art. Is there any form of contemporary art that you think is aesthetically valuable?

RS: I think you're wrong about this. I was not criticizing contemporary art as such just bad contemporary artists, and the kind of rhetoric they use to justify their work. What interested me was the fact that people have been trying to create forms of art which marginalize the goal of beauty. Of course, you can have works of art which are not beautiful, which deliberately put beauty on one side – like Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin,* which put ugliness right in the centre of things. But these works are necessarily marginal. If somebody said to you that human relations have nothing to do with love, that we relate to people in thousands of different ways, that there are interesting relationships that are purely business relations, then you might say, yes, but what is valuable about human relations is connected to the fact that we do love each other. That is what we are always moving towards, and if we did not have relations of love all the rest would be meaningless. I want to say something similar about art and beauty. Of course, there can be lots of different things that works

of art can be doing. However, if there is no sense in which works of art are aiming at beauty, then this whole aspect of the human condition – art, that is to say – would become meaningless.

So I am only attacking the attempt by certain schools of art to marginalize beauty and conceptual art – art, which replaces itself with its own explanation, usually intended to show just how clever the artist is. I think these forms are themselves marginal. I am not arguing against contemporary art, though. There is a lot of beautiful work created now – for example painting by David Inshaw, sculpture by Alexander Stoddart, Robert Saxton's motets, the symphonies of David Matthews, the architecture of John Simpson. But these things are art in the original sense, not a way of putting the artist's ego on display but a way of deferring to an audience.

PJA: Could it be that contemporary artists just have a different take on beauty? That could be said, for example, of abstract expressionists.

RS: That could be so. The nature of beauty is controversial, and it might be that we disagree as to what it is. Here we come to the question of what a test for beauty would be. I adhere to the view that Anthony Savile develops, the test of time view, according to which we know in the long run what is beautiful, but upon a work's immediate impact you might not know that it is beautiful. Take Manet, for instance, his *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Everyone thought that was hideous – a naked woman sitting in the middle of a picnic. But now everyone sees it as something rather wonderful, as a leading masterwork of the 19th Century, which casts a singular light on contemporary life. So there is that possibility. But this does not preclude my claim that works of art that exhaust themselves in their ephemeral identity, something like Tracy Emin's *My Bed,* will not, in the long run, justify the fuss that they are designed to create.

II. MUSIC

PJA: Among the art forms, one of your main interests has been music. What questions can philosophers ask about music specifically?

RS: This is an important thing to ask because in obvious ways music stands apart from the usual subject matter of aesthetics, which has traditionally been representational arts like poetry and painting. One very obvious question specific to

music, with which I deal in the first two chapters of *Aesthetics of Music,*[5] is the relation between sounds and tones – whether music is an art of sound only or whether something happens to sound in order to make it into music. And I argue, yes, something does happen, it happens in the ear of the beholder, and it is a kind of ontological transformation of sound into a form of order and movement.

Then there is the question of understanding music. People have asked from the 18th Century onwards what the meaning of music is without asking the question what it is to hear a piece of music *with understanding*. I think Wittgenstein was the first person who said that this reverses the order of things.[6] Understanding is something that is manifest in performance, not in an explanation. I think this can be a clue to the question of the meaning of music. The meaning is what we understand when we play with understanding. Asking what that thing is opens a door into the subject that hadn't been opened before.

PJA: That understanding, if I follow your line of reasoning in *The Aesthetics of Music* correctly, is going to be in terms of tones, and the movement of these tones as we hear it in music. In an important sense for you, this metaphorical way of putting it is not reducible to a description of the physical vibrations of the sound waves.[7]

RS: I think that's right, but it raises a big question. One way of posing the question would be to say that most people don't play instruments and don't sing, but they still understand a certain repertoire of music; so the question is, what is it that they are doing? I want to develop a notion of moving *with* music which is not simply jigging about, but is a movement of the soul. It is like what happens when you move with someone when dancing or in conversation – when you are responding minutely to another person's expression and giving back expressions of your own. This touches the core of our social intentionality. And I think that music is part of that core.

PJA: So it is not that we get meaning from music as we would by interpreting a language. Rather it is derived from the kinds of things we may be moved to do or experience as we move along to it. Does that mean that music can be a source of moral significance, even knowledge?

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5 Scruton (1997).
6 See Scruton (2009b), Chapter 3.
7 See Scruton (1997), Chapters 1 and 2; for a précis see pp. 78-79.

RS: One important thing to think about is the concept of sympathy. If I am right our understanding of music is a matter of our sympathetic reaction to it, moving with it inwardly. In opera music is also making you move along with the drama, but according to the rhythm of the music. And this might have a great significance for you because it might be the first time that you have been brought into sympathy with some particular human situation. Or, on the other hand, a situation that is totally strange. Take the situations in Wagner's *Ring,* like Siegfried's awakening of Brünnhilde – a woman asleep on a mountaintop that seems like a man. You might think that is all very ridiculous, but the music is taking you along and making you focus on and resonate to aspects of it until finally it feels as though something is happening deeply within you. And then, looking back on it, you might think, gosh, I have really learned something. You do not know quite how to put that into words, but in this case it is something deep about sexual awakening.

PJA: We cannot put it into words because it is not a proposition that we have come to believe; it is more like an education of our emotions.
RS: Yes, something along these lines.

PJA: One charge against the view that our understanding of music is in terms of the movement of the tones, arguably, came through Schoenberg's break with the system of tonality. This break was based on the idea that triadic tonality is not anything more than an arbitrary style of music. You argue that tonality is more than just a style.[8]
RS: I want to say that tonality is not a style; it's a tradition, which again is a very complicated concept. I want to say it is a kind of paradigm of musical order. It takes various musical universals and builds from them not a set of rules, exactly, but a set of expectations, which enable both the listener and the composer to build ever more complex, but nevertheless immediately intelligible structures.

So it is not that I want to say that there is no other form of music than that of the Western tonal tradition. I rather want to say that there is something paradigmatic about that tradition. Schoenberg's break with tonality did not actually lead him in a new direction altogether.[9] He did start using all the twelve tones and started constructing music in new way through their permutations, but those twelve tones are

[8] See Scruton (1997), Chapter 9.
[9] Cf. Scruton (2009b), Chapter 11.

themselves the by-product of the tonal tradition – they are the twelve semitones of the tonal scale. And they are constantly leading him back to the thing he thought he was rejecting. We still listen to his music in the entirely same frame of mind that we listen to a Beethoven symphony; we try to hear prolongations, imitations, the way some particular passage is picking up a theme and carrying it forward. We do not hear Schoenberg's music as a set of permutations at all. The result has been that twelve-tone music is always heard as very bitty. Hearing it developing into a climax and coming to a conclusion is very rare and when this happens, as in Berg's violin concerto, this is often because tonal techniques have been used.

PJA: If tonality is something of a paradigm of our understanding of music, what kind of explanation can we give for that? Would you go with attempts like those by Helmholtz,[10] who tried to give a naturalistic explanation, or would you be happy to say that it is just something deeply engrained in our culture?

RS: I wish I had a final answer to all this. The first thing to say about Helmholtz is to say that he was discussing relations between sounds, and not between tones. But his physics of sound is interesting because it does give something of an explanation as to why the octave, the fifth and the fourth seem not to jangle on our nerves. They don't because the sound waves of those notes fit into each other, so they do not create clashing overtones. Insofar as an explanation can be given, it explains why it is that certain sounds are concordant and are recognized as such not just by human beings but also by other animals. But as soon as the tonal system really gets going those explanations seem very hollow. If you take a triad and play it right down in the bass then it will have complex overtones, which beat against each other every bit as much as the sharpest discord in the treble. And yet we hear it as harmonious –Beethoven often has parallel thirds in the bass of his piano sonatas, and you can hear the harmonic logic of it perfectly.

So why is that? One could say there is some feedback from the grammar of the system, which makes you hear this as harmonious. That is what gives rise to the idea that the whole of tonal understanding is a matter of grammar. Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff try to explain tonality along these lines in their book *A Generative Theory*

[10] See Scruton (1997), pp. 241ff.

of Tonal Music;[11] They try to show that our perceptions of harmoniousness are generated from deep structures by rules of formation. But again, I do not think they succeed. I take that view apart in my book,[12] and I think I show that such a project could not succeed because there is no musical semantics that provides the deep structure that is encoded in the musical surface.

Nevertheless, it is an interesting thought that somehow there is a grammar of expectation there, and that it is partly culturally determined, and partly leans upon natural capacities to process sound waves.

PJA: So to defend tonality we do not need to show that every single feature of it leans upon a natural order?

RS: That is right; though, there are things like movement towards the conclusion, such as the classical chord progression finishing with the dominant and the tonic. This is something that has such logic to it. The progression of a piece can be spread out through such a long time, and yet you know that the conclusion is coming – think of the coda of Dvořák's Cello concerto last movement. But it is hard to say just what follows a natural order and what is cultural. One would need to compare Western tonality to other traditions, for example to look at what Indians have to say about Indian classical music. There have been studies of Balinese and Indonesian gamelan music, which does have a lot of structure, though not the kind of structure to which we are accustomed, in which tension and release are generated by voice-led harmonies.

PJA: If we return to the idea that music can have an edifying or moral significance, this takes us to your critique of contemporary popular music.[13] I take it you would say that one of the standards by which we can critique a musical genre should be the kind of moral life it engenders.

RS: I am not the first person to make noises in that direction; again, this is something that goes back to Plato. Plato made it very clear that there is a connection between music and ethos, and interestingly enough he was not talking about particular works of music; he was talking about idioms, or what he called modes. We do not fully

[11] Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983).
[12] Scruton (1997), Chapter 7.
[13] Scruton (1997), Chapter 15.

know what he meant by that, but his attack on certain idioms would amount to something like taking a whole style, like jazz, and saying you should not have that in the city. He made the case quite strongly on the grounds that appreciating music is a form of imitation, and that what we are imitating is character and emotion. If you imitate the wrong character, you obtain the wrong character.

It's very crude to put it that way; but it is not stupid. And something like that has been felt down the ages by many different people.

PJA: Adorno comes to mind …[14]

RS: Adorno wanted to attack popular musical culture because he accused it of the vice he called the 'regression of listening', that is, the inability to follow a musical argument freely, or to postpone gratification over an extended period. Instead we take a substitute for it. He criticises what he calls fetishism in music, following the idea of fetishism of commodities in Marx's *Das Kapital.* Pursuing the substitute instead of the real human thing, this is what he thought jazz was providing through its little, easily absorbed jingles, avoiding the demanding exploration of human freedom, which goes on in real music.

Now, you can say lots of things against Adorno in this respect. First of all, he ignores the primary function of music in society – which is dancing and singing, not listening. He is confining music to the kind of culture from which he himself came. His attack is also connected with his hostility towards tonality, and jazz was the last form of tonal exploration. One might agree with Adorno that there is something short-term in the musical attention that jazz invites, in comparison to the classical symphonic tradition, and perhaps that is something that does matter. However, you might also recognize that there is something short-term about it, but not dismiss it for that reason. I would say this latter position is right. We should recognize the popular idioms, but bring them into the fold of the aesthetic. And that means learning to discriminate.

PJA: So you do not reject all the 'easier' musical idioms?

RS: What I object to is not pop music in general. I object to people who do not discriminate and people who think that popular music is somehow outside of our

[14] Scruton (1997), pp. 468ff.; Scruton (2009b), Chapter 13.

critical awareness, that the whole thing has to be accepted *en masse.* In the last chapter of *Aesthetics of Music,* I take apart a few pieces and try to show that a melody like the Beatles' 'She Loves You' has genuine musical interest and musical quality, which you cannot find in the pieces by Nirvana and R.E.M. that I look at.[15] Perhaps I am wrong on that particular example, but what I feel is that people have lost the habit of approaching popular music critically.

So you see, what was annoying about Adorno was that he dismissed American popular music of his day as thought it all had the same value, namely zero. And when we look back on it, we can see that some things have lasted, for example the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. These were genuinely popular but had something to say too, something moving, often. Other things have not lasted.

PJA: In criticism, then, there is the singular aesthetic judgement as well as the moral one. You point to the music of the 'Great American Songbook', which you say afforded a new kind of moral life.[16]

RS: Yes, this is the more kind of Platonic approach again. The American songbook humanised modern, short-term romantic relationship and made them less tragic than they otherwise would have been. In this connection, heavy metal is a very interesting case as it is both defended and attacked, but always only on these general Platonic grounds. Defenders say, this is the life of frustrated youth trying to get it out and make a point; and the attackers say that this is the life that these awful, frustrated, aggressive youths are letting out at us, but which they should be holding in. Either way, there are not enough specific judgements about specific works, and I think it would be interesting to attempt that – because there are obviously differences.

PJA: You have praised Metallica's 'The Master of Puppets'.[17]

RS: Yes, that's an impressive one, compared to 'Bleed', which I played in the seminar the other day [by the Swedish death-metal band Meshuggah]. Anyway, the issue of the individual discrimination of songs within a genre is a big topic, and it would be great if somebody took it forward.

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[15] Scruton (1997), pp. 501ff.
[16] Scruton (2009b), pp. 214ff.
[17] Baggini (2008), p. 28.

PJA: If I may press the Platonic point further, though: would you nevertheless say – perhaps with Adorno – that while developments in popular music do offer new forms of life, the kind of moral understanding they offer will always fall short of the kind of understanding that classical music offers?

RS: If we thought that, it would be rather depressing, because these are the idioms of the day. A Spenglerian would say 'yes, we are living at the end of music'. I think it is not as simple as that, though, because after all people are still writing really serious music. Take Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River:* you will find there one of the great expressions about the nature of human relationships, in which, to our great surprise, the dramatic pattern of a Japanese Noh play, combined with Balinese-influenced homophony, are used to present a very Christian story of personal love and loss as a 'Church parable'. One is constantly coming across things, which have the same kind of seriousness about human relations as Mozart displays in *The Marriage of Figaro* or *The Magic Flute,* and are finding a musical language for it. So I suspect that one should not be totally Spenglerian about it. But of course, the advocates of pop do not seem to be aware that there is anything very much to live up to, or that there are aspects of human life which are important and which only music can touch on.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Professor Roger Scruton is a philosopher, freelance writer and public commentator. He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge, and has held a number of academic appointments (at Cambridge, London and Boston Universities). Currently, he holds part-time positions at Oxford University, St Andrews University and the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC. He has authored more than thirty books, which include works on political philosophy, aesthetics, history of philosophy, and politics. He is also the author of four novels and two operas.

His works in aesthetics include *Art and Imagination* (Methuen, 1974), *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (PUP, 1980), *The Aesthetic Understanding* (Carcanet, 1983, new ed. 1997), *Aesthetics of Music* (OUP, 1999), *Beauty* (OUP, 2009), *Understanding Music* (Continuum, 2009), and a BBC documentary *Why Beauty Matters?* (2009).

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWERS:

Sarah Hegenbart is working towards her doctorate at the University of Leeds, under the supervision of Matthew Kieran. Her thesis aims to expand discourse about beauty in contemporary aesthetics and restore beauty to a central place in our understanding of the nature of virtue.

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