

References

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Sara Angelini

The Soul of the World

Scruton, R. (2014). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Scruton is an English philosopher who specialises in aesthetics. This book is based on a lecture series exploring ‘philosophical discussions of mind, art, music, politics and law in order to define what is at stake in the current disputes over the nature and ground of religious belief’ (preface). While not defending any particular faith he does argue for making room for the religious world view in current discourse.

He begins with a chapter on the features and purposes of religion. Then proceeds through exploration of ourselves as individuals, our relations with others and the world, and a chapter on ‘the sacred space of music’. His benchmark throughout is the prism of aesthetics and his arguments relate to examples from art, music, literature, maths, architecture and design of cities. He ends with musings on ‘Seeking God’ and ideas of an afterlife.

He discusses the various ‘myths of origin’ that attempt to explain how we transitioned from human animal to self-conscious human person, such as Adam and Eve in the Fall, which he says seeks to explain how we became ashamed of our bodies, only possible for a self-aware animal. It is also when we ‘became tempted to conceive our most intimate relations in objectifying terms’ (p 107). He refers to a fresco by Masaccio ‘The expulsion from Paradise’ where two kinds of shame are depicted – Adam hiding his face, *the self*, and Eve hiding her now private parts from unwelcome eyes. He suggests such myths are important because they tell us deep truths about ourselves.

Scruton takes issue particularly with evolutionary psychologists and what he sees as their trivialising myth of origin – leaving no room to ‘puzzle over the meaning of music or the beauty of art’ (p 142) because they construe such things as adaptations whose meaning resides in what they do for our genes. He believes great works of art grace our lives, they speak across time and space from other existences and are ‘the remedy for our metaphysical loneliness’ (p 173).

My impression, distilling his wide ranging discussion is that this is essentially a well argued plea for us not to throw the baby out with the secular bathwater – while allowing the explanatory priority of science to

describe *what is*, he claims this is not all there is in the human world and that there is another aspect to our existence which matters greatly. To marshal his arguments he focuses on three concepts: cognitive dualism, the Lebenswelt and what he calls the 'overreaching intentionality of interpersonal attitudes'.

Taking Husserl's concept of the Lifeworld or Lebenswelt, a world arising from our self consciousness that subjects experience together and where we derive much of our sense of meaningfulness in life, he says while Nature is ontologically prior it does not trump the Lebenswelt. Our world differs radically from the world of animals although containing, from a scientific perspective, the same basic things.

Invoking Spinoza and Kant, he says the world is one thing seen in two incommensurable ways. It is a unified reality containing the natural physical world and the lived world of minds. This delivers the daily mystery of our lives living as both subject and object. We know this is the case but we cannot grasp both perspectives in a single act. He suggests this cognitive dualism can be reconciled by recognising the Lebenswelt as an emergent world from Nature, and personhood as an emergent feature of the human being.

Like Mary Midgley he protests against what she calls 'nothing buttery' – where the human person is nothing but the human animal, the Mona Lisa is nothing but a smear of pigments and where a Bach cantata is nothing but a sequence of pitched sounds of varying timbre. Music can be described in terms of acoustical analysis but on hearing beauty, meaning and emotion we position it in the Lebenswelt. Music emerges from and reaches beyond the horizon of the physical world.

For Scruton, the Lebenswelt is also the realm of promises, obligations and responsibility, where we go beyond our animal desires in taking responsibility for the future and the wellbeing of others. He claims that secularization is damaging this aspect of the Lebenswelt, replacing 'sacred duty' with a world of contracts which are rescindable and open to choice thereby threatening family and societal responsibilities and the claims of the unborn as well as of the living.

He describes an 'overreaching intentionality of interpersonal attitudes' (p 74) that occurs in the I/You encounter when we look into the other 'in search of that unattainable horizon from which he or she addresses us' (*ibid*). He suggests it is in this attempt to reach beyond the body to the incarnated being that gives rise to the myth of the soul, the hidden self that is 'veiled by the flesh' (*ibid*) and where lovers not only look *at*, as animals do, but also look *into*, seeking a soulmate (p 99).

His debates throughout the book with religious and non-religious thinkers, poets and mystics lead him to a view that instead of seeking God why not

say we stand here on the edge of a mystery? We cannot know how God might exist both outside and inside space and time. Accepting cognitive dualism creates space at the edge of reason for not knowing and Scruton is content to live with this uncertainty.

He believes we must live in awareness of our mortality and acceptance of death as our completion and that herein lies our salvation, not in the notion of a physical afterlife but seeing ourselves as part of the eternal order. He suggests a mystical afterlife where ‘God is the all-knowing subject who welcomes us as we pass...beyond the veil of nature [and return] to the place whence we emerged...[which unites us] with the soul of the world’ (p 198).

Scruton writes in a discursive, conversational style, reflecting on his own earlier writings as well as that of a wide range of other thinkers and sacred texts, during a process of personal discernment through which he arrives at a realisation of his own preference for a theological elaboration. We’re invited to follow the byways of his quest and to reflect on the complex recursive web of his sometimes elusive ideas in pursuit of the transcendent dimension, the sense of the sacred, that endows the world with a soul. Although at times challenging, it is a highly erudite, thoughtful and rewarding read.

Notes

¹ Masaccio, *The Expulsion from Paradise*, Florence, Santa Maria del Carmine.

Diana Pringle

Doctoring the Mind

Richard Bentall. (2009) London: Penguin

This compelling and closely argued book sets out to provide a rational critique of psychiatry, on the basis that it is unscientific and unsuccessful. The book provides both a passionate plea for a more humane approach to mental suffering and a careful critique of the science underpinning a biological interpretation of mental distress. Complicated concepts are described in easy to understand terms, making it suitable for anyone with an interest in what is commonly described as mental illness. The book makes for particularly important reading for existential psychotherapists. Although the notion that human behaviour is meaningful and relational forms an essential part of existential thinking, we may be inclined to overlook this in cases of psychosis, viewing this within a medical rather than therapeutic paradigm. This book is a powerful reminder to focus on the person rather than the brain suffering mental distress.