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# An Interview with Tom Cochrane

Conducted by Rohan Srivastava and Alexandra Crotty

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**Alexandra Crotty:** *Could you tell us a little bit about your background in philosophy and how you came to study music and emotion from the perspective of aesthetics?*

**Tom Cochrane:** Philosophy and music have been the dominant interests in my life since I was a teenager and over the years I have tried to combine them in various ways. I was first introduced to aesthetics during my undergraduate degree at University College London. There I was taught by Malcolm Budd, whose work on music and emotion showed me how rich the area is. Following my undergraduate degree I did a masters in music composition and largely forgot about philosophical issues. It wasn't until I started getting interested in the possibility of group mindedness that I returned to musical expression as an activity where people might literally share mental states. That was the subject of my Ph.D. at Nottingham University (supervised by Greg Currie). Trying to show that joint musical performance allows for collective mental states is what forced me to get serious about how exactly music manages to express and arouse emotions. Since then, I've somehow ended up publishing quite a lot in this area. My most recent paper on musical arousal, defending the claim that music can contagiously arouse feelings while also satisfying formalist demands, is forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*. I think I might have finally said enough about music and emotions!

**Rohan Srivastava:** *In your upcoming book, you defend a view called "Aestheticism." Could you summarize this view for our readers and also explain who your sources of influence were in developing this theory?*

**TC:** For me, Aestheticism is encapsulated in Nietzsche's declaration that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon are existence and the world justified to eternity." For years, that one sentence was all I knew about Nietzsche's view, and when I came to actually read *The Birth of Tragedy* I was disappointed to find that it was couched in a bizarre Schopenhauerian metaphysics about the underlying will of the universe. But the thought had been reverberating in my mind in the meantime, and I had developed my own sense of the aesthetic perfection of the universe. I was also aware of Leibniz's response to the problem of evil—that the best possible world is that which yields the

greatest variety from the simplest laws. This is also an aestheticist response—a sense in which the amazing beauty of the universe can compensate for suffering.

Of course, as I came to research the issue, I learned that other philosophers have defended similar views, most notably St. Augustine. I find it very striking that Aestheticism is a point of contact between philosophers as diametrically opposed as Nietzsche and Augustine. More recently we also have the idea of positive aesthetics developed by Allen Carlson and others, which argues that all pristine nature is beautiful, even rotting carcasses. Yet I am not just focusing on pristine nature and not just on beauty. I am trying to claim that everything bears aesthetic value, either on its own, or in combination with other things. And I believe that a sense of this aesthetic value is the ultimate foundation for the judgement that this is a good world.

**RS:** *So it's important to you to distinguish between aesthetic value and beauty. What are examples of things that can possess the former but not the latter?*

**TC:** Besides beauty, aesthetic value also encompasses the sublime, the dramatic, the tragic, the comic, the erotic, the cute, the cool, the kitsch, and the uncanny, amongst others. All of these values draw on distinctive psychological mechanisms. For instance, the distinctive psychological mechanism behind our appreciation of beauty has to do with the way beautiful objects appear particularly susceptible to and rewarding of our efforts to understand them. They seem particularly clear, ordered, harmonious, or well-fitting. This makes beauty a major aesthetic value, but not the only one. Aesthetic value is the broader phenomenon of finally valuing something without regarding it as satisfying my own (or my group's) self-interested concerns. It is what I call "objectified final value." That is, aesthetic value is a way of valuing something not as good for me, or as good for us, but as just good.

**RS:** *In your upcoming book, you discuss both major and minor aesthetic values. How do you differentiate between a major and minor aesthetic value and why is this distinction important?*

**TC:** The most important psychological claim in my book is that aesthetic values are distal versions of practical values. What I mean by this is that we have a variety of practical drives, e.g., for nutrition, or power, or social connections. Aesthetic values are then ways in which objects hook into those drives, giving us a sense of reward independently of our actually acquiring the object—so from a distance in this sense. A straightforward example is that the taste or smell of food can be rewarding prior to our actually ingesting it and getting the nutritional value. Similarly, a sublime object (like a volcano) can give us a rewarding impression of power independently of our gaining any practical power.

I identify 8 basic practical drives: The drives for (1) food/drink/air (2) security/shelter (3) sex (4) activity (5) relief from various energetic demands (6) social attachment (7) power and (8) knowledge. Each of these drives then corresponds

to an aesthetic value: (1) taste aesthetics (2) tactile aesthetics (3) the erotic (4) the dramatic (5) the comic (6) the sympathetic (7) the sublime and (8) the beautiful (those first two could probably be broken down further). Where an aesthetic value can be directly associated with a practical drive I call it a major aesthetic value. Where the aesthetic value is associated with some blend of practical drives, or an emotional variation upon a drive, I call it a minor aesthetic value. There are an indefinite number of minor aesthetic values, but they include things like the cool, the cute, and the uncanny.

**RS:** *You mention the concept of “difficult beauty” as a means to get around the problem posed by ugliness for a theory that proclaims everything to hold aesthetic value. Is this not just a linguistic cheat? Could you explain your argument here, including what your chief worries are with your view?*

**TC:** Yes, an obvious objection to the claim that everything is beautiful is that some things are ugly. One way of responding to this objection is to take the cosmic perspective (like Leibniz) and say that everything has its place within our orderly universe. The ugly parts are complex manifestations of elegant laws of nature and so can be reconciled within the big picture, just as a dirty grey streak may contribute to the wider grandeur of a landscape. This, basically, is the idea of difficult beauty; that from a narrow perspective something might seem ugly, but from a broader perspective—particularly one that recognizes deeper scientific principles—it can seem beautiful. People like Carlson who defend the beauty of rotting carcasses because they fit within wider ecological patterns are drawing on this idea.

But as I said, the appeal to difficult beauty is just one strategy to defuse the objection from ugliness. Another powerful strategy is to allow that ugliness is specifically opposed to beauty, and that it need not exclude other significant aesthetic values. In particular, ugly things can be aesthetically powerful (like gargoyles or punk music), sympathetic (like the snot-streaming weeping of a tragic hero) or funny (like the blobfish).

**RS:** *You believe that the pursuit of aesthetic value can be a genuine philosophy of life. To what extent do you see yourself subscribing to it in your own life? In what ways do you fall short?*

**TC:** The foundation of Aestheticism is the idea that aesthetic value makes the world worthwhile. I think this idea holds for anyone, and provides a buttress against nihilism and despair. What makes Aestheticism a philosophy of life is then the idea that some people may devote their lives to the pursuit of aesthetic value. We do this not by passively appreciating things, but by actively investigating and expressing the aesthetic value of the world.

Expression makes aesthetic value personal; it filters the value of things through one’s own particular skills and sensitivities. In this sense, expressing one’s sense of aesthetic value is a path towards self-realisation. But as R. G. Collingwood said

about art, expression is also a social activity. I can only be sure of having successfully expressed myself if others are able to grasp what I am getting at. Thus expression is a way of sharing value. Indeed, one of the special features of aesthetic value is that it can be shared fully with others. This is what makes it one of the foundations of our society.

Now the obvious way to express aesthetic value is in the production of artworks. I am inspired by my experience of a landscape, or a trill of birdsong to put my experience into sharable form. But philosophers and scientists can, and often do, regard their investigations into reality in the same light. For instance, if I write an article about consciousness, I am not just trying to solve a practical problem. I am trying to understand some part of the world, and that understanding has final value, independent of any practical consequences. Moreover, my article expresses to others my sense of nature's order.

So to answer your question, I understand all of my philosophical activity, including my teaching, as fitting an aestheticist model of life. Of course, as I go about the world, I also like to simply appreciate things, and perhaps sometimes I don't do this as much as I would like to. But I'm constantly trying to understand and appreciate the harmony of the world, and I'm constantly trying to express that understanding.

**RS:** *A dedication towards aesthetic value is sometimes regarded as a vice, resulting in the most self-indulgent lives. How could someone living in poverty nevertheless abide by the Aestheticism doctrine? Or is this merely a philosophy appropriate for the affluent?*

**TC:** I think Aestheticism comes into its own when life is at its worst. When your personal life is in tatters, you can still enjoy the trees and the clouds and the reflections in puddles. I also want to emphasise that Aestheticism is not just directed at non-human nature. Aesthetic value can equally be taken in the dramatic qualities of human struggle. It takes a certain amount of detachment from one's personal worries to do so, but that detachment can be relieving and enlightening.

Similarly, while the appreciation of fine art might be considered an affluent activity, there has never been a shortage of dirt-poor artists. And outside of technical art-making there are lots of ways of pursuing aesthetic value—in the meals we make, the rooms we live in, and the conversations we have—that are fully available at any income level. But most fundamentally, aesthetics is about finding positive value in the world. Imagine a life in which our aesthetic sensibilities were never satisfied—no pleasure taken in the taste of food or drink, no appreciation for the personal qualities of the people we meet, no witty conversation, no dramatic scrapes, no awe for the fiery sunset or the starry sky. That seems to me a pretty empty sort of existence, even if I were rich and powerful.

**RS:** *Do you practice forms of art yourself? What is the relationship between the artist and the aesthetic philosopher? In other words, why be an aesthetic philosopher when you could be an artist?*

**TC:** In addition to philosophy, I compose music and write fiction (and of course, this also fits my commitment to an aestheticist mode of living). Broad as it is, philosophy does not allow me say everything I want to say. Also, philosophy can be delightful and exhilarating, particularly when I feel like I've generated some significant new insight. But turning that insight into a publishable journal article, and enduring the often unsympathetic peer review process can be frustrating and painful. So it's good to have some other intrinsically rewarding activities to turn to where I am less exposed to professional brutalities. Similarly, if I were a professional artist, no doubt that would involve significant pressures and struggles, which I might relieve by indulging in a bit of philosophy. I did however make a decision in my twenties that it would be more rewarding to be an amateur musician than an amateur philosopher. Good philosophy demands blood.

On the relationship between art and aesthetics, I want to emphasise that aesthetics is not just high-level art-criticism (which I am personally less interested in). The book I've written on aesthetics is about how we value the world. My work on music was as much about understanding emotions and the possibility of collective cognition as it was about understanding music. That said, I do think that artists have something to gain from engaging with aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Most of all, it should help them to reflect on the values of art. My impression is that too many artists (and art curators) lack a strong sense of this. They try to be original, or to make a political statement, when these are some of the least important things that art can achieve.

**RS:** *Why are political statements some of the least important things art can achieve? What are the most important things art can achieve?*

**TC:** I think that some art can have a valid political message, and in rare cases, actually have an effect. Indeed, expression will tend automatically to reflect the political sensitivities of the artist. Yet I think that art has a much broader connection to values than this, because artworks possess aesthetic values and aesthetic values are distal versions of practical values. Thus cultivating a sense of aesthetic values (by engaging with lots of artworks) should also allow us to become more sensitive to all of the practical values as well. Connected to this are the strong benefits that art-making and art-appreciation can have for regulating our emotional well-being and connecting with other people. So overall, I think the political effectiveness of art is at best subordinate to these larger benefits.

**AC:** *This connects to one of your previous publications, "No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humor," right? There you argue that due to the non-seriousness of humor, it is unlikely to change one's perspective on a certain norm. However, in your upcoming book, you argue that humor has the power to reconcile us with our own vulnerability. Why do you think humor can teach us to be vulnerable but not to re-evaluate certain accepted norms?*

**TC:** The fact that humor can have a certain emotional benefit for us is distinct from humor changing our beliefs about something. For instance, hearing a joke about a corrupt politician might help me to feel less frustrated about that politician, but have no effect at all on whether or not I believe him to be corrupt. I should note that I think that humor can reinforce or strengthen our attitudes (so you think that the politician's actions are not just corrupt, but grossly corrupt). But humor won't get you to believe that someone you thought was corrupt is in fact innocent, or vice versa. That sort of shift in one's beliefs would require a serious engagement with the evidence that humor does not in general encourage, or when it does, it stops being funny. This is why I think satire is ineffective and even potentially retrogressive.

When it comes to my own significance, if I can laugh at myself, I take myself less seriously. That is a powerful form of stress-relief (which is why I associate humor with the practical drive for relaxation). But once I stop laughing, I'll probably go back to striving for significance, so it's not like I've given up the norm to try and be significant (here I connect with Nagel's view on the absurdity of life). I'm just taking a break.

**RS:** *Speaking of striving for significance, you've talked about the importance of writing books for aesthetic philosophers. Why do you make this recommendation? What are the relative advantages of books compared to journal articles?*

**TC:** I don't think I'd make a general recommendation along these lines, but personally I prefer writing books to writing articles. Partly I think it's a better way to live. You set a certain modest writing target to meet each week and so long as you hit that target, you're making steady progress and life is good. That continuity is far harder to achieve with articles. But more philosophically, an article might contain 1 or 2 key ideas, while linking together a number of chapters, each of which contains 1 or 2 key ideas, encourages you to generate 5 or 6 more ideas, and moreover ones that are more profound. I think this was the case for my aesthetics book and my book on emotions prior to that.

The problem is that people don't have time to read books. At least, I rarely find the time to read a philosophy book from cover to cover (though it's always rewarding when I do). In full awareness of this fact, I've labored to make my aesthetics book as decomposable as possible—where each chapter is relatively self-contained. But that conflict between how I like to write and how I know people like to read is a tiny tragedy for me.

**RS:** *You talk about how aesthetics holds a particularly low status within the landscape of philosophy as a whole. Obviously, we chose aesthetics as the inaugural theme for the Washington University Review of Philosophy in part because we too feel that it is underappreciated. Why do you think this is the case, and what might a roadmap to popularizing aesthetics, or moving it toward the mainstream as a discipline, look like?*

**TC:** I suppose part of the reason might be the conflation of aesthetics with art-criticism, and the sense that while art might be interesting, it is not a central feature of reality. Or perhaps philosophers think that important questions about value are in the ethical domain, since this is where life and death issues are raised. I don't agree about that. First, 99.9999999...% of the observable universe has nothing to do with ethical value, while aesthetic value takes it all in. Second, in a normal day, you probably make a lot more aesthetically-influenced decisions than ethical ones.

I suppose to get more attention, aestheticians have to show other philosophers that there are insights we get from aesthetics that are relevant to wider issues about value, mind, metaphysics, or epistemology. I hope to make a small contribution along these lines by presenting a vision of aesthetic value as the origin of our sense of objective value. I also think that aesthetics is where issues about the nature of emotion, imagination, and perception become particularly pointed. Meanwhile I have less expertise in metaphysics and epistemology, but I know that other aestheticians have significant overlaps in those areas (e.g., in the metaphysics of abstract forms, and the epistemology of testimony).

Finally, in a more practical sense, any philosophy department with pretensions to give a reasonable coverage of the subject should be hiring an aesthetics specialist (and students can definitely play a role in pushing for this). Two supporting considerations: (1) The subject is always popular with students. (2) Pretty much every great historical philosopher had something significant to say about aesthetics or art (a possible exception is Bertrand Russell, and he won the Nobel Prize for literature!) Doesn't that make you think there's something worth paying attention to here?

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**Tom Cochrane** received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from University College London before pursuing a master's in music composition at Birmingham Conservatoire. He subsequently earned his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Nottingham. His research focuses on aesthetics (with a particular focus on music), the philosophy of emotions, and extended and collective cognition. He also holds interests in metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy. He is currently on faculty at the philosophy department of Flinders University in Australia. Outside of philosophy, he continues to compose music and also writes fiction. His book *The Aesthetic Value of the World* is forthcoming via Oxford University Press, and his paper "Moved by Music Alone" is forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*.

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