

Freedom, instrumental reason and music.

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This contribution is absolutely inspired by the previous ones, which urged me to connect some ideas I have been working on the last few years. Trained as a philosopher, I am living together with a musician for over two years now. She plays the cello. Besides many other things, this has given an insight experience of the life of contemporary musicians and composers. I have always been a devoted lover of music, but the many things I have learned about music in the last few years definitively made an impact on me, also as a philosopher. This contribution is also a way of trying to make sense of them. Nonetheless, the views expressed here are mine, not necessarily those of the musicians 😊

Reflecting about BtSM-meetings that I visited over the last 6 years, asking myself what I might have learned here, in the sense of what has *changed* me of course, one thing in particular comes to mind. It may be a small, perhaps irrelevant revelation but nonetheless I would like to share it with you. It has to do cultural pluralism in relation to universalism. In my view, Western culture has developed not one but two sorts of universalism. The first one is the moral universalism that encompasses the idea of human dignity, human rights, democracy, etc. The second one is scientific rationality, the (perhaps supposedly) *neutral* approach to problems and questions.

There is no doubt much to say about these forms of post-cultural universal languages, the one thing that I surprised me during our meetings, is that although moral universalism is contested all over the place, scientific rationality largely seems to escape this criticism. Initially, this bothered me, because in all honesty, growing up with reading Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger leaves one rather skeptical about the apparent ‘neutrality’ of science. Of course, Ralf’s story provides some consolation for me but does not make up for the many other stories that prove to opposite. Somewhat to my amazement, scientific rationality finds its way to the beliefs of people much easier and quicker than, say, the universal moral standard of the equality of men and women.

So what to do? Should I persevere in my skepticism or should I investigate that tiny possibility that there might something appealing about scientific rationality that has escaped me so far? Without forgetting the important lessons of the critics of science, I will now try to do the latter. So my apologies to Jan in advance, for dragging the terms “science” and “mind” back into the discussion. Still, I do not want to let go of my firm moral and philosophical conviction that the most important thing in every person’s life is freedom and that the only

absolute value in life is human dignity. So do not expect a plea for scientism of any kind. Instead, I want to reassess a question: How does scientific rationality has to do with freedom?

Before my experiences with BtSM, I would have answered this question by simply pointing out that scientific rationality is only a means to an end and can never be an end in itself. Science can tell us *how* to do things, but not *why* to do them. It does not provide any ethical or existential guidance. But now I realize that this might not be true. Perhaps there is an end in itself to scientific rationality, or in other words, freedom and scientific rationality are intrinsically related. In my view, by posing this question, I am still a philosopher and not a scientist. Also, I am not interested in finding freedom in the activity of the scientist, but more in a use of scientific rationality that is in complete correspondence with the act or experience of being free.

Many philosophers and psychologists claim that scientific rationality is about man's desire to *control* nature. This can be linked to freedom in the sense that we must control our inclinations to be able to be free. Again, the classic dichotomy returns. Controlling nature is a *means* to be free, but remains external to the controlling of nature: to control nature for the purpose of controlling nature alone is neurotic and against freedom. So even the desire to control nature is pathological, unless moral guidance is provided. However, I think I can give an example in which the desire is full and absolute control over nature that is *not* pathological, and hence *free*. That example is *music*.

A philosophy of music

In comparison to the other arts, music is the closest to instrumental reason. The essence of music is *harmony* (which should not be confused with consonant). Harmony is what musicians describe as musicality, someone's ability to make a group of tones sound like music. Music, especially composition, is to a large extent a sort of mathematics. A group of tones can be organized in space in time, respectively by stacking tones (building chords and harmonies) and by playing series of tones (creating melody and rhythm). This is an undertaking of instrumental reason in the sense that natural sounds are transformed into something spiritual, showing that nature and the human mind are in correspondence. Stacking tones is directly related to the natural occurrence of tone: every tone creates so-called overtones that are captured in musical language (quins and octaves are overtones). Melody relates to the fact that different tones have different pitches. Rhythm relates to the natural difference between sound and silence, as 1 and 0 in a binary system.

The point is that music captures the essence of instrumental reason, and in doing so, surpasses it. Whereas instrumental reasoning is a transformation of nature in the form of an infinite regress, music completes the transformation by creating a totality of nature in the form of sound. Sound grasps the whole of nature at once.

The primacy of sound over sight, of ears over eyes, in this regard is a fact that I cannot explain and that is perhaps unexplainable. But it is very important for our self-understanding. There is a strict absence of *drama* in music. All emotionality in music has to be called *lyrical*. This can be easily experienced by listening to a beautiful violin concert. You are deeply moved but you have no idea why or by whom. To refer to the philosopher Levinas that Paul already mentioned, there is no face of the other in music. The emotionality of being confronted with another human being, which I think forms the basis of drama, appears to me as something fundamentally different. This might have to do with the difference between hearing and seeing, and the biological fact that before opening our eyes as a baby, we can already hear.

The point where lyrical and dramatic touch each other is in the human voice. Recognizing the human voice means to understand that the truth of music is not nature but the human being that transforms raw natural sounds into something that sounds as harmony. Hearing comes before seeing but the essence of hearing is to see, so the human voice tempts us to open our eyes (which also a metaphor for becoming conscious). The opening of the eyes also breaks the spell of music and the intense emotionality gets lost. Remarkably, however, the intense emotionality is not entirely lost. By listening to music we can experience a lyrical emotionality that is not a distant memory of the all-encompassing meaning of sound as the omnipresence of the absolute itself, it is in fact this omnipresence that is experienced. Only we label it as memory because it no longer expresses the entirety of who we understand ourselves to be.

So what is the whole point of this? Well, the point is that by being captivated by music, we are connecting to this very old source within ourselves. Although music has another function in modern society than in primitive societies where music might have been the actual presence of the divine, the experience of music certainly is connected to the part within us that connects us to prehistoric tribes. In fact, I believe that this ancestral meaning of music is actualized throughout history until the present day. For example, the music of Bach is a perfect illustration. His composition style is based on the so-called doctrine of affects. The idea of the doctrine of affects is that our emotions correspond directly with specific tone scales. For example, G sharp stands for happiness, C minor for grief and sadness. Bach is rightfully considered as absolute music, because this is the very essence of the lyrical. Bach's music shows

that instrumental reason is *in itself* capable of activating the emotions. Here, emotions do not signify natural facts but they are feelings that are elevated into the spiritual domain of human freedom. The emotion experienced through music is sensibility that has taken the shape of freedom.

Wrapping up

Music is the end of instrumental reason because in making music, instrumental reason finally succeeds in transforming nature into freedom. It is not morality, externally imposing constraints on instrumental reason, but it is the completion of what instrumental reason is in itself. So be calling Bach's approach to music is purely instrumental, faceless so to speak, you will now understand that this gives an entirely new meaning to instrumental reason.

However, the absence of the face other also makes that the lyrical can never replace morality. Nonetheless, music and morality are linked because the human face or the essence of drama is the hidden presupposition of lyrical music. The personal signature of Bach is quintessential to the quality of his work, but this is at first only the hidden presupposition of music. In the completion of lyrical music (of which Bach can serve as an example) it becomes manifest that the origin of music is not divine but human. Philosophically, one could say that Bach's music has not yet made the Copernican Turn. It does not become explicit that the effect of his music (elevating the senses) is due to his geniality and that it is, essentially, the effort of a subject in the guise of natural talent (cf. Kant's theory of geniality).

Contemporary music transgresses the realm of the lyrical. After Bach, as a figure of speech, music must enter the realm of drama in which the face is revealed. The human origin of music is no longer hidden but this also undermines the lyrical quality of music. This means that the fact that music exists no longer as the supreme expression of human freedom (as it might have done in primitive societies) is now also reflected in the music that is being made. Still, also contemporary music that is often regarded as inaccessible in the end still very much strives for lyrical quality (or makes the experience that it should do just that).

Finally, also on a personal level, I experience over and over again that the lyrical essence of music is still very much accessible both to composers and listeners. The emotional impact of music is still its defining quality. The point is rather that emotional impact is something very different than sentimentalism or the cheap use of musical effects. Instead, emotional impact is this listener's experience of the musician's musicality. In this sense, musicality is and will always be the ability to move the senses.