"The Rationality of Aesthetic Responses"

In Roger Scruton's *Art and Imagination* an attempt is made to meet two difficulties facing a characterization of aesthetic experience as objective and rational. The theory developed there is detailed and sophisticated and I will discuss only a few key passages from the book, but it is fair to say, I think, that most of *Art and Imagination* is directed towards the solution of these difficulties. Few writers in aesthetics have recognized the force of these difficulties, and fewer still have argued so convincingly against them. In this paper I will criticise some of Scruton's arguments, suggesting that, whilst his theory of aesthetic appreciation finds application to representational art it cannot be generalized, as he hopes, to the non-representational arts which include, as Scruton himself has argued, music.

The problems to which I have referred above are as follows: (1) Establishing that the work of art is the emotional-object of the aesthetic response and that, therefore, the responder may justify his response by referring to features of the work of art. This is the problem of establishing the rationality of aesthetic responses. (2) Determining the (public) grounds on which the aesthetic response may be identified by others as, say, one of sadness.

The importance of these problems for an objective account of aesthetic understanding can readily be appreciated. If the work of art does not stand to the aesthetic response as its emotional-object, the response could not indicate the responder's understanding and appreciation of the work of art. If the work of art is merely the perceptual-object of the response and its cause, then the work of art is merely the occasion for the response. The responder's

---

1 Methuen 1974.
2 *Art and Imagination*, p. 238.
description of the work of art would serve to identify the cause of his response, but it would not serve to justify the appropriateness of that response because it would not show that the responder believed the work of art to display the response-relevant features. Furthermore, if other people could not identify the responder’s response, it could be argued that he would be unable to identify his own response and that there would be no way of justifying anyone’s identification of the response. In that case there could be no test of the appropriateness of aesthetic responses and no justification for any particular response to a work of art. Unless these difficulties can be met it will be impossible for the objectivist to maintain that aesthetic responses are rational and subject to justification.

In the Kenny/Wilson account of the relation between emotions and their emotional-objects, the relation is secured by the responder’s beliefs about the emotion-relevant properties of the emotional-object. One believes that the emotional-object instantiates the formal object of the emotional response. Now, many aesthetic responses to works of art involve the appropriate beliefs. If one is delighted by the work’s ingenuity, then one believes that the work instantiates the formal object of delight. But when the response is to that which is represented or expressed in a work of art, one does not believe that the work of art instantiates the formal object of one’s response. For example, if the formal object of sadness is ‘a situation which is viewed as both unfortunate and regrettable’ and one’s response of sadness is to that which is represented or expressed in a work of art, then the work of art could not be the emotional-object of one’s response because one does not believe that that which is represented or expressed instantiates the formal object, as characterized, of sadness. If one is saddened by a poor waif in a picture as a result of entertaining without belief the actuality of the scene depicted, then one does not believe that there really is a sad waif in a situation which is both unfortunate and regrettable. And if one responds to the sadness of a musical work by feeling sad, then one does not believe that there is anything unfortunate and regrettable about the music or that which is expressed in it. Now, important as the responses which involve the appropriate beliefs are, it

is the aesthetic responses to that which is represented or expressed in art
(where the emotion-relevant beliefs are lacking) which usually would be
taken as an index of the responder's understanding and appreciation of the
work of art, and, according to the Kenny/Wilson account, the work of art
does not stand to such responses as their emotional-object.

Scruton develops his account of aesthetic responses through a
discussion of representational painting. He argues as follows: there are many
things we might imagine of a representational painting. Where the
imagination is directed towards the end of understanding the painting
aesthetically, rather than towards the end of mere self-entertainment, then
what must knowingly be imagined is that the scene depicted is actual; that is,
one make believes or entertains without belief the thought that one is a
witness to an actual scene. Of course, when a person views a painting of a
poor-looking waif he does not believe that he is a witness to an actual scene.
He can, however, see the painting as if it were the scene depicted and must
then (knowingly) imagine being a witness to it. As a result he may imagine
feelings of tenderness towards the child depicted. He justifies and explains his
response by referring to those features which, if they were (believed to be)
actual, would usually count to justify the equivalent 'real' emotional response;
that is, a feeling of tenderness (with its natural accompaniment of desires)
towards an actual waif. But in the case of the aesthetic response, the reality of
the scene is entertained and not believed and, likewise, the emotional
response (and the accompanying desires) are entertained rather than acted
upon. Even though the viewer may feel the tenderness, the desires which
accompany his feeling are merely entertained and the aesthetic response lacks
the normal forms of expression of such desires in action, as would occur
normally in the case of a 'real' feeling of tenderness towards an actual waif.

In Scruton's account, the scene whose reality is (knowingly)
entertained stands to the aesthetic response in exactly the same way that a
corresponding actual scene would stand to the corresponding 'real' response,
as its emotional-object. In other words, Scruton is challenging the
Kenny/Wilson account of the emotion/emotional-object relation by
suggesting that, whilst paradigmatically the emotion/emotional-object

---

5 Art and Imagination, see especially pp. 128-133.
relation is secured by belief, it may equally be secured by make-belief (by imaginatively entertained, or unasserted, thought). He is suggesting that the nature of aesthetic responses clearly suggests that the Kenny/Wilson account specifies the emotion/emotional-object relation too narrowly. Everything about the aesthetic response suggests that it takes the work of art as its emotional-object. If the Kenny/Wilson account leads us to deny that the work of art is the emotional-object where the response is to that which is represented, since that response is not based on a belief in the actuality of the scene, then it is more sensible to recommend that the Kenny/Wilson account be amended than it is to accept the (absurd) consequences which follow from the view that such responses do not take the work of art as their emotional-object. If we accept that the emotion/emotional-object relation can be secured by the imagination in its quasi-belief form, there will be no difficulty in maintaining that aesthetic responses to representational art are rational to the extent that they may be supported by reference to features of the work of art (whose actuality is knowingly entertained rather than believed).

This argument appears to meet the difficulties which may have been thought to arise in characterizing the subject depicted in a representational painting as the emotional-object of an aesthetic response to that subject. However, Scruton hopes to generalize this account of aesthetic responses to cover the case in which one responds to a non-representational work of art. Thus he must argue that responses to non-representational art, where response-relevant beliefs are not involved, rest on response-relevant make-beliefs. Scruton does argue that hearing a succession of notes as a melody involves the imagination in much the same way that perceiving the person depicted in a representational painting involves the imagination; but, even if this claim is accepted, it can be argued that Scruton is unable convincingly to account for the rationality of aesthetic responses to non-representational art.

It is not self-evidently nonsensical to entertain without belief the experience-embodied thought of the scene depicted in a representational work of art as actual. Any depiction of a scene could be the depiction of an

6 Ibid., especially Chapter 12.
actual scene. As Scruton indicates, there is an obvious aesthetic point to such make believing. But non-representational art presents no ‘content’ on which the imagination can operate in a similar (quasi-belief) fashion. There is nothing that one might imagine of a non-representational work of art with the aim of understanding it aesthetically which could serve to make it the emotional-object of one’s response. The critical case is the one in which one responds to the expressiveness of a non-representational work of art. If the work is expressive (and is experienced as such), there is nothing that one need knowingly to imagine before one can respond to that expressiveness or before one’s response can be indicative of one’s understanding and appreciation of the work’s expressiveness. In particular, one need not imagine an emotional-object for the emotion heard in the work (that is, there is no thought of the work’s being, say, sad about something), nor a subject who feels the emotion expressed in the work (that is, there is no thought of someone’s feeling the emotion expressed in the work), before one can respond to that expressiveness. And if the work of art is not expressive, what could one knowingly imagine of it with the aim of understanding it aesthetically? Not that it is representational, let alone that what it ‘represents’ is actual. Anything that one imagined or came to feel as a result of imagining would be essentially unconnected with the content of the non-representational work of art and one’s response would not reflect one’s understanding and appreciation of it.

Representational art provides a subject upon which it is aesthetically appropriate (and necessary) to exercise the imagination in its quasi-belief form. The subject controls and restricts the imagination to that which is in the work of art where one’s interest in the work of art is an aesthetic one, allowing that, whilst the response rests on what one make-believes, the response is

---

7 Obviously the notion of actuality cannot be applied crudely, especially where the point of the painting may require an appreciation of the way in which the depicted world departs from the real world. It would be mistaken to entertain the thought that Chagall’s wing-less horses are falling from the sky, for example. More important difficulties may be raised by the representation of logically impossible scenes, as in many of Escher’s works, but I will pass such problems by.
aesthetic since it does not go beyond that which is given in the work of art. But non-representational art provides no such subjects, so that anything one make-believed would lead one away from the work of art and render non-aesthetic responses founded imaginatively. One's aesthetic response to the expressiveness of a non-representational work involves neither response-relevant beliefs (such as a belief that a person's feeling is being expressed), nor response-relevant thoughts entertained without belief (such as a make-belief that a person's feeling is being expressed). The expressiveness perceived in the work of art is neither believed nor imagined to be the emotional-object of one's aesthetic response.

It might be thought that this criticism of Scruton's account applies also to the case where one responds aesthetically to that which is expressed in representational art (rather than to that which is expressed, say, on the face of the person depicted). Scruton has argued that, because that which is expressed in representational art is expressed through that which is represented, the response to the expressiveness in a representational work of art necessarily is founded on thoughts entertained without belief. This point may be conceded, I think, without accepting that the make-belief on which a response to that which is represented is founded serves also to make the expressiveness in the work of art the emotional-object of the response.

At the first-person level we can note some important differences between 'real' emotions and the equivalent aesthetic responses. The tenderness that one feels when viewing a painting of a poor-looking waif differs in some respects from the tenderness that one feels towards an actual waif. Neither belief nor desire is present in the tenderness that one feels towards the depicted waif, whereas both are very much a part of one's feeling towards the actual child. One feels tenderness towards the actual waif because one believes that it feels miserable and in need of comfort, but there is nothing that one similarly believes of the depicted waif when one feels tenderness towards it. If one's tenderness towards the actual waif is genuine, one also desires to comfort it and (sometimes) act on this desire. Certainly one would not wish to revel in its misery. But if the painting makes one feel tenderness, one does not therefore desire to comfort the depicted of the child.

---
or to put an end to the misery one sees represented there. In the case of aesthetic responses to works of art, the absence of the felt-desires which normally accompany an emotion leads to the absence of the behavioural expression of those desires through action. However, despite these recognized differences, one has no difficulty in identifying one’s response to the painting. When one is moved by the depiction of the child one does not feel something like tenderness, something one calls tenderness for the want of a better name. It is not as if one feels tenderness.

When we turn to a consideration of others’ identification of one’s response to a work of art, the differences recorded above take on more significance. Usually another person’s feeling is identified by his behaviour. His behaviour may point to his emotion’s object and its emotion-relevant features, or it may indicate that he feels desires relevant to some emotion. But if the response is a response to a work of art, it is not obvious how another’s response could be identified as, say, one of tenderness. He may show some behavioural expressions of an emotion (he may look as if he feels tenderness) and/or he may say that he feels tenderness. But, if he does show signs of his emotion, his behaviour does not point to his having an emotional-object, nor does it indicate that he has any felt-desires. His behaviour usually identifies the work of art as the perceptual-object of his response, but it may not be clear from his behaviour what he takes the emotion-relevant features of the work of art to be. Moreover, his behaviour does not point to his having emotion-relevant desires. Where the response is an aesthetic one, others are denied the usual means by which they identify another’s emotion. How then are aesthetic responses identified by others if not in the usual way?

Scruton attempts to resolve this apparent difficulty in the following manner. The responder entertains the actuality of that which is depicted in

9 Scruton makes a further point (ibid., p. 132) that the sincerity of an emotional response to a work: of art can be tested against the person’s future behaviour and responses in ‘real’ situations. But it should be noted that usually to describe a response to a work: of art as insincere is to claim that that response is non-aesthetic. We do not, as Scruton implies, accept the possibility of insincere, aesthetically proper responses.

10 Ibid., especially pp. 128-133.
the work of art, thus making that which is depicted the emotional-object of his response. Moreover, he knowingly entertains the emotion-relevant desires which, because they are merely entertained, do not issue in action. We identify another's aesthetic response to a representational work of art by identifying the emotion-relevant features of the emotional-object (whose actuality is knowingly entertained) and his entertained desires. These are apparent in his description of the work of art rather than, as in the standard case, in his behaviour. Which is not to say that we simply accept his report of feeling, say, tenderness. We can ask him to justify his response and, in doing so, he tells us of his entertained desires and of the emotion-relevant features he perceives without belief in the work of art. We identify his response not by what he does (as in the paradigm case), since he probably does nothing, but by what his description of the work says he would do if he believed he were a witness to a corresponding actual scene. Where the response is an aesthetic one, our access to another's emotional response is through that which he says rather than that which he does. We identify another's emotional aesthetic response by the same criteria by which we identify a 'real' emotional response; that is, by his desires and his characterization of the emotion-relevant features of the emotional-object. What distinguishes the two cases is our means of access to these criteria, not the criteria themselves. The difference in the means of access to the criteria follows from the fact that, whereas the 'real' response is founded on belief, the response to the representational work of art is founded on make-belief, thoughts entertained without belief in the actuality of the depicted scene.

In his account of aesthetic responses Scruton does not distinguish between two apparently different cases; namely, the case in which the responder feels an emotion and the case in which the responder imagines what he would want to say and do if he did feel some emotion. He does not distinguish between them because the desires which are a part of the felt-response and of the knowingly imagined response are in both cases merely entertained. Whilst acknowledging the phenomenological difference between these two kinds of aesthetic response, Scruton argues that we must be concerned primarily with the way in which the emotional character of
aesthetic responses is recognized by others. The emotional character of the two types of aesthetic response are recognized in the same way through the responder’s description of the work of art and of his entertained desires. Thus, in the most crucial respect, the two types of aesthetic responses are indistinguishable.

Whilst accepting that these two types of response may be identified by others in the same way, it is difficult to agree that their differences are unimportant. In discussing aesthetic responses to non-representational art I will argue that the difference between the two types of response is crucial because, unlike the felt-response, the response in which the feeling is merely entertained is always a non-aesthetic response. If we think of the difference between the two responses only as a difference between feeling an emotion and thinking what an emotion would feel like, then we may be inclined to think of them as very similar. But imagining having a desire or an emotion usually involves thinking out its setting, causal origin and likely end-result in action, not thinking what the emotion or desire would feel like. The importance of the difference becomes clearer when it is recognized that it is the difference between feeling an emotion and merely thinking (under the control of the work of art) of a context for the emotion and the consequences of feeling it. Would we be inclined to say that a person understood art, including representational art, if he never responded to it by feeling emotions, that is, if all his responses were merely entertained?

When the aesthetic response to the sadness expressed in a non-representational work of art is a feeling of sadness, then that response is accompanied by neither entertained nor ‘real’ sadness-relevant desires. Neither the work of art nor that which is expressed in it provide subjects towards or about which one can knowingly imagine the desires which normally accompany a feeling of sadness. When one responds to that which is depicted in a representational painting as if it were actual, the painting supplies a represented subject towards which one can entertain desires appropriate to the character of one’s response. But recognizing the expressiveness of a non-representational work of art does not depend on, say, knowingly entertaining the thought that through it is expressed the artist’s or

11 Ibid., pp. 131-2.
anyone else's felt-emotion. Because non-representational art is not appreciated as expressing, in general, anyone's felt-emotions, responses to the expressiveness perceived in non-representational art are accompanied by neither imagined nor 'real' desires. Reference to desires plays no part in the identification of such a response.

Of course, one might imagine all sorts of things in the presence of a non-representational work of art and, as a result of such imaginings, one might feel emotions accompanied by the appropriate, entertained desires. These desires can be described in the context of that which was imagined, but not within the context provided by the work of art. In such a case the work of art is merely the occasion for the response which 1s not, therefore, an aesthetic response. When the case of aesthetic responses to the expressiveness of non-representational art is considered the importance of the difference between responses which are merely entertained and responses which are felt becomes apparent. Where the response is not felt it will be accompanied by the appropriate, entertained desires, for it will be these desires and the nature of the entertained emotional-object which ultimately serve to make the response identifiable as some particular feeling. But a person responding to a non-representational work of art has no such desires; to describe such desires would be to supply an emotional-object for the response which could not be located in the work of art and would, therefore, indicate that the response was a non-aesthetic one. If the response to the expressiveness of a non-representational work of art 1s an aesthetic one, then that emotional response must be felt rather than merely entertained. Non-representational art leads us to feel emotions; it does not lead us to think what we would say or do if we felt some emotion in a given situation.

The above argument would also apply, I think, in the case where a person responds to that which is expressed in a representational work of art, given that what was expressed was an emotion. But it may well be the case that, rather than expressing emotions, representational art more often expresses thoughts about or attitudes to that which it represents. If so, an aesthetic response to that which 1s expressed in a representational work of art may be entertained rather than felt because the expressiveness is about, as well as arising from, the subject represented.

In the preceding I have argued that, whilst Scruton's approach might
comfortably explain how a representational work of art is the emotional-object of an aesthetic response to that which it depicts and that such responses may be identified by others, his solution to the difficulties under consideration cannot, as he hopes, be extended to accommodate non-representational art. In particular, it is aesthetic responses to the expressiveness perceived in non-representational works of art which resists the type of theory that he has proposed. The rejection of Scruton’s general theory of aesthetic responses reinstates the problem of establishing the rationality of aesthetic responses to non-representational art. Must we conclude that the appreciation of the expressiveness in non-representational art is non-rational, or can the difficulties under consideration be removed by some other theory?

Elsewhere I have argued that aesthetic responses to music’s expressiveness may be justified and identified and the account offered might well be generalized to cover other forms of non-representational art. In this paper I am concerned primarily with the discussion of Scruton’s views, rather than with alternative solutions to the difficulties raised. In the following I will merely sketch the direction which an alternative theory might take.

Kenny and Wilson treat responses lacking emotional-objects as rare and even aberrant. Whilst it can readily be conceded that, in the paradigm case, responses take emotional-objects, it may be that responses lacking emotional-objects are more common than they allow. Moreover, it may be argued that, although such object-less responses cannot be justified as a response to an emotional-object is justified, it does not follow that all such object-less responses are non-rational. What follows, of course, is that if such object-less responses can be justified, the way in which they are justified differs from that in which responses which take emotional-objects are justified. The rationality of such an object-less response may be established by arguing that no other, equally object-less response to the same perceptual-object would be accepted as appropriate or natural. Thus it could be argued that, when one responds aesthetically to a non-representational work of art by feeling a sadness mirrored in the expressiveness of the work of art, the justification for that response takes the form of demonstrating that no other,

equally object-less, response would be accepted as appropriate by those who appreciate the work of art. In practice, the justification of such a response involves a description of the work of art as expressive of the feeling mirrored in the response.

One's aesthetic response to the expressiveness of non-representational art cannot be identified by others in terms of its emotional-object, since no such emotional-object is believed in or entertained, nor by one's desires, since such desires are neither felt nor entertained. Sometimes, at least, one's response must be identifiable because one looks as one feels (as well as reporting how one feels). This view faces an apparent difficulty: comparatively few feelings, when shorn of the behaviour which points to their emotional-objects and which acts out the desires felt towards those objects, have behavioural expressions sufficiently distinctive to permit the identification (by others) of the feeling. However, it may be argued that the range of aesthetically appropriate responses to the expressiveness of non-representational art is restricted to just those responses which may be so identified, and that this restriction corresponds not coincidentally with the range of emotions which may be expressed in non-representational art.