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Booknotes

Wagner famously wrote that it remains to art to salvage the kernel of religion. Through its symbolic representations, art will reveal the deep truth concealed in the images religion would wish us to believe are true on a literal level. This is perhaps the *leitmotif*, as it were, of Sir Roger Scruton's magisterial study of Wagner's Ring cycle: *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wager's Ring of the Nibelung* (Allen Lane, 2016).

Scruton is, in fact, only the latest in a long line of distinguished philosophers who have written perceptively about Wagner, starting with the anti-Wagnerians Nietzsche and Adorno, and more recently, in the Anglo-American tradition, such ardent Wagnerians as Michael Tanner, Bernard Williams, Bryan Magee, Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht. To this strictly philosophical list one could also add, among many others, Robert Donnington and Deryck Cooke, whose insightful studies certainly have philosophical elements.

The amount, and indeed quality, of writing on Wagner testifies to the enduring fascination evoked by his music. But is it the fascination woven by an enchanter, a Klingsor, coiling us up in his seductive and lying wiles, or is it grounded in something ultimately valuable, ultimately true, as Wagner himself would have us believe? This was the question Nietzsche posed right at the start (though, ever ambivalent, was Nietzsche ever really an anti-Wagnerian?). The seduction question was answered somewhat equivocally by Thomas Mann on the grounds that Wagner was essentially a dramatist, and therefore not subject to philosophical demands for consistency and the like. But the charge of insincerity and worse cannot be so easily evaded, given the fascination Wagner had for many people of questionable taste and morals, the Nazis being only the most notorious. Scruton mentions that Goebbels was supposed to have attended 100 performances of *Die Meistersinger* and, in Scruton's view, without ever understanding its true meaning. Scruton may well be right about the true meaning, but given the way Wagner has been misunderstood and continues to be misunderstood (above all these days by those who produce his works in opera houses), it is surely incumbent on Wagner's admirers to articulate what his works are really about, and maybe also to consider why they are so open to misunderstanding.

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A core element of Scruton's approach is to insist on the meanings which lie beneath the words, in the music itself. So if his book is a philosophical study it is also a musical study, listing not only 186 *leitmotiven*, but in his text showing how Wagner's deployment of them allows us to go beneath the words to the multiple meanings, feelings and judgements bound up in the actions of the characters and in the drama itself, meanings often not fully apparent to the agents themselves, but which are nevertheless crucial aspects of all human activity. We all feel, in listening to Wagner's music how things cohere, how the past of the drama is bound up in the present and the future, how intentions are occluded, how certain moments and actions follow an ineluctable logic – a logic which may well elude efforts to put into words, especially if we remain on the level of the words. One obvious example is the ending itself. What is paramount there: love, renunciation, sacrifice, quietus, pity, humanity, ending, Götterdämmerung? Or is it a mish-mash of sentiments, whose contradictory nature we overlook in the overpowering flood of the music, as Wagner's critics might have it? Scruton's musical approach here helps us to see that it might be all of these things, that it evokes redemption through loving sacrifice, that this redemption involves renunciation of power and possession, that at its core is pity, the pity of a god for a mortal woman (as music associated with Sieglinde swims back over everything in the final bars), and, in the character of Brünnhilde, a god who becomes a mortal woman, thereby articulating the sacredness at the heart of our humanity. And not only might it be all these things, but all these things are part of a genuinely coherent vision, made coherent in Wagner's drama.

In the book there are many other cases of Scruton showing us how the music works to resolve and to deepen our understanding of what is going on in the drama. This understanding is often below the level of the conscious (and, if the Goebbels example is to be taken seriously, may not be there either). So Scruton's approach is both necessary and illuminating, if we are to treat the works as more than a glorious outpouring of stirring and seductive sound, sound in which the true import of the drama may be missed by inattentive or prejudiced listeners.

In writing and composing the Ring, Wagner moved away from an early enthusiasm for a revolutionary politics based on the thought of Feuerbach to a Schopenhauerian sense of the need for pity, for compassion and for the renunciation of will. One of the problems in interpreting the Ring is that all these elements, and many others show up, though with an anti-Schopenhauerian insistence on the centrality of

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the love of man and woman. Does the Ring cohere? We *feel* it does, in listening to the music, as already intimated, and Scruton goes a long way to showing how they actually do cohere in the music, in the end, and in the music of the end.

One thing which the later Wagner dropped from his earlier revolutionary position was the Feuerbachian hope or expectation for a new and purified political order (for which he himself had fought in Dresden in 1848–9), which is obviously relevant to the treatment in the cycle of the character of Siegfried. But what he did not drop from his Feuerbachian days, according to Scruton, was the sense that the gods were not just dead, but that all the time they had been illusions created by humanity to embody our deepest hopes, fears and feelings, and to help us to deal with them. But according to Feuerbach and indeed to Scruton, this embodiment of truth in the divine idols, this trick in Scruton's phrase, is false on a literal level, gods being a projection of humanity, and not something beyond us. But, though literally false, the myths embodied in religious beliefs about gods, tell us deep things about ourselves. It is precisely this which Wagner regarded as the kernel of religion, which he attempts to encapsulate in his own art, particularly in the Ring.

So the character of Wotan reflects deep truths about power, legitimacy, freedom and, in the end, withdrawal; analogously, Alberich, his polar opposite, dark to Wotan's light, embodies the resentment almost inevitably trailing in the slipstream of legitimate power, especially when it is realised that all legitimacy rests and necessarily rests upon mere and illegitimate power, to say nothing of original acts of violence, conquest and rapine. Further, Alberich and his deeds and what follows from the curse of the ring show what happens when love is sacrificed to power, to the enslavement of others and to the hoarding of wealth. Needless to say, the words here are made fully alive for us in and through the music. We also have the key moment when Brünnhilde – Wotan's actual will, the will of God or of the god – is transformed by pity for a vulnerable mortal woman into becoming a vulnerable, mortal woman herself. Then there is also the tortuous route by which Wotan ultimately finds rest in a form of *kenosis* involving his own extinction, and the death of the gods as a race, a route which winds through the hate filled and Hagen driven anarchy which arises when the law and legitimacy represented by Wotan, his spear and Valhalla itself cease to carry weight with men (the Gibichung). It might be observed here that neither Wagner nor Scruton seem satisfactorily to resolve this aspect of the withdrawal of the gods: how is the force and legitimacy

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of law and contract sustained once the support of a divine myth is dissolved?

So do we need the gods? Do *we* need the gods? Wagner's view (and Scruton's?) is that they have gone. But Scruton argues powerfully that what Wagner preserves from religion in the Ring is the sense that there are moments in our lives in which something sacred, something transcendent even, remains. This sense that there is intrinsic value in our lives and decisions is not an illusion, though it has in the past been fostered by illusions (the gods). Our emergence from nature (from the forests and the waters of the Rhine in Wagner) is not a biological fact, but a spiritual one. Our lives are not wholly circumscribed by status and power and the hoarding of wealth; there is also pity, self-giving in love, sacrifice and, ultimately, acceptance of rather than fear of death. There is the sense that if we have created and destroyed the gods and their laws, 'it is we ourselves who must come to the rescue'; we can still 'dramatize the deep truths of our condition, and renew our faith in what we are'.

It may not be altogether clear whether this last thought is Scruton's own, or Scruton reporting Wagner. Whichever it is, it is certainly a heady one, and may well be extractable from the Ring and from Wagner's works more generally. There is, though, a question as to Wagner's method. He has created a myth in which deep truths are inscribed and articulated. Scruton has with philosophical and musical brilliance extracted and articulated a plausible account of the meaning of the myth and the music, which is no mean feat, and which, apart from anything else stems from half a century's living with both. But this new myth has neither the age nor the patina of life nor the centuries of spontaneous and largely unconscious development of the old myths. Can a newly forged 'myth' do the work of the old myths, particularly if – as in this case – it is actually being presented as not true? To what extent did the weight and seriousness of the old myths depend on their being believed, deep in the psyche of their adherents, rather than being seen as tricks (in Scruton's phrase)? Does the sheer force and depth of Wagner's music make up for the problems inherent in its genesis?

But let us suppose that Wagner's myth can or does bear the weight of expectation laid upon it, can we retain the sense of the sacred insisted on by Scruton without a transcendent realm? This is the deep question posed by Wagner's claim that it is the mission of *art* to preserve the kernel of truth in religion. More pointedly it is the dilemma we are left with by the end of the Ring itself, Valhalla burning, the gods and the heroes all dead, the waters of the Rhine engulfing all once again, in the theatre, an empty stage, and what to

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follow? 'The Gods have not returned. 'They have never left us.' They have not returned.' Ezra Pound's balancing act (in *Canto* CXIII) is Wagner's and Scruton's too.

Balancing acts are also central to John Kekes' latest philosophical essay, *Human Predicaments and What to Do About Them* (Chicago University Press, 2016). Readers of Kekes' earlier works will be familiar with his remorseless stripping away of philosophical pretensions (or theories) in the face of the actual dilemmas we, all of us, face in life. So much philosophical work is shown by Kekes to be wholly and, at times, dangerously inadequate to how life is and we are, dangerously so because the tendency is to erect systems based on a single premise (often unsupported) which are then used to ignore the complexity of life, individual and social. And he shows this both by close and rigorous analysis of the philosophical doctrines (e.g. on equality, on justice, on need, on 'capability', on autonomy, on welfare), which influential contemporary philosophers take as central to their systems and by sensitive and judicious use of examples from literature, history and present day situations. Kekes' own position is at root pluralistic or perhaps better non-absolutist, both in the sense that he does not believe that there is any philosophical-cum-ethical principle which can claim precedence over all others (e.g. equality, justice, need, 'capability', autonomy, welfare), and also in the sense that he does not believe that there is any philosophical-cum-ethical system which can be shown definitively to be rationally superior to all the others, in such a way as to trump all rival systems and claims in specific situations. Both these aspects of absolutism are dangerous because they lead people influenced by those systems to ride roughshod over the feelings and claims of individuals affected by their policies – and one could add that the philosophies that support these absolutisms are dangerous too, because they have wide and far-reaching influence in the world, including the contemporary political world.

Kekes' immediate forbears philosophically include Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams, all of whom he cites approvingly, though there is also more than a hint of Montaigne about him, both doctrinally and stylistically. Some might feel that in this list of philosophical companions, conspicuous by not being mentioned by Kekes, is Michael Oakeshott: one wonders if Kekes is repelled by Oakeshott's at times insouciant, if not callous aestheticism, for in the book Kekes is very far from any such inappropriate playfulness, however much some of his positions might seem analogous to some of Oakeshott's. Be all that as it may, Kekes' new book is thought-provoking and original not so much in the position which

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underlies it as in the topics he considers and the conclusions he draws regarding them.

For the topics – the predicaments in Kekes' terms – are ones which in one way or another concern any thinking person, but which are typically neglected in the philosophical academy, and, were they to read him, his conclusions will disturb many philosophers (not because these conclusions are wrong, but because they may well be right). The very first item tackled by Kekes is self-knowledge, or reflectiveness, since the time of Socrates the very disposition often taken to characterise the philosophic spirit. But, says Kekes, it can be taken too far, pursued too destructively. It is an illusion to think that what emerges in the pursuit of self-knowledge is ever going to be absolute or necessarily something which will make us better. We may, on occasion, be better off following the conventional ways of our society's evaluative framework (as in fact Descartes recommended – though perhaps it should be added that much will depend here on the society and its framework). Self-knowledge is important, up to a point, says Kekes, but we have to acknowledge that there are many fine lives where it has less importance than philosophers often wish to accord it. The un- or less examined life is not always or necessarily worthless. And, wherever we stand on that, what self-knowledge will not do is to allow us to avoid conflict and difficult choices, which is Kekes' next topic: we have to have standards, and reflection can help us to refine and improve our standards, but we should beware of 'their stupefying and desensitizing influence' (to quote Arthur Lovejoy) if we apply them or any one of them rigidly or absolutely in each and every situation we encounter – a temptation to which politicians and the commentariat are especially prone, and especially in a world in which instant and simplistic responses are demanded to every issue confronting them and us.

There are thought-provoking discussions in the book of meaninglessness and of the philosophically neglected topics of boredom and hypocrisy, but what underlies the whole book is an impassioned plea to avoid the illusory quest for an absolute value to over-ride all others, for a paramount way of evaluating (such as the moral) to trump all others, for a single ideal theory. Such quests are illusory in the light of the multifarious conflicts (predicaments) in which we find ourselves and also in the light of competing theories which cannot easily be rationally dismissed. Further, ideal theories and the rest lead all too easily into the sort of fanaticism with which history is blighted, in which evil, in the sense of the deliberate harming of innocent victims is actively pursued and passively

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tolerated. We humans are vulnerable and fallible, and, as Kekes puts it, we cannot free ourselves from having to choose between 'fate and autonomy, fear and prudence, contingency and justice, our present and future self, social and personal evaluations, hypocrisy and authenticity, boredom and engagement, evil and reasons, and innocence and reflection', with the choices not always and in every case going in one direction. Of course, many systems and philosophies (and philosophers) tell us we can, and should. Kekes is relentless in showing that all this is an illusion, and, by means of his examples from history and from the present, showing how much harm the illusion has done and continues to do. We should rather recognise what the nineteenth-century theological writer J.I. Mombert referred to (in a phrase beloved of the late and greatly-lamented Geoffrey Hill) as 'the imperfection which marks all human effort, especially where it aims to avoid it', adding that effort here should be read as including thought and evaluation, as well as action. Kekes thinks that, recognising all this does not mean that we should despair, subsiding into boredom, meaninglessness or apathy. Within the limits of our condition we can still favour arrangements and policies which favour good will and weaken evil will. A big step on the road to the latter is precisely to see ideal theories and systems as the dangerous illusions they are.

There is also a degree of liberation which comes from recognising our limitations. As Kekes puts it, once we recognise that the search for ideal theories has to be abandoned, we will see that the search itself is no more than 'a ferment of very earnest people banging their stubborn heads against very hard walls, when, actually, the door is open and they could leave their self-imposed confinement'. That, of course, is the option we, in the reflective West have. In other times in our past, and in other places now, confinement by fanatical believers and idealists is not something victims of these idealisms impose on themselves, but all too often a condition by which they are imprisoned whether they assent or not. All the more reason, then, for those of us in the civilized West not to seek to assuage any sense of boredom or meaninglessness by pursuing, in Kekes' words 'mysticism, oriental cults, misanthropy, religious or ideological fanaticism, or in numbing ourselves with work or physical exertion'. Although Kekes is too polite to say this, perhaps we could add at this point, nor with the pursuit of chimerical philosophical ideal theories, whose human effects are far from always or universally benign.

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