

Roger Scruton on “Why Beauty is not a
Luxury but a Necessity for a Life Worth
Living”

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1. PREFACE

My pleasure in being here, at the Studiecentrum Soeterbeeck, to discuss the book Roger Scruton wrote on beauty, is twofold. It so happens that I am finishing a book on facial expression and facial beauty, and the chapter I sent to Roger to request his comments, resurfaced unopened in my own mail box, last week. Apparently something went wrong in the mail. Today I might get some of those comments. Secondly, reading Roger’s book, an impression of a kindred spirit has stuck with me throughout.¹⁾

Sometimes, though, something like an ungrounded preference surfaces, which for Roger, clearly has intuitive force, maybe even the force of a conclusion, but for me this doesn’t always ring true.

I only mention two instances where my own preferences would be different. One is, where after rightly criticising the reverence allotted to Duchamp’s *Fountain*, in a single sentence (on p. 98) both Radiohead and Brahms are mentioned, in an obvious effort to disqualify the former. The other is where he defends film as an art by comparing it to traditional art, by pointing to shots from an Ingmar Bergman movie, which “would sit on your wall like an engraving, resonant, engaging and composed.” (p. 102).

What the incidental surfacing of such preferences makes available to us is that doing aesthetics is not a merely technical philosophical endeavour, but involves art criticism, from time to time. If you don’t love art or its core values, how could you do aesthetics? And there is a deeper thought behind this in Roger’s writings: that the use of taste belongs to the good life.²⁾

All this, also, indicates my predicament, here and now. I feel most inclined

to applaud almost everything in this book, but won't—it would be rather redundant. Luckily, there is some ground for dissent too.

2. AN INNATE CAPACITY FOR BEAUTY

The core questions addressed by Roger are What is beauty, why is it important? How does art relate to beauty, and how do both relate to life? Roger thinks something quite normal must be at stake in our quests for beauty, something which, also, is inherently valuable. I agree, but what is this *quite normal thing, experience or event* that grounds our more cultivated quests for beauty? Here we seem to have slightly differing views.

Roger places it on the one end in what he calls “minimal beauty”, the dedication to our everyday surroundings—garden arrangements, and architecture, and the layout of our streets—and, on the other, certain masterworks of art which seem complete, and detailedly structured. An alternative model to think about the anthropological, or psychological constants for beauty and art is facial expression, which I take to consist in a dynamic reciprocal addressing between two persons: from one I to another I.^{3) 4)} Let me first sketch the scope of this approach.

First, some of this mechanism seems available in natural beauty. Secondly, pictures motivated primarily by cognitive concerns, however, tend to fail this reciprocity, and thirdly, this is where art comes in: art tries to make up for that failure and to offer some compensatory reciprocity.

Roger has a different view. He thinks that the true moral value of works of art “lies in the ability to open our eyes to others [I agree!], and to discipline our sympathies towards life as it is [here our ways part].” (132, my additions).

All this ties in with the 5th and 6th platitudes about beauty that Roger identifies.⁵⁾ I agree with the platitudes. Indeed, beauty is somehow an objective property of the thing, but it nevertheless cannot be paraphrased or replaced by a description: you have to experience it for yourself.⁶⁾ We must however, ask why this would be the case, and, I think, taking recourse to the reciprocal process of facial expression can help out. Here, as with art, the observer engages with the observed and has the observed, whether this be a person or a work address him. The engagement of the beholder incorporates an element of projection, and this projection must fit, and it is the object of the gaze which tells us whether or not it does.

“My pleasure in beauty is therefore like a gift offered to the object, which in turn a gift offered to me.”¹

¹ Scruton 2009, 31.

4. NATURAL BEAUTY

Could one say that music does not fit the idea that beauty is basically like the realisation of another person's otherness—as in our engagement with facial expression—because music is more than other arts, and more perhaps than nature, a case of structuring?⁷⁾ I agree that we should not normally view music as expressing a musician's mind, but want to stress that however much music can be conceived of as a structuring laid down in the score by the composer, the notated structure must be brought to sound, and this is achieved by musicians, and it is the audibility of the performers' manipulations of instruments which bring the music to life.⁸⁾

3. ART AS ORDERING (INERT MATERIAL)

But now Roger thinks that artistic creativity, and beauty is to do centrally with ordering. I quote:

“In appreciating art we are playing; the artist too is playing in creating it. And the result is not always beautiful, or beautiful in a predictable way. But this ludic activity is fulfilled by beauty, and by the kind of orderliness which retains our interest and prompts us to search for a deeper significance of the sensory world.” (Scruton 2009, 128).

I am having trouble with this privileging of ordering. He calls it “This ‘blessed rage for order’” (128).⁹⁾ I agree that artistic beauty is to do with a particular coherence in a work but it requires an awareness of the material as somehow speaking for itself: we see something in a painting but we also notice the paint; we hear a composition but the sounds of the music have an opacity worth attending to. No matter how great the ordering is that an artist adds to his material, the material itself remains available: how else to perceive the risk the artist took, or the success of his creativity?¹⁰⁾

I realise that Roger thinks that works of art point to a truth beyond themselves (p. 130), and for that, ordering should indeed be kernel. I think, however, that the reference to the truth of works both overstates art's importance—a residual platonism?—and misallocates artistic merit. I hope to correct this by pointing to the other element in creativity and in beauty: of a recognition of otherness.

We see this in natural beauty.

4. NATURAL BEAUTY

When we experience natural beauty we experience what I call the “proper logic” of the event perceived. The terms are intentional: I am speaking of a logic to try to bring to the fore the coherence in the event, which I call *proper* to underscore the fact that we feel that coherence belongs to the event, not

to us who experience it. For me, beauty is important because it somehow ontologically proves the reality of nature *beyond* our orderings. An example of natural beauty, for me, would be a flock of migrating geese crossing the sky, announced by their distant honking. My use of “logic” would seem to point to Roger’s use of order—even though Roger wasn’t speaking of natural beauty here but of artistic beauty—but my use of “proper” refers to the meaninglessness of the world, or to the idea that natural beauty is a gift of nature, even though it seems to require from us something like a teleological projection.

The aesthetic experience of natural beauty, in my view, is an experience of recognising the otherness of some natural object or event. This involves, more than mere observation, a peculiar awareness of an individual; applied to persons: we do not merely see, or observe another person’s beauty, but in experiencing his or her beauty we are aware of their personhood, we prove their existential reality, and in the same move our own, as events with a proper logic.¹¹⁾

Did not Kant concentrate more on beautiful natural objects, than on events such as the migrating geese? Kant would, indeed, refer to the perfect form of a bird’s wings, or a sea shell or a tulip.¹²⁾ My objection would be that an adequate account of natural beauty should not take such mere forms as its prime examples, but, rather, events. My reason for this objection connects, perhaps, to Roger’s minimal beauty, in the sense, that minimal beauty should not be understood in terms of mere forms or relations, but in terms of events, too. When Roger mentions our feeling at home as one of the elements of getting things right, that, I think, should be consequential for the analysis of its addition to our understanding of beauty. If we arrange ordinary things in our homes so as to have them add to our feeling at home, what we would be doing is activate their affordances for people, and these affordances are shared: feeling at home is, contrary perhaps to how we discuss it—“I don’t feel at home there”—an element of sharing a moral space with others. I agree that beauty plays a central role there, but object to taking that role as merely finding the right interconnections between things. Getting things right, and seeing that they are right, involve anticipations on possible actions done in their vicinity by people cared about. Engaging with facial expression forms the regulative ideal (a Kantian term) for minimal beauty.

5. ART AND PROJECTION

Roger thinks that . . .

“Our favourite works of art seem to guide us to the truth of the human condition and, by presenting completed instances of human actions and passions, freed

6. HUMAN BEAUTY

from the contingencies of everyday life, to show the worthwhileness of being human.”¹³⁾

I am having trouble with the use in this quote of terms like “completed” and “freed from the contingencies of everyday life”, and I want to try to flesh out what I feel is lacking in them. There is a clear sense in which a work of art is finished when we experience it. Picasso’s *Guernica*, in that sense, is indeed, completed. But it is not nicely beautiful, but requires an active response from its audience. There is as clear a sense of works requiring certain types of appreciative experiences for them to be brought to life, in our experience of them. Some projective act on the part of the beholder is required for whatever ordering is there—completed, and devoid of everyday contingencies—to acquire full recognition of artistic merit, or success, something captured in the 19th Century German notion of *Einfühlung*, of the “Projecting of one’s own feelings in lifeless objects [...]”¹⁴⁾

6. HUMAN BEAUTY

Lastly, human beauty. Roger discusses an evolutionary explanation in terms of attractiveness and sexual selection—like the peacock with his tail, so we, too, make ourselves beautiful to attract mates.¹⁵⁾ That, according to Roger, is far too quick, and again I agree. But some evolutionary explication may be available. Our everyday reciprocal engagement with facial expression is, surely, the result of evolution: it is basically the reciprocal attunement of members of a species amongst each other which explains their survival, and if my analysis is correct that with humans this survival is based in reciprocal facial addressing, and that this is a necessary condition for facial beauty, then human beauty seems to fall into place with evolution in a less simplistic manner.¹⁶⁾ I think it is human beauty that explains why we should value beauty so much—not the minimal beauty of “getting things right”, or “structuring” but: affective recognising and “letting be” of an otherness which is nonetheless similar to our own being in the world.

Now people use distinct notions of facial beauty, and it is crucial to prise them apart. One is a proportion theory which may in large part be still at work in the aesthetic ideals applied to faces by cosmetic surgeons. The second is the beauty of depicted faces—most notably those of fashion models, film stars, and television “personalities”. This second view of beauty seems to be the most widespread in contemporary culture.¹⁷⁾ There is, however, a third view of beauty which bases itself in properties of real faces as these are met in real-life confrontations.

Kant clearly referred to this view of human beauty in section 17 of his *Critique of Judgement*.¹⁸⁾ Here, Kant, addresses the nature of an ideal of beauty.

Roger, by the way, isn't too happy about this, I quote:

“The pursuit of absolute or ideal beauty may distract us from the more urgent business of getting things right.” (Scruton 2009, 13).

But I think there is more to ideal beauty than absoluteness: it provides us with a model. Kant, first, argues that such an ideal of beauty will not be what one might find in an average image—the average woman.¹⁹⁾ Instead, it is formed in humans only, because they alone determine their aims and goals for themselves, from the inside, and these moral aims people express in their outward appearance.

Kant was not referring to physiognomic views of faces as showing personalities, nor to proportion values like symmetry, nor to depicted average images, but to a view of faces expressing inner mental lives—expressing to others, I hasten to add, to bring out the evolutionary advantage of facial beauty. Much more should be said about this, but allow me to cut to my view that facial beauty presupposes facial expression, or, better, facial expression is a necessary condition for facial beauty, but facial expression is a reciprocal process—not something locatable in that other face, but something the response to which proves integral to it.²⁰⁾

The mechanisms involved in this reciprocal dynamics of people gazing at each other can be transferred to our dealings with beautiful nature, meritorious art, and beauty generally. The relevant appreciative activities are not so much about ordering reality and forcing meaning onto it, but about recognising its proper logic, or the meaning it has in store for us in its own inert self-satisfaction, and respectfully adding to it, by a proper response. This model explains why with beauty we hold a principle of acquaintance.

I want to thank you wholeheartedly for clarifying so much of our thoughts and intuitions.

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NOTES

¹⁾ For instance, I am all with you on the issue of pornography and sexuality, and persons and their bodies, in chapter seven, and your criticism of cartesianism.

²⁾ And that contemporary *postmodern democratic* culture conduces to an empty relativism. I agree that aesthetic relativism is mistaken, but I am not sure whether contemporary culture can be characterised the way Roger does—but I see that as an empirical point.

³⁾ Hans-Georg Gadamer would place the, what he called, *anthropological constants* of art in *playing*, recurring *festivals*, and the meaning-mechanisms of *symbol*, but I'd argue that these activities incorporate centrally certain types of interaction which would require further philosophical development. Richard Wollheim would look for psychological powers in the suitable spectator: a certain perceptual power, seeing-in, and a certain psychological tendency in people to project affectivity.

⁴⁾ Roger posed a question of methodology with regard to this approach. What work is done by a genealogy in terms of anthropological constants? From my point of view, to understand people's dealings with beautiful things and events, we must make sense of the psychological powers that are used centrally in these dealings. These powers must be available, or else their contribution would be nil, tautologous (to process beautiful events we need powers that allow us to process beautiful events ...).

⁵⁾ "(v) The judgement of taste is about the beautiful object, not about the subject's state of mind. In describing an object as beautiful, I am describing it, not me.

(vi) Nevertheless, there are no second-hand judgements of beauty. There is no way that you can argue me into a judgement that I have not made for myself, [...]" Scruton 2009, 6.

⁶⁾ Others have called this the principle of acquaintance.

⁷⁾ Roger brought this up in the discussion.

⁸⁾ See van Gerwen 2009. There is, in this debate, also a matter of which examples to pick as one's starting point. From the point of view of classical music the input of the individual musicians' playing seems instrumental—and taking that starting point seems legitimate because these pieces are often more complex and profound, than those found in pop music. The deeper nature of classical music may be induced by the fact that the music should be exchangeable among musicians—pop music in contrast, is often written for this or that particular singer. There is no real need to translate the song into a more universal idiom. The positive aspect of pop music, however, is that it, more than classical music, brings us to realise that music is performed, and that the performer is heard in the resultant piece. In jazz improvisation, what the listener would be interested in would be exactly the contribution of this one musician to the "piece". Even in classical music, though, the hearability of the music's human origins, whether this be the composer or the orchestra, is kernel—it belongs to our concept or art. This point should be of no importance to the issue of which kinds of music are the major deliverance of the most profound pieces. Music genres are and at the same time, are not comparable in that sense: every genre will have its artistically most meritorious examples, at least for a definition of art that is open to the element of artistic merit—which for instance the institutional conception by conscious design is not.

⁹⁾ I recognise it from his *Aesthetics of Music*. Scruton 1997.

¹⁰⁾ This would be one of those instances where Heidegger had things right. (In Heidegger 1960).

¹¹⁾ More must be said about this notion of proving. I think of this in terms of a direct realist theory of perception which places perception's proving powers in polymodality, the

synchronous delivery of incompatible data as connected to some singular event. Nowhere is this awareness more reflected, or self-conscious than in the experience of beauty (or other high, positive aesthetic values).

¹²⁾ And this tendency in Kant may be what led later theorists to formalism.

¹³⁾ Scruton 2009, 129.

¹⁴⁾ Theodor Lipps used the term as an explanation of how works of art come to life: “Hineinverlegen eigener Gefühle in leblose Gegenstände der Natur”. And see Wollheim 1993 for important insights in the creative process.

¹⁵⁾ Little and Perrett 2002 argue that there are several coefficients for measuring attractiveness, but they assume that most people agree on certain criteria. The evolutionary explanation is in terms of selection of persons who hold the most promising genes. My guess is that the research is flawed by references to pictures. How does one establish which faces are felt are most attractive, when not by pointing to pictures? One thing these authors came up with is the fact that many pairs resemble one another to a high degree. How can self-similarity be explained in terms of beauty, if that beauty is the beauty found in pictures? My guess is that self-similarity somehow may seem to guarantee that the other has led a somewhat similar life—and one knows how good one’s own life felt. Well, this is something to be looked into. I cannot say I am through thinking about this. One thing is clear, though: referring to the evolutionary concept of attractiveness is not helpful in any straightforward sense.

¹⁶⁾ Attractiveness plays a minor role in that, or so I think.

¹⁷⁾ Which is not a visual culture as it is often called, I think, but a picture culture, though, yes, pictures are visual representations.

¹⁸⁾ Which seems not to fall into place in the overall argument of his book.

¹⁹⁾ In fact, it is such average pictures that biologists use to establish the mean criteria of attractiveness—failing to acknowledge the fact that these are pictures, not real persons. See note 15.

²⁰⁾ A face which expresses no human inner cannot be beautiful (in this sense), or, better: a face which prevents the expression to come about, or be recognised, is not beautiful. When a person gets stuck perceptually in some trait or part of another’s face, and this makes it impossible for him—or so he feels—to connect perceptually to the other person, then he has reason to think that the other is ugly. Facial beauty confronts one with the other’s “proper logic”.

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