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Varieties of Interpretations

Nirmalangshu Mukherji
Department of Philosophy
Delhi University

ABSTRACT

Much of what we grasp, understand, and act upon is a result of some interpretive activity directed on some object of interpretation. We interpret vagaries of nature, traffic signals, musical scores and performances, visual arts, speeches and writings, smiles and tears, gestures and attitudes, practices and symbols, aches and twinges, and so forth. It is hard to expect that we can discern some general pattern in these activities.

This is not to deny that there *could* be a general pattern. But a discovery of that common cause could well be the agenda for a final science, if at all; 'if at all' because such a science may well fall beyond the scope of human design. In the meantime, it is natural to settle for some version of what may be called 'pluralism', the idea that human interpretive practices differ as interpreters and objects of those practices differ, period. I will argue that the notion of interpretation varies so much even across cultural entities such as literature, painting, and *especially music* that it is implausible that unitary notions of interpretation apply everywhere.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much of what we grasp, understand, and act upon is a result of some interpretive activity directed on some object of interpretation. As Kant taught us, very little of the world comes to us via sensory channels only, so to speak. We interpret vagaries of Nature, traffic signals, musical scores and performances, visual arts, speeches and writings, smiles and tears, gestures and attitudes, practices and symbols, aches and twinges, and so forth; each of these categories come in a bewildering variety of individual forms. Interpretive activities differ not only with respect to the objects, but with the features of interpreters as well – their age, gender, interests and preparations, cultural location, and the like. It is hard to expect that we can discern some general pattern in these activities.

This is not to deny that there *could* be a general pattern, or a network of patterns, involved in all these. In fact, there must be: human interpretive practices cannot fail to have a common cause that is entrenched in the design of a human. But a discovery of

that common cause could well be the agenda for a final science, if at all; 'if at all' because such a science may well fall beyond the scope of human design.

In the meantime, it is natural to settle for some version of what may be called 'pluralism', the idea that human interpretive practices differ as interpreters and objects of those practices differ, period. In some favorable cases, such as certain basic levels of human linguistic interpretations or visual interpretations, we may hope to reach a somewhat more general thesis that detects commonalities between, say, sundry linguistic interpretations. Even there, as hinted, the claim of generality may well be restricted to some 'basic' levels such as grammatical interpretation, and may fail to cover pragmatic aspects of interpretations. For the rest of our interpretive practices, some forms of literary criticism, and some reflective enumeration of 'forms of life' are all that we are likely to get. In sum, the point so far is that there are reasons to be suspicious about any claim of generality for this area of human conduct.

In what follows, I wish to examine one aspect of Michael Krausz's work from the stated direction. We will see that Krausz offers a general thesis on human interpretive activities that pays careful attention to some aspects of the diversity of those practices. In that, Krausz's thesis is perhaps the most disarming general thesis currently in circulation. Yet, I will argue, even this disarming generality fails.

Krausz opens his book *Limits of Rightness* with the question, 'Must there be a single right interpretation for such cultural entities as works of art, literature, music, or other cultural phenomena?' (Krausz 2000:1). The form of the question suggests that Krausz expects a general answer: 'yes' or 'no' or something in between. Krausz settles for the third option as follows. Singularism is the thesis that a given 'cultural entity' admits of exactly one interpretation; multiplism is the thesis that cultural entities admit of more than one interpretation. Armed with these theses, Krausz concludes that while singularism applies in some cases, multiplism applies in some others. Some entities, however, seem to escape this dichotomy when, in considering whether they admit of several interpretations, we are unsure if the same entity is involved in each of the (allegedly) competing interpretations.

Several points need to be noted to get some bearing on what these ideas mean. First, for reasons that follow, I presented Krausz's general thesis, following his opening

remark, in terms of cultural entities alone. Krausz himself, however, wishes to extend the thesis to any object of interpretation whatsoever, cultural or non-cultural. I review this extension briefly below only to set it aside.

Second, Krausz's formulation of singularism and multiplism involves *admissibility* of interpretations, not just the *availability* of them. As I understand this interesting move, singularism and multiplism are to be viewed as the end-results of a long and reflective interpretive process, not in terms of the beginning of this process. Consider the non-cultural example of the snake-rope problem widely discussed in classical Indian philosophy. You have the visual experience of some longish, greenish object lying in front of you: 'is this a snake or a rope?', you wonder. A given experience here gives rise to two possible interpretations. But this will not be an example of multiplism since both the interpretations have not been (simultaneously) admitted. In fact, in this case, both the interpretations cannot be admitted: just one of the interpretations can be right. That's why we proceed to inspect and admit one, if at all. Therefore, despite the availability of two possible interpretations, this at best is a case of singularism.

So, the proposed picture is as follows. We begin with, say, two available interpretations, and commence a process of investigation. First, we attempt to reject one or both interpretations. Suppose, we are left with one; that's singularism. Suppose we are unable to *reject* any. Then next, we try to put the two together to form a single coherent interpretation – called the 'strategy of aggregating'. If the attempt succeeds, we get singularism once again. If the attempt fails, we go back and try to 'pluralize' the original object so as to attach different interpretations to different objects. If the attempt succeeds, we get singularism once again. *Otherwise*, we get multiplism, where we are compelled to admit two opposing interpretations at the same time. Krausz is cautious to add that, here as well, we might *prefer* one of the interpretations over the other, although we can no longer explain our preference in terms of rightness. These processes, Krausz believes, apply to any object of interpretation.

I deliberately presented Krausz's proposals in an 'algorithmic' form to bring out the point that, *on the face of it*, the generality of his thesis concerns *strategies* of interpretations, rather than interpretations themselves. In other words, given that the evidence of objects of interpretations typically under-determine the range of possible

interpretations, we are likely to come up with more than one interpretation in most cases and proceed along the lines just suggested. This is just a methodological suggestion which says nothing about the character of interpretations reached by this methodological route.[1] For example, it does not prevent *all* interpretations to be exclusively singularist, or exclusively multiplist, or neither. That is, there is nothing in the description of possible choices that tell us how these choices are likely to be distributed. In that, Krausz's thesis by itself does not answer his leading question, 'Must there be a single right interpretation etc.'

As such it is not surprising that it applies across the board, since we employ such strategies of rational inquiry in almost every sphere of possible dispute, as any ombudsman can tell. It is also not surprising that these strategies are immune from classical philosophical disputes around realism, since these disputes have to do with (the content of) interpretations themselves. In sum, making a list of logically possible options does not generate any substantive result. How do we add substance to Krausz's proposal?

For one, suppose Krausz suggested that, for any choice of object of interpretation, it is always the case that that object *will* give rise to all of singularism, multiplism, and neither. But Krausz doesn't say that, as we saw. More importantly, he cannot say that since, being oppositions, singularism and multiplism cannot apply to the *same* object when we fix the interpreter; multiplism obtains when all attempts at singularism *fail*.

Alternatively, Krausz's proposals could have meant that, given the totality of all objects of interpretation, it is the case that some (not all) give rise to singularism, some to multiplism, and so on. This suggestion, though non-trivial, is far from being an interesting one. We saw already that the snake-rope case generates singularism at best. Classical figure-ground cases (duck-rabbit, face-vase, etc.) clearly generate multiplism. As we will see, Krausz himself holds, correctly in my view, that all music is multiplist. These are facts that immediately satisfy the alternative suggestion under discussion. But to say as much is to list some well-known facts; it does not say how these facts cohere.

However, we may discern a more substantive contribution in Krausz's work when we take a closer look at the actual organization of his discussion. What follows then is a possible reconstruction of Krausz's work. First, I am interested in the fact that though

Krausz had a general thesis concerning all objects in mind, he *opens* the discussion in terms of cultural entities like literature, works of art, and music. Second, the greater part of Krausz's discussion on these issues over the years concerns cultural objects; there is only a marginal interest in non-cultural objects such as objects of scientific interpretation, 'middle-sized' objects of common life, and the like. Third, even when Krausz ventures into non-cultural domains, he shows more interest in those cases, such as figure-ground cases, which have an intuitive pull towards cultural entities.[2] These interests seem to show where Krausz's sympathy lies. How do we interpret this body of textual evidence?

For obvious reasons, cultural objects – literature, marriage ceremonies, religious practices – are generally viewed as grounds for the idea that interpretations vary as cultural locations vary. Hence, cultural objects naturally breed *multiplicity*. To cut a very long and confusing story short, this alleged fact of multiplicity of cultural objects has led many authors in recent decades to various claims of multiplism, relativism, incommensurability, indeterminacy, and the like, for *all* human interpretive acts, including acts of scientific interpretation. A discussion of this turbulent literature is beyond the scope and interest of this essay.

Krausz's contribution lies in distinguishing between multiplicity and multiplism *even for cultural entities*; just the availability of multiple interpretations is no ground for the suspension of rightness. That limit is reached when other options fail. It is a confusion, therefore, to *identify* cultural entities with multiplism. In other words, the category of cultural entities – its ontology – has no direct links with the *character* of interpretive activities directed on them. Therefore, most philosophical theories, such as constructivism, constructive realism, and the like, that depend on a close tie between the category and its allegedly characteristic interpretation, are mistaken. This is not to suggest that these theories themselves are mistaken. They could well be right on independent metaphysical considerations; but those considerations are now *detached* from the interpretibility of cultural entities.

Earlier, I characterized Krausz's work to be disarming; we can now see why. Interpretive activities directed on cultural entities are now spread over various choices. Some of these choices decisively admit rightness, some don't. As we saw, a number of

reflective options are available within these choices. In some sense, the rich variety of human interpretive activities is given its due.

However, Krausz maybe viewed as disarming not only the constructivist in his various guises, but the realist as well. The argument consists of a resolution of two apparently conflicting claims. First, which is the central concern of this paper, Krausz maintains that "multiplism is perhaps characteristic rather than definitive of the cultural" (Krausz 2000:12), although, second, "multiplism is no criterion of the cultural" (Krausz 2000:11) The tension in these claims is difficult to miss. The only way I can interpret this set of puzzling claims is to think of a picture in which cases of multiplism and cultural entities *cluster* such that most cultural entities are cases of multiplism, and vice-versa. To take an analogy, consider two oppositions: male-female and masculine-feminine. We could say that the female and the feminine cluster though there are (relatively few) feminine males and (negligible) masculine females. Thus multiplism characterizes the cultural without being definitive of it.

In this picture, cultural multiplism is viewed as the central core of human interpretive activities. The rest of the activities trickle out of this core formation. Thus, Krausz is in agreement with the choice of the *domain* of the cultural relativist: this is where human interpretive activities are at their salient best. But Krausz is able to avoid the *position* of the relativist by allowing the core picture to diffuse at both ends: not only that singularism applies to some cultural entities, multiplism applies to some non-cultural entities. Thus, Krausz is able to disarm both the realist and the relativist, and any combination of the two such as constructivist-realist, while staying in the domain of cultural multiplism. The disarming subliminal message is that all interpretive activities are more or less cultural, but that doesn't by itself lead to any definite metaphysical position.

This then is the substantive consequence of Krausz's proposals regarding interpretive strategies. Given a conception of cultural entities (a *category*), the application of interpretive strategies to them generates both singularism and multiplism, though predominantly multiplism.[3] The availability of this category enables a conception of non-cultural entities. When the strategies are applied there in turn, we get both singularism and multiplism once again. This shows that even if multiplism clusters with

cultural entities, it is not identified with them. This is a very general picture of human interpretive activities that stretches across all domains of those activities, though with unequal weightage, as we saw.

These applications of interpretative strategies thus generate four areas: singularist-non-cultural, multiplist-non-cultural, singularist-cultural, and multiplist-cultural. The entire taxonomy, we saw, flows from the initial conception of cultural-multiplism, the fourth area. Is that conception tenable? If the answer is in the negative, we need not even look at the other areas to examine the validity of Krausz's picture.

The crucial issue is that the conception of the category of cultural entities has to do with human interpretive activities in this area. In other words, it is assumed that there is something called 'cultural interpretation' that applies to each of the entities that fall under this category. In turn, this means that there is some notion of interpretation that *remains invariant* across the entities in this category. To repeat, Krausz's programme requires, as with many other programmes in this area of philosophy, some coherent notion of culture that can be tied to the specific form of interpretive activity that takes place there. Traditionally, that tie had been sought in multiplism itself, viz., that cultural interpretations are distinguished by their abundance. But this is one of the 'orthodox' views that Krausz categorically rejects – correctly in my view. So, the only way Krausz can uphold a coherent notion of cultural interpretation is in terms of the *nature* of the interpretations themselves.

I will argue that the notion of interpretation varies so much across literature, painting, and *especially music* that it is implausible that unitary notions of singularism and multiplism apply everywhere. To take an analogy, consider Albert Einstein's claim that quantum theory is incomplete, and Kurt Gödel's claim that certain formal systems are incomplete. It does not follow that there is a general notion of incompleteness that applies to both the domains. In fact, if our concept of multiplism is understood in terms of how it applies to literature, then it is hard to see that the twin concepts of singularism and multiplism apply to music at all. I will develop the argument from three different directions, and show that they converge.

2. SOME EXAMPLES

To get a preliminary idea of the sort of problems I have in mind, let us consider some of Krausz's crucial examples that purportedly illustrate multiplism for different kinds of entities. Recall that Krausz's list of cultural entities includes 'other cultural phenomena' besides literature, works of art and music.

For general cultural multiplism, Krausz cites the interesting case of a dead baby floating in the Ganges river (Krausz 2000: 35-6). While Krausz himself, a North American, was plainly shocked with the sight of a 'dumped' baby, the locals explained to him that, being 'morally pure beings', dead babies are accorded the honor of being returned to the life source of the Ganges. The implication is that, while the North American Krausz was shocked, the locals would perhaps interpret the sight as a holy gesture. Krausz asks: 'If we saw the same thing but interpreted it differently, who is right? Or is more than one interpretation admissible?' Plainly, what is involved here are large and *irreconcilable* belief systems of different cultures as embodied in their texts, convictions and practices: one can not be both shocked and filled with religious admiration at the same time.

Suppose there is no doubt in this case that everyone sees a dead baby afloat. That's the *sight*. Then the question of whether the sight is repulsive or respectable depends on the cultural spectacle we use. Beginning with the visual experience then, there are two layers of interpretation: (a) the interpretation as a floating dead baby, and (b) the interpretation regarding how we evaluate (a). Multiplism in the sense concerned occurs, if at all, at (b). Thus, if the sequence of interpretations terminated with (a), multiplism will not apply. Moreover, even if there is multiplism at (a) – say, between a dead baby and a rotting idol shaped as a baby, the notions of interpretation involved here will be very different from the one applying at (b).

Next consider Krausz's example of a 'pluralizing maneuver' regarding Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*. He suggests that the work of art may be subject to any one of formalist, psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, or other interpretations. There are a variety of problems to think of each of these interpretations as *cultural* interpretations in the sense encountered in the previous example. For one, the formalist interpretation hardly involves any other belief system except the one solely geared for such artistic objects; for example, the formalist interpretation is likely to be concerned with tonality, strength

of drawing, spatial arrangement, distribution of light, and the like. It will not apply to political systems, family relations etc. In that, the formalist interpretation is very different in character from the other interpretations. The other interpretations may be viewed as *highlighting* different aspects of the work such that, as Krausz suggests (Krausz 2000: 13), it is possible to reach an *aggregating* interpretation, say, Marxist-feminist. Multiplism in this case then can *disappear* in two different ways. This, as noted, can not be the case at stage (b) of the previous example.

Consider now some examples from music. 'In the musical case', Krausz says, 'I am a multiplist' (Krausz 2001: 4). But he also says that the notion of interpretation involved in musical multiplism attaches exclusively to *performances* of music, not to the scores themselves. In enforcing the restriction, Krausz is suggesting subliminally that the notion of interpretation in music might be significantly different from the interpretation of a work of literature. In the case of dramatic works, for example, there is a relevant notion of performance; hence, there is a relevant notion of interpretation in the sense of performance: actors interpret a play by acting it out in a particular way. But a play also admits of varied cultural interpretations of the text itself: Marxist, feminist, Buddhist, and the like. The point is too obvious to require illustration. Pieces of music, however, typically admit of only one of these forms of interpretation – as performance – even when we label pieces of music as 'romantic', 'baroque' etc.[4] This makes music a wholly different kind of cultural entity than, say, a work of art or fiction.

The point can be illustrated by considering the factors that Krausz lists (Krausz 1993) as contributing to multiplism in music. Starting with the idea that multiplism in music arises because 'musical scores are characteristically incomplete' (Krausz 2001), Krausz suggests a number of 'different resources' in which 'different interpretators' interpret their music. These include choice of tempi, choice of timbre or volume of a given instrument, physical position of a musician in an orchestra, choice of bow movements for string instruments (i.e., up or down), duration and speed of a vibrato, pressures of bows and fingers, room temperature, well-accepted violations of the score (Krausz 1993:79), historical practices of a tradition, idiosyncrasies of a teacher, pressures on rehearsal time (Op.Cit: 81), and the like. Cumulatively, Krausz calls these things 'extra-score practices'. Thus his general conclusion is that, since 'extra-score practices vary

historically', it will be incorrect to 'insist that the range of ideally admissible interpretations must always be singular' (Op. Cit.: 87).

For the purposes of this essay, I will not question whether such extra-score practices in fact lead genuinely to different *interpretations*.[5] Let us assume so. Even then it is obvious that this notion of interpretation – hence, the related notion of multiplism – could not be the one that applies to *Potato Eaters* or floating babies. I will now attempt to give some theoretical shape to this concern.

3. FORMS OF INQUIRY

It is an irony of human inquiry that sometimes different groups of people reflect apparently on the same object without having anything to say to one another. A classic example is the complete lack of conversation between astrophysicists and astrologers, though both deal with (motions of) stars. Astrologers think that stars have something to do with human fate; astrophysicists think that they are nothing but great balls of fire, totally incapable of influencing the course of psychic events.

In the star-case, it is reasonably clear which inquiry is the valid one. In some cases, both inquiry could be equally valid, upto a point. Consider the distinction between theory of language and theory of literature. Both fields are concerned, in some sense, with the workings of language. Yet, it is quite clear that they are looking at very different aspects of language and its use. A language-theorist is basically concerned with a cognitive system; a literary theorist is concerned with a cultural-historical product with a cultural-historical *content*. Roughly, the same holds for the more advanced forms of visual arts like painting, sculpture and architecture. Thus both literature and the visual arts may make comments, albeit in very different ways, on the futility of war, wickedness of power, grandeur of nature, personal grief, and so forth. One could conceive of an inquiry which is focused exclusively on these comments and the explicit, articulated forms of making them. This inquiry need not concern itself with the properties of the cognitive systems of language and vision which underlie the ability to make these comments. Nevertheless, we can also discern a *difference* between literature and the visual arts with regard to the distinction between cognitive structure and cultural comment.

For literature, it seems the distinction is overriding; it is hard to see how considerations from cognitive linguistics will bear upon the examination of the thoughts expressed in literature. Consider Maurice Bowra's celebrated evaluation of Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* (Bowra 1950). To bring out Coleridge's specific form of what Bowra called 'romantic imagination', Bowra examines Coleridge's use of language, including his poetic style, at great depth. '*The Ancient Mariner*', Bowra suggests, 'draws attention to neglected or undiscovered truths' (Op.Cit.68). The way a poet 'reveals' such 'secrets of the universe' is to 'work through myths' such as that of the ancient mariner. This myth is to be thought of as 'an extension of the use of symbols', where a symbol, according to Coleridge, is 'characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual'. In *The Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge 'shapes these symbols into a consistent whole' resulting in 'a myth about a dark and troubling crisis in the human soul'. Plainly, Bowra is concerned with 'world-views' as they get uniquely expressed in Coleridge's use of language. Although such concerns often require study of metaphor, irony, analogy, and imagery, at no point do they require going into the structure of semantic interpretation, grammatical rules and pragmatic competence in ways in which linguists understand these things.

This distinction is less marked in our understanding and appreciation of the visual arts.[6] No doubt some outstanding examples of art, such as Picasso's *Guernica*, Michaelangelo's *Pieta*, Van Gogh's *Cypress Tree*, cave-paintings of Ajanta, and the like, are often understood in terms of their 'messages' on matters of human interest, as we saw for Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*. Yet, even in these exemplary cases, the predominant interest is in the form of the artistic piece rather than in its content. In the large majority of artistic examples, however, especially for the more abstract and non-representational pieces, the interest is entirely in the form.[7] And the form of an artistic piece is intimately connected to how it appears to its viewers; that is, to its perceptual properties. In this sense, much of the visual arts maybe thought of as skilled manipulation of perception.

Considerations such as the above led E. H. Gombrich (1960:33) to cite John Constable with approval: 'Painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?' The interest is that

Constable's own work, as Gombrich puts it (Op.Cit.34), 'is surely more like a photograph than the works of either a Cubist or a medieval artist'. Even then, as Gombrich's subsequent analysis of Constable's *Wivenhoe Park* brings out, 'the painter's experiments adjoin those of the physicists'. In this sense, the artist's achievement lies 'in the 'discovery of appearances' that is really the discovery of the ambiguities of vision' (Gombrich 1960:314).

I am not suggesting that an artistic work, therefore, ought to be viewed on a par with the science of the relevant domain, say, the human visual system. The artist's scientific explorations, if any, at best underlie his artistic expression; unlike the scientist, he is not *describing* the visual system. In other words, although the artist's 'discovery of appearances' often requires some understanding of the concerned cognitive system, this understanding is exploited rather than expressed, much as advertising campaigns exploit the 'laws' of human gullibility.

Nevertheless, it does follow, as Gombrich's extensive analysis shows, that one significant way of explaining a work of art is to explain the psychological understanding that goes into its making. In that sense, the distance between a psychological study of visual arts and their aesthetic study is not as far removed as it is for literature. In fact, aesthetic explanation is likely to converge onto psychological explanation at prominent joints. As we saw, the more a work of art is seen as a formal object – in contrast to a cultural product – the more amenable it is to psychological explanation. This raises the possibility that the distance between these forms of explanations becomes indistinguishable when a work of art is not viewed in terms of its 'message' at all.

In the case of music, it is even more difficult to make a distinction between a cognitive system and a cultural product. Though no human enterprise can fail to be a cultural-historical product (and music is no exception), it is difficult to maintain that music has a cultural-historical *content* in that it makes comments on the futility of war etc, although it is quite possible that the cultural-historical context of a war might lead someone, say Stravinsky, to compose a specific brand of music. This point about music can be brought out in several ways, as we will see.

For now, one quick evidence is the widely-tested ability of very young children to intuitively grasp and perform fairly advanced forms of music even when they have very little ‘world-knowledge’ to grasp advanced forms of literature and the visual arts. This ‘non-representational’ character of music is a puzzle of great theoretical interest which raises doubts about the distinction between a cognitive system and a cultural product. For this reason, it has been a persistent problem to incorporate music in aesthetic and critical approaches which begin with, say architecture and Greek tragedy.

It is also, I think, the underlying reason for an ancient interest in the ‘language-likeness’ of music that Bernstein finally, explicitly raised (Bernstein 1976). It is interesting to note that the *grammatical* complexity of language (long-distance reflexives, triple embedding, double negation etc.) is also no problem for young children even when they have troubles with metaphors, analogies, deliberate ambiguities, ironies, and the like.

In my view, current work in linguistics and musical cognition can be fruitfully linked to some of Wittgenstein's insights to develop the idea of 'language-likeness' in the grammatical sense just outlined. The perspective that ensues helps explain why musical interpretation is fundamentally different from literary interpretation. Musical interpretation, I will argue, *stops* at a level analogous to the grammatical level of interpretation.

4. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VERSION

The suggested parallel between just the grammatical part of language and the *whole* of music can be approached from Ray Jackendoff's interesting discussion of these issues (Jackendoff 1992:157-65). Jackendoff begins by distinguishing between two versions of 'the fundamental question for a theory of mind'. The 'philosophical' version poses the question, 'What is the relationship of the mind to the world ... such that our sentences can be true or false?' The 'psychological' version poses the question: 'How does the brain function as a physical device, such that the world seems to us the way it does?'[8] With this distinction in hand, Jackendoff argues 'that it hardly makes sense to say that the representations one constructs in response to hearing a performance of the *Eroica* are true or false' (Op. Cit: 165). Mention of Beethoven's (later) work is particularly

relevant here since Beethoven wrote the symphony 'in the absence of any overt musical signal'. Thus, it seems absurd to ask if the piece suddenly acquired 'a truth-value when the score was written or the first performance took place'. The 'philosophical' version of the fundamental question, therefore, does not apply to music at all; only the 'psychological' version does.

It seems that the inapplicability of the philosophical version to music is nearly obvious. In his influential work, Roger Scruton (1983: Chapter 7) has forcefully argued that musical symbolism does not imply that its symbols stand for anything in the world. Working through well-known examples of music where aspects of nature are allegedly depicted (blowing of wind, sound of waterfalls, bird calls, cries of animals), Scruton argued that no intelligible sense can be made of the idea that these sections of music either resemble or represent aspects of nature. Further, even if we grant that such music 'imitates' nature in some way, we can not say that the music says something *about* those aspects of nature. In sum, musical symbolism lacks predication in the desired sense. Since there is no predication, there can not be any satisfaction in Tarski's sense; hence, the notions of truth and falsity simply do not apply to music. To emphasize, these notions do not apply to music *at all*.[9]

The interest here is that Jackendoff makes a similar claim for language as well. Suppose language consists of three parts: grammar, phonology, and semantics. Jackendoff claims that the psychological version holds, as against the philosophical version, for each of these parts. The claim is most controversial for the third of these parts; hence, Jackendoff's arguments for the psychological version of semantics are the weakest. There is a strong intuition that 'dog' is true of dogs and, thus, 'dogs are feline' is false. Except for the general suggestion that terms such as 'true' or 'false' need to be 'embedded' 'in a general theory of concepts', Jackendoff has done nothing specific to dispel this intuition.[10]

Not surprisingly, Jackendoff's claim for phonological representations is more plausible since it is totally unclear what it means for the *noise* 'dog' to be true or false: it is 'difficult to see how the predicates 'true' and 'false' apply to one's phonological representations in response to an incoming stimuli' (Op. Cit.: 164). This leads Jackendoff to the general conclusion that 'the notion of computation need not have

anything to do with 'respecting semantic relations' at least in the domains of phonology and syntax' (Jackendoff 1992:29). Consider the aspirasted sound 'p' as in 'Patrick'. Jackendoff's central point is that these phonological objects themselves do not stand for something else. If you like, there is a sound-meaning correlation between 'p' and an aspirated sound; there is no further correlation between the sound and something else in the world. 'Patrick' is just an arrangement of sounds. The point is obviously even more compelling for objects in syntactic structures: 'There is no such thing as an NP, a VP, or an Adjective in the environment'. In sum, 'Speakers don't believe (or believe in) NPs or phonological distinctive features or rules of aspiration' (Jackendoff 1992:165).

With these considerations in hand, it is worth asking if the significance of a piece of music – hence, its possible interpretations – ought to be phrased in any 'external' terms, i.e., terms that refer to elements apart from the musical symbolism itself, at all. For example, Jackendoff shows (1992:Chapter 7) that explanation of certain aspects of musical affect, e.g., why certain pieces of music do not seem to lose their pleasing effects even after repeated hearing, can be explained solely in terms of the combinatorial properties of notes (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983), and the modular character of musical processing. The point is that it is possible to explain why we *want* to hear the same music from the properties of musical processing alone, not *because* the piece invokes – although it may – pictures of reality, desires and the like.

Interestingly, 'and the like' is beginning to include even moods and emotions which are thought to be the hallmarks of musical significance in most common and philosophical conceptions of music. Granting that the external significance of music can not be captured in terms of representations of aspects of reality, it is very widely held that, nonetheless, music '*represents* emotions in a way that can be recognized by listeners' (Dowling and Harwood, cited in Raffman (1993:42). As Diana Raffman proceeds to cite Roger Scruton, it is 'one of the given facts of musical culture' that the hearing of music is 'the occasion for sympathy'. Thus the literature on the emotional significance of music include: being merry, joyous, sad, pathetic, spiritual, lofty, dignified, dreamy, tender, dramatic; feelings of utter hopelessness, foreboding, sea of anxiety, terrified gesture, and the like.[11] For Scruton, if someone finds the last

movement of *The Jupiter Symphony* 'as morose and life-negating', he would be 'wrong'.[12]

In recent years, cognitive theorists of music have generally rejected this tradition. The basic objection to the very idea can be stated as follows: 'Musicians argue about phrasings and dynamics and resolutions. They do *not* argue about the emotions they feel or otherwise ascribe to music' (Raffman 1992:59). As Raffman elaborates, musicians may argue that a given phrase ends at a certain E-natural because the note prepares a modulation to the dominant; the argument never takes the form that the note expresses ultimate joy, or whatever. None of this of course is meant to deny that listeners often have emotional responses to music. The point is that the fact need not to be traced to music itself.

5. WITTGENSTEIN ON LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

Ludwig Wittgenstein reached this point several decades before the onset of cognitive psychology of music. In his *Blue and Brown Books* (BBB), he remarked as follows: 'It has sometimes been said that what music conveys to us are feelings of joyfulness, melancholy, triumph etc., etc. and what repels us in this account is that it seems to say that music is an instrument for producing in us sequences of feelings. To such an account we are tempted to reply 'Music conveys to us *itself*' ' (BBB 178). According to him, it is a 'strange illusion' that possesses us when 'we say 'This tune says *something'*, and it is as though I have to find *what* it says'. Given that what a tune 'says' can not be said in words, 'this would mean no more than saying 'It expresses itself' '. To bring out the sense of a melody then 'is to whistle it in a particular way' (BBB 166).

To see what Wittgenstein might have meant by his claim that music 'expresses itself', it is interesting to note that he extends the claim to language as well – to the understanding of a sentence, for example. He suggests that what we call 'understanding a sentence' has, in many cases, a much greater similarity to understanding a musical theme 'than we might be inclined to think'. The point is that we already know that understanding a musical theme *can not* involve the making of 'pictures'. Now the suggested similarity between music and language is meant to promote a similar view of language as well, i.e., no 'pictures' are made even in understanding a sentence.

'Understanding a sentence', he says, 'means getting hold of its content; and the content of the sentence is *in* the sentence' (BBB 167).

There are several ways of interpreting these difficult claims. It is well known that Wittgenstein's own way is to draw attention to 'gestalt' features of object-perception, which, in a way, leap into our minds. Hence, Wittgenstein devotes a major part of his analysis to properties of visual perception in an attempt to draw lessons from there to apply them in turn to music and language. Even if we grant that lessons from vision might work for music, how can it work for language? For example, despite Wittgenstein's valiant attempts, it is hard to see how the notion of *expression*, as in 'what a face or a flower expresses', applies to what a sentence expresses.

In my opinion, the suggested parallel between understanding a sentence and a piece of music such that they 'convey themselves' can be explained from an altogether different theoretical perspective. In this perspective, significance of a sentence can be brought out in various layers, beginning with a layer that has no 'external' significance at all. We can then view the other layers in terms of progressive addition of external significance. Each layer, nevertheless, admits of multiplism that attaches exclusively to that level. I will suggest that multiplism in music is very much like the multiplism of language at the *initial* level.

Consider the sentence 'who knows John gave what to whom'. The sentence admits of multiple interpretations depending on the relative scopes of the embedded wh-phrasess. Since these are questions, I have also included a possible answer in each case to display the differences of interpretation somewhat more perspicuously.

(i) Representation : who_i e_i knows to $whom_j$ [John gave what e_j]
Interpretation : For which persons x and y, x knows John gave what to y
Answer : Bill knows John gave what to Mary

(ii) Representation : who_i e_i knows $what_j$ [John gave e_j to whom]
Interpretation : For which person x and what thing y, x knows John gave y to whom
Answer: Tom knows John gave the book to whom

Someone’s knowledge of John’s gifts is under query here. In (i), the query is about the recipient of those gifts; in (ii), the query concerns the gift-item. The sentence (= text) under

discussion thus admits of multiplism. Representations (i) and (ii) are *linguistic* expressions *par excellence* – called 'LF-representations' in linguistics. Hence, many aspects of the interpretations that can be attached to them are linguistic in character as well. In particular, we do not expect the *shape* of these expressions to be available in any other symbolic domain.[13]

Nevertheless, I wish to draw attention to some general features of this example which, in my opinion, are available beyond language. First, (i) and (ii) are *structurally* distinct in that the relative positions of the symbolic objects in them differ. Second, these structural differences are directly related to how a representation is to be interpreted. In fact, one of the global economy principles stipulates that a representation may not contain any element that can not be interpreted. Third, the interpretations do not make any reference to how the world is like, the beliefs of people interpreting them, the vagaries of the associated culture, and the like. In fact, in order to differ, the interpretations do not require that there be an 'external' world at all. Yet, to emphasize, *multiple* interpretations are attached to the same symbolic object solely in terms of the ambiguity of its representational structure.

Consider again the possible dispute between musicians which Raffman suggested to show the irrelevance of emotivism for musical interpretations. The dispute concerned the identification of a musical phrase, i.e., whether it ends with a certain (occurrence of) E-natural. In principle then, the dispute can be traced back exclusively to the structural features of how a group of notes are to be represented. Three possibilities arise: the phrase ends before the E-natural, the phrase ends at the E-natural, and the phrase extends beyond the E-natural. As anyone familiar with music knows, these structural differences make big differences in the interpretations of music. Depending on the group of notes at issue, and the location of the group in a passage, some of the structural decisions may even lead to bad music. This is because these decisions often make a difference as to how a given sequence of notes is to be *resolved*. Any moderately experienced listener of music can tell the differences phenomenologically, though its explicit explanation requires technical knowledge of music (such as modulation to the dominant).

This explains why composers and performers spend a lot of time on 'marking' a score to show how exactly they wish a sequence of notes to be grouped. Lerdahl and Jackendoff's work (1983) shows how different groupings impose different hierarchies on musical surfaces such that each hierarchical organization gets linked to a specific interpretation of the surface. The phenomenon is explicit in musical traditions which use scores. But it can be observed in any tradition by attending its training sessions, for example. Training *means* attention to the pitch of individual notes *and* how notes are to be organized. When the music becomes complex, and it begins to tax memory and attention, various devices are used to highlight the salient properties of symbolic organization. These include emphasis typically by suitable ornamentation, organization of music in delineable cycles such as rondo, display of unity of larger sections by cadences, exploiting the cyclic features of the accompanying beat, and so on. The list is obviously very incomplete, but it is pretty clear that, in some sense, there is nothing else to music. Interpretations in music are sensitive solely to the syntactic properties of representations.

Plainly, there is much else to linguistic interpretations. Consider Chomsky's example 'drinks will be served at five' (Chomsky 1975:65). As Chomsky observed, the sentence can be used as 'a promise, a prediction, a warning, a threat, a statement, or an invitation', among others. A decision on which of these varied interpretations of the given sentence is most salient will depend on the features of the extra-linguistic environment. These features include the states of mind of the speaker and her audience, a knowledge of the specific locale in which the sentence is uttered, some knowledge of the culture in which the given community of people generally participate, facial expressions, past utterances, and so forth. In sum, the linguistic object 'drinks will be served at five' needs to interact with *other* systems of knowledge and belief for *these* interpretations to be available.

The array of these systems can get progressively thicker to include social relations, cultural choices, religious pronouncements, proto-scientific beliefs, conceptions of the future, and the like. At some point in such a dense field of interactions, we get works of literature. These works themselves can then seep into the general culture to generate even wider belief systems – most cultures are textual cultures, in that sense.[14] Since we do not have the faintest idea of how these systems are organized with respect to each

other, let us say that interpretations of literary and cultural texts form a continuum with items of common life such as 'drinks will be served at five'. The entire continuum may now be viewed as distinct from syntax-governed interpretations outlined above. There is thus no general notion of interpretation that spans both literature and music, even if we want to place them under the common head 'cultural entities'.

Nirmalangshu Mukherji

NOTES

[1] 'Interpretation', as Krausz cites the *Oxford English Dictionary*, involves 'to expound', 'to elucidate', 'to render', 'to give a particular explanation of', 'to signify', etc.

[2] Needless to say, these – in my view, selective – interests can be discerned much beyond Krausz to a variety of 'anti-essentialist' positions in recent decades.

[3] For expository purposes, I am ignoring Krausz's third option of neither singularism nor multiplism.

[4] This is not to deny that works of music admit of critical intrepretations as well; see Krausz's reference to Jerrold Levinson (Krausz 1993:77, note 2). Such critical interpretations, though distinct from performance interpretations, are closely tied to them. The present point is that even critical interpretations are very different from 'cultural' interpretations such as Marxist, feminist etc.

[5] It could be argued that, for music, performance *is* the text. When musicians talk of 'making music' they mean the playing of music, not writing of scores. Since performances inevitably include such 'extra-score practices', these practices lead to different musical texts, not to different interpretations of the same music. Individual performances can now be subjected to different critical interpretations – a wholly different matter. If this wasn't the case, it will be difficult to attach any sense of multiplism to musical works in a tradition which does not have scores. Yet, I am not pushing this point in the main text since, even for 'oral' and improvised music, some sense could be made of the notion of 'music in the mind' prior to its performance. Such abstract pre-articulatory forms can well be viewed as texts which admit of different performance interpretations, as required by Krausz. The availability of scores in some traditions obfuscates this point.

[6] Cinema raises problems of classification that I will set aside in this discussion.

[7] The very fact that artistic pieces may be non-representational brings out the point under discussion. This point has little to do with the issue of realism in arts; a representational piece need not be realistic, as some of Van Gogh's and most of Salvador Dali's paintings show.

[8] I will ignore Jackendoff's identification of psychology with the study of brain functions; nothing in what follows will be lost if we simply replace 'the brain function as a physical device' with 'the mind function as a system'.

[9] See Mukherji (2000a: Chapter 4). In that work I argue that Scruton's suggestion does not forestall the idea that musical symbols may have reference. The issue is of only indirect concern here.

[10] I do not, thereby, mean to endorse the 'philosophical version' for semantics. My complaint is that Jackendoff's arguments for the psychological version are insufficient. In my opinion, Chomsky (2000: Chapters 6 and 7) presents a more powerful perspective in favour of the psychological version.

[11] I have heard serious philosophers of music talk about heavy-hearted resoluteness. See Mukherji (2000a: Chapter 4) for some criticism of the idea.

[12] This widespread linking of emotions to expressiveness of music raises obvious problems: how can something inanimate, such as a score, be expressive of emotions? The problem has led several authors to promote 'persona' theories in which a given piece of music serves as a prop for make-beliefs as if *someone* is angry, joyous, sad etc.; see Walton (1993) for one proposal in this direction. A detailed discussion of this amazing proposal is beyond the scope here. In my opinion, persona theories ought to be viewed as *reductio ad absurdum* for emotive theories of music.

[13] This is not to miss the very recent interest in the affinity of the syntax of language and music. Recent work in psychology of music (Krumhansl et. al 2000) suggests that there are various invariants in the tonal structure of music across cultures and traditions; some of these structures are beginning to be understood in generative theories of music (Krumhansl 1995). Further, there is some evidence that the syntax of music and language may be located in the same area of the brain (Maess et al 2001). See Mukherji (2000b) for a brief review of this literature and its connection with Wittgenstein's ideas sketched above.

[14] See Mukherji (In Press) for some discussion of these issues.

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Nirmalangshu Mukherji