Booknotes

When twenty five years ago a book on the subject of what sort of people should there be appeared, it had something of the air of a thought experiment. The book (by Jonathan Glover) was none the worse for that, and the rather theoretical nature of the discussion allowed for some quiet reflection on a number of questions basic to our conceptions of ourselves. Now that 'human enhancement' seems far from a merely theoretical possibility, the whole topic has become highly prominent in the field of applied ethics, as we can see from the book of that name (edited by Julian Savelescu and Nick Bostrom, Oxford University Press, 2009), in which a clutch of leading applied ethicists bend their minds to what is involved.

If *Human Enhancement* is a guide, it cannot be said that the real prospect of 'human enhancement' has refined thinking on the topic. Indeed, as one of the contributors puts it at the start of his contribution, 'if it wasn't good for you, it wouldn't be enhancement'. End of story, one might think, and it is hard not to get the impression that most of the contributors to Savelescu and Bostrom are working from some such conclusion to the premises and argument which might lead them there, rather than vice versa. There is indeed, as in so much applied ethics, a broadly utilitarian stance adopted by most contributors. So it is not surprising to find it explicitly stated (by John Harris) that it is 'unimportant' whether some supposed benefit 'is classified as enhancement or improvement, protection or therapy', for, from a utilitarian perspective such distinctions are unimportant. Probably few of the contributors would be quite so stark, but quite a lot of the argument is directed to showing the difficulty of making such distinctions; and so it follows that if we accept therapeutic medical intervention, and even more perhaps, screening of embryos and the like (protection), we have no argument against medical enhancement.

Interestingly, perhaps, Ryuichi Ida, writing from an explicitly Asian perspective, turns the whole argument on its head, counselling against such things as organ transplants. Rejecting enhancement, then, we should also reject much modern therapy. But for most of us it is already too late for that, and few of the other contributors get to grips with what he is saying. Michael Sandel is one of the few other dissenting voices in the collection, suggesting that the

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concept of human enhancement may endanger our sense that life in general and our lives in particular should be seen as a gift, and treated as such. There is some inconclusive wrangling on this point, but one gets the feeling that (predictably enough) for most of the contributors the major worry about human enhancement is not its very validity, but, taking its validity as given, its impact on the egalitarian standpoint most of them seem to espouse. For at least one, egalitarianism actually seems to demand that athletes grow longer legs and pianists two more fingers when and where they can; this will be precisely to counteract the inegalitarian effects of the initial genetic lottery that has determined that some are born higher jumpers than others and others gifted with the finger span of a Rachmaninov.

For those worried by the general drift of *Human Enhancement*, what Harris describes as unimportant will be all important, difficult as it might be to draw the distinctions he is referring to, and uncomfortable as the results might be for what is already taken for granted in modern medicine. One would also look for a far more sensitive discussion of what might count as human enhancement than is on offer here, one that might be able at least to entertain the thought that affliction, say, or self-emptying might be or contribute to human 'well-being'. And Sandel is surely right to ask us to focus on 'openness to the unbidden', though as *Human Enhancement* vividly demonstrates this is a notion which neither 'applied ethics' nor the utilitarianism most of it is based on is able to treat with justice.

The unbiddenness of the given is, however, a theme often just below the surface in Roger Scruton's new collection of essays on music (*Understanding Music; Philosophy and Interpretation*, Continuum, 2009). A preoccupation running through the essays is the way that music, even of an ostensibly abstract nature can and does express themes of real human significance. For Scruton one of those themes is the extent to which we are all part of a community beyond and before our own lives, and also, as individuals, in need of a sense of the sacred. Idolatry – celebrated in the music of kitsch, as much as in projects of human 'enhancement' – is when 'our appetites shape themselves as gods and take command of us', causing us to falsify our true condition, and it is just this form of insincerity which some might find in the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber. By contrast in Wagner's *Ring* we are presented with 'a god-haunted, dream-enchanted landscape', responsive at a deep level to our psychic and existential roots. In the mythical world elaborated by Wagner it is the gods and not mankind who need redemption, a redemption which can come only through their own death and the love of humans. According to

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Scruton, what Wagner is getting at here is hard to express in words, but it is transparently obvious in the music: despite our attempts to live without formal religion, our need for it is as great as ever. Through the gods we invent and invoke, we idealise our passions and come to recognise the need for sacrifice. We begin once more to live under a divine jurisdiction (not of our making), surrounded by sacred things and finding meaning through love – or at least that is the prospect Wagner puts before us existentially and aesthetically. It this layer of meaning which modern productions of Wagner strive endlessly to obscure. In those who have turned away from religion, the sacred produces the desire to desecrate.

As well as Wagner, Scruton discusses Mozart, Beethoven, Janacek, Schoenberg and Szymanowski, in terms which skilfully interweave musical analysis and reflection on the human meanings embodied in the works. In some more formal discussions he attempts to develop his earlier answers to the problems raised by seeing (as surely we all do) 'abstract' music as suffused with expressivity and also with moral virtues and vices. Based on a reading of some of Wittgenstein's remarks on music, he analyses the musical understanding which is key to our appreciation of music as a form of imaginative involvement with the state of mind in or behind the surface of the notes. It is this form of understanding which allows the listener to see in Schubert, say, if not the whole range of human emotion, a range as wide as that of any artist in any medium. Finally in a remarkably even-handed essay, Scruton attempts to extract the good from the bad in the balefully brooding figure of Adorno.

During the course of this discussion Scruton reveals an unlikely admiration for the Beatles, which makes an equally unlikely point of contract with *Human Enhancement*. In that book Frances Kamm argues (surely erroneously) that a child designed with a gene for composing classical music could not have turned out to be one of the Beatles, and that this might be a reason against such a use of design (erroneous if only because, as with so much pop, the Beatle music is rooted in classical tonality and cliché). Scruton's Beatle enthusiasm, it is only fair to add, comes in the course of an argument against Adorno to the effect that there can be popular music which is not pure kitsch, and is in contrast to the output of 'U2', a point on which it is beyond our competence to pronounce.

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