Booknotes

'You think philosophy is difficult, but I tell you, it is nothing compared to the difficulty of being a good architect.' Thus Wittgenstein after working on the so-called Wittgenstein house for his sister, and quoted by Alain de Botton on his book **The Architecture of Happiness** (Hamish Hamilton, 2006).

Architecture, though apparently more difficult than philosophy, is not philosophy. What, though, about writing and thinking about architecture? If not philosophy in the strict sense, writing about architecture can raise and engage with philosophical questions. At least it can and does in the hands of writers such as Roger Scruton (in his earlier book **The Aesthetics of Architecture**, Methuen, 1979) and now de Botton. For both these writers buildings raise not just technical questions of construction. Indeed both are inclined to pass over technical questions except where some technical feat, obviously negotiated, itself contributes to the feel of a building, as in a slender bridge over some Alpine chasm or, perhaps more interestingly, when an eighteenth century architect uses the slimness of a window frame to accentuate the grace of the façade (both examples given by de Botton).

Scruton and de Botton would probably not put it quite as crudely as this, but in the view they both expound, a work of architecture, good or bad, has a human face or alternatively, it speaks to us with its own voice, appropriately or not, as the case may be. Architecture is an element of the human world, a vital and unavoidable element, given its ubiquity. Its description and evaluation is a task for aesthetics, and impinging on philosophy and drawing from philosophy in much the same way as applied ethics. Indeed de Botton's central claim (doubtless deriving from Schiller) that 'it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be' is philosophical one, both as regards who we might ideally be and also on the way architecture might have a bearing on who we might ideally be.

It is not a claim which philosophers have spent a lot of time considering, maybe because its exemplification and defence require the patient and sensitive examination of examples of architecture against a complex background consisting of conceptions of who we are, of what our flourishing might involve and of how buildings can contribute to that and even change our sense of human flourishing.

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De Botton's book is an impressive contribution to the task, and his descriptions of architecture and its effects continually challenge one to look more carefully and also to re-assess earlier evaluations one might have adopted unthinkingly. Even though one may remain unconvinced by some of his judgements (such as his advocacy of plate glass and raw concrete in the Voralberg), de Botton goads the reader to make precise his reactions to the building and the reasons for disagreement.

One of the charms (for some) of de Botton's writing is its underlying melancholy. Building (or architecture) is always an assault on nature, however beautiful or humane it is, and beauty itself is so evanescent that even its presence can at times weigh us down. He quotes Rilke, as reported by Freud, saying that 'all beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty that men have created or may create.' No such doubts about his subject matter assail Stephen Law in **The War for Children's Minds** (Routledge, 2006), a spirited defence of liberalism and critical thinking in the moral education of children and young people.

Law is worried by both relativism in moral education and the authoritarianism which he thinks has grown up partly in response to widely perceived failures in moral education over the past few decades. Law believes that both dragons can be slain by a stiff dose of free thought and discussion by children even as young as those in primary school. For Aristotelians Law does not give enough weight to experience in practical judgement. For how can minds with no real experience of life judge sensibly on subjects such as the marriage or business or practical politics? More fundamentally, one doubts how far reason can go in morality. Reasoning has its role there, to be sure, as every Aristotelian would recognise, but it does not follow that morality is purely or mainly a matter of reason and reasoning, or that morality can flourish outside of a context of habit, feeling, sensibility and acquired virtue (rather like good architecture, in fact).

It would be interesting to hear Law's reaction to Nietzsche's adage that 'it is a great crime to have incited someone to autonomy at an age when subjection to a great guide is to be cultivated': like so much else in Nietzsche there is too much straining for effect here, but there is nevertheless a grain of truth in what he says. All will depend on just when one regards children as ready for reasoning in morality, and just what one sees as the proper role of reasoning in morality. Disagreement here may constitute not so much a war for children's minds, so much as difference of emphasis

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about what those minds are capable of, over what they should be encouraged to attempt and about the nature of morality itself.

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