

The recent Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks faults the United States government for a failure of imagination, and recommends a way of "routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination." This remedy was of such importance that the commissioners called section 11.1 of their report, *Imagination*.

Some may find it hard to accept this word as it has been applied to the slaying of innocent lives. Who wouldn't rather describe a fugue, or a poem, as imaginative? While the anticipation of wickedness, and how to foil it, is the just response to terrorism, it seems odd to call this "imagination." Shouldn't the word be reserved for what is beautiful and noble?

But in fact the commissioners were correct in their application of the word. There is a tradition in western civilization of identifying the beautiful and noble--what the late Russell Kirk called *permanent things*--with universal truths revealed by the *moral imagination*.² Conversely, what is contrary to that truth represents an immoral imagination. September 11, 2001 belongs to the latter category.

Our purpose here is to demonstrate how the fugue represents the moral imagination. The fugue is morally imaginative because it is fitting, feelingful, creative, logical, original, structured, well proportioned, and vital. They who listen to it learn these things from it, and how to evaluate other art and situations by similar universals.

In illustrating the moral imagination of a fugue it shall be necessary for us to consider its opposite--art of an immoral imagination. While such terms may strike moderns as being "moralistic," the arts have historically been assumed to have moral implications. I do not use the word in the twaddling sense of pop culture. Instead I subscribe to the understanding of the Anglo-American poet and playwright, T. S. Eliot who, in 1933, delivered a series of lectures at the University of Virginia in which he foresaw the decline of the moral imagination in modern literature. Later published as *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, these lectures draw the line between moral and immoral fiction.³

² The concept of the *moral imagination* permeates the works of T. S. Eliot and his biographer Russell Kirk. The term was first used by Edmund Burke: *Reflections on the Revolution of France*. Kirk's protégé, W. Wesley McDonald has defined the moral imagination as a "power of ethical perception," and the "ability to perceive universal norms that cannot be rationally proven" (*Mars Hill Audio Journal* vol. 70). Such norms include courage, kindness, loyalty, wisdom, honesty, humility, etc. Because the faculty of moral imagination is not based upon reason, Kirk believed that it was passed from one generation to the next in literature--poetry, fables, novels, plays, and even ghost stories, of which Kirk was a master. Vigen Guroian has shown, for example, how fairy tales awaken the moral imagination in children.

³ Eliot's idea is that mutable tradition requires tempering, a function that is provided by Christian orthodoxy, where blasphemy is possible. Without a shared belief that some forms of speech are offensive to the Deity, said forms, incapable of blasphemy, are heard more like the mimicry of a parrot. Authors who are able to blaspheme, and readers capable of understanding it as such, include Jane Austin, Dickens, and Thackeray--moralists all. "When morals," he writes, "cease to be a matter of tradition and orthodoxy--that is, of habits of the community formulated, corrected, and elevated by the continuous thought and direction of the Church--and when each man is to elaborate his own, then *personality* acquires alarming importance." He offers George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and, to a lesser extent, Conrad, as self-absorbed moralists in a literature characterized by emotionalism. When morality is abandoned, that is, in a world where the

Moral fiction, Eliot theorized, is rooted in the human habit of recognizing order and transcendence in the universe, and attempting to harmonize with that order. He correlated the decay of literature with the abandonment of this way of viewing the world--a starving of the moral imagination. For want of transcendence, humans become self-absorbed, indulging in an idyllic imagination, which ultimately produces a diabolical and corrupted imagination.

Notice that Eliot has called the corrupted imagination a *modern heresy*, a seeking after *strange gods*, implying that corrupt art is more than a modern phenomenon, but the fruit of a theological problem--a "heresy." While postmodernists are even now trying to pin down the meaning of modernism, one obvious trait is its tendency to reject classical and traditional modes of expression.⁴ Especially in the arts, modernism exists to jettison the givens of prior generations. Modernism is modeled upon opposition; without something to oppose, it can't exist. Its essence pertains more to what it doesn't accept than what it does.

The main rejection of modernism is the very idea that distinctions can be made between what is moral and what is not, what is beautiful and what is not, what is noble and what is not. Such distinctions, if they can be made at all, exist only in the eye of the beholder; reality is individual, not universal, emanating from the self, not a *natural order*. This confusion stems, in part, from modernism's disillusionment with order itself, largely prompted by the social and political chaos of the 20th century's world wars.

Modern squeamishness about making distinctions traces ultimately to a rejection of truth with a capital T (and god with a G). Modernists believe that all truth claims are constructs that have no universal existence or reality outside of the minds that made them.⁵ Truth is whatever we imagine it to be, however we define it.⁶

possibility of blasphemy no longer exists, Eliot offers the specter of the diabolical imagination, exemplified in D. H. Lawrence, whom he considers to be sick, but genius nonetheless.

⁴ Daniel Bell has defined *modernity* as: "The proposition that there are no ends or purposes given in nature, that the individual and his or her self realization is the new standard of judgment, and that one can remake one's self and remake society in an effort to achieve those goals." The theme of modernity is, "the rejection of a revealed order or natural order, and the substitution of the individual, the ego, the self, as the loadstar of consciousness." (as quoted by Ken Meyers in *Mars Hill Audio Journal* Vol. 70).

⁵ *Deconstruction* (a modern critical method) has moderate and radical forms. As modeled (and invented) by Jacques Derrida, moderate deconstruction is about the slippery slope of language and how there can be no definitive meaning to anything. The radical deconstruction exemplified by Derrida's contemporary, Michel Foucault, is about power and who has it. The method begins with a presupposition that "truth" is *constructed* by the powerful in order to oppress *historically victimized classes*. The purpose of the "deconstruction" is to reveal underlying fabrications that confer power to *oppressors*, and replace them with correct constructs that *empower* victims. (If you read something with three or more of the italicized buzzwords of this paragraph, it is probably a piece of radical deconstruction.) By its own logic, radical deconstruction is itself a construct, therefore suspect. It exists, as all methods presumably exist, to grab power. (Note that the foregoing sentence is a deconstruction of deconstruction).

⁶ In his *Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom laments the abandonment of truth in the American university. He contends that Truth claims are systematically quashed under the rubric that persons who've made up their minds about anything are being intolerant and closed-

Recalling Eliot's words, modernity seeks after *strange gods*; not the immutable and self-transcendent. Modern gods are smaller than the fickle beings that created them, and more strange. Modernity loves the malleable and plastic, what can be made to glorify the individual who answers to no one else. "Be true to yourself," a thoroughly modern mantra, translates:

- I define the only truth to which I can be held accountable.
- Since I create truth, I am greater than truth.
- I am therefore accountable only to what is smaller than myself.

Prior to the modern era, Truth was considered to be universal; true for one was true for all. By abandoning the historical truth about Truth, modernism encouraged conflict between competing and often contradictory "truths," calling into question the very idea of the beautiful and the noble. Anything is noble, so long as someone has defined it that way. It was this assumption that would be shattered by September 11, 2001. Moderns could no longer maintain that every "truth" was as true as every other. Some would sooner slit your throat than coexist.

By now you are surely wondering what this has to do with a fugue. In a nutshell, the relationship is one of imagination. If the attack upon the World Trade Center was the fruit of a diabolical imagination, the *Well-Tempered Clavier* represents the moral imagination. It is morally imaginative because *it acknowledges the existence of a compositional ideal*--a universal order with which it seeks to harmonize. To understand how, we'll need to forget the dry stuff for a fable: a tale of ancient and universal Truth, versus synthetically processed definitions, modern and contrived.

Forget the Dry Stuff for a Fable

Our late departed Bach did not, it is true,
occupy himself with deep theoretical or
speculative matters in music.

Lorenz Christoph Mizler

Carl Philipp Emanuel confirmed his father's seeming indifference toward music theory when he wrote that he was "no lover of dry mathematical stuff." This characterization is understandable when one considers the tedious style of 18th-century tomes on music theory. But it would be wrong to conclude, on the basis of the foregoing quotations alone, that Bach considered theory to be a waste of time.

Belying his words, Bach's music reveals a mind uniquely predisposed to theoretical modes of thought. His commitment to composition as an exercise in

minded. The only truth that is not considered suspect is the claim that *all Truth claims are suspect*. Think about it! If the italicized claim is true, then it is false; but if it is false then it is true. This is what is known as an undecidable proposition. If you enjoy these types of problems, study the C# Major fugue of Book II.

harmonic and contrapuntal order betrays a keen interest. But instead of writing *about* music, he put his ideas into practice by writing *music itself*.⁷ His work is the embodiment of theory, not only about musical structure, but also its purpose: to reflect a divine order for the glory of God.

"Theory," from the Greek (θεωρία), means to contemplate. Its root *theo*, from which we get "theology," implies the contemplation of God. This is the sense in which music theorists, through Bach's generation, understood their role: to perceive *universals* reflected in everything that exists. Because (they reasoned) God created what exists, these universals represent divinity, and beauty was perceived in the reflection of a created order. By identifying musical structures pertaining to that order, one was contemplating the Creator--*theoria*.

From the time of Boethius (a Roman), to Zarlino of the Renaissance, and Rameau of Bach's own day, music theory was committed to this idea--that harmony was natural, not contrived, emanating from a created order, therefore universal. To illustrate the distinction that pre-Enlightenment thinkers made between natural and contrived orders we turn to fable.

In the kingdom of quadrupeds there arose an ass that believed its tail to be another leg. Said he, "With five legs now I shall be as swift as a horse and able to carry the equal of his load." He assembled a large following that also came to believe. Granted audience with the king, they demanded definition of their tails as legs. Now the king was opposed to calling tails legs, but unwilling to impose his private belief. So he deferred to the court. Determining it to be their right to be as swift and strong as horses, the court ruled that every asses' tail throughout the realm should henceforth be called a leg. Soon thereafter one donkey was heard to bray: "Now, though I've risen in the estimation of myself, I still feel like an ass."

As imaginary as a donkey's fifth leg, the "tale" is contrived. But its moral is universal: defining a thing does not determine its essence. An accommodating definition does not change reality, it only corrupts language. At stake is the fundamental order: if to run and carry loads, then legs, but if to swish flies from an ass, then a tail. The two should not be confused, and the distinction between them not decided by plasticized language or popular vote.

Richard Weaver's words on the "enormous exertions made by the Middle Ages to preserve a common world view" are apropos:

The Schoolmen understood that the question *universalia ante rem* or *universalia post rem*, or the question of how many angels can

⁷ Describing Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* as a "musical revolution," Jonathan Tennenbaum writes: "Bach did not add any commentary or theoretical analysis; for him, music was a fully developed language, and Bach said everything he wanted to say, without any ambiguity, in the music itself." From "Bach and Kepler: The Polyphonic Character of Truthful Thinking," *Fidelio Magazine*, Summer-Fall 2000.

stand on the point of a needle, so often cited as examples of Scholastic futility, had incalculable ramifications, so that, unless there was agreement upon these questions, unity in practical matters was impossible.

Ideas Have Consequences, p. 21

With few exceptions, Bach's contemporaries believed that universals existed "before the thing" and not after. The fundamental problem that music theorists sought to resolve was the extent to which harmony could be said to have a physical basis: what universals existed before music, and what musical attributes are derived (and how) from them.

Let us attempt a distinction between natural and contrived orders in this fugue. Suppose Bach wanted to compose a stretto. To do this he needed to find a musical motive that could accompany itself. The wedding of non-complementary motives (in "counterpoint," here presumed as universal archetype) would have been unthinkable. Because indiscriminate combinations were taboo, Bach recognized a finite array of compatible motives, all naturally found in acoustics. Most of these motives had been discovered long before Bach contemplated the problem.

Of the Subject's "Tale"

That Bach contemplated this subject is beyond question. It has been the "subject" of perhaps more speculation than any other in the *WTC*. As with most subjects, it has two parts: a head motive and a tail. The head motive's canzona rhythm (repeated pitches) was typical of Italian poetry and lyrical song. As for the tail idea, David Ledbetter (p. 259) calls it a "canzona motif," observing that its rising fourth followed by falling seconds also emanated from vocal music.

The canzona motif is of unusual importance to this fugue. Whereas there are 25 entrances of the canzona rhythm, the canzona motif enters 108 times, comprising three-fourths of the work! Just listen to the end of the first and third developments, the sequence of mm. 35-37 (and following), and the fugue's conclusion. If any fugue might be described as "the tail wagging the dog," this is it!

One might ask, is this natural--for the tail to wag the fugue, I mean? Well, it is natural so long as the wagging isn't monotonous--which it is not. The canzona rhythm is a signal, like the bell to Pavlov's dog, that fervent tail wagging is just around the corner.

As for the canzona motif's nature, Bach didn't make it up; this particular idea had been used by countless composers before him, and would be used by many more. Bach himself may have gotten the idea from the anonymous 1668 *Wegweiser*, which he used in his own teaching.

From Every Perspective

So much for the subject's tail. The reason why this fugue is so interesting to music theorists, and why I believe that in writing it Bach was demonstrating a theoretical mode of thought, has more to do with the subject's head motive. The

problem is that it is in the "wrong" key. You see, the order of this fugue in Bach's labyrinth dictates that its subject should be in the key of D Major. But most people would hear it in the key of G. Listen to the subject once more and tell me if you don't agree that it is in G.

The problem is further complicated by the fugue's answer. It is "real," which means that it is a transposition of the subject to a new tonal center--the key of D. This expositional scheme of alternating subjects with answers in a I--V--I--V relationship is "natural." And this particular exposition represents the norm...for a fugue in G Major.

But this fugue is supposed to be in D Major! And for a fugue in D, the expositional plan is quite out of the ordinary, some might even say unnatural. What we had thought, on first hearing, to be do-sol-do-sol in the key of G turns out to be fa-do-fa-do in the key of D.

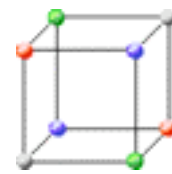
The problem may be summarized as follows: a "real" exposition in the key of D would normally have alternated subjects (in D) with answers in the key of the dominant (A), a structure that could be represented by the Roman numerals I-V-I-V. But this fugue alternates subjects in the subdominant (G) with answers in the tonic (D)--IV-I-IV-I. It is a plagal exposition, a structure that seems to challenge convention and sounds, on first hearing, to have been contrived. The problem has two solutions.

First, in answer to this question, we must note that plagal expositions had precedent in modal music. Bach not only knew what he was doing, but he also knew that it was natural. His contemporary Mattheson complimented Handel's treatment of a similar exposition, and Marpurg expressed his admiration for this very fugue. Both theorists liked the way that the composer established "the real" tonal center early in the work while adhering to a plagal scheme.

But there is another answer to this problem, and it has to do with perspective. And it is here that we come to appreciate the uniqueness of this fugue. From what tonal perspective does one hear the exposition: in G or D? We have already noted that the subject will most likely be heard at first in G, and the answer will be heard in D. But, when heard as a whole, the entire exposition turns out to be in D.

The genius of this fugue is that its subject is Delphic; it can be interpreted in two ways. Upon first hearing it sounds like sol-sol-sol-do-mi in the key of G. But, after hearing its answer, we retrospectively hear it as do-do-do-fa-la in the key of D. The fugue's answer makes us re-hear its subject from a different perspective.

While the architectural variation of this fugue plays with our perception of tonal centeredness, everything about it is well within the bounds of the tonal system. Bach has exploited our natural ability to perceive musical ideas in one way while they are happening, but in other ways after the fact--what I call, "making the box flip." While the composer has hinted of ways to hear the exposition, he has left us with considerable latitude in how we choose to hear it. As in the cube to the right, we derive pleasure in flitting from one perspective to the other.



If our ability to hear this subject in two ways is real and natural, what might Bach have done that even the most tolerant among us would have perceived as

contrived? Well, he could have identified this as fugue No. 22 in the cycle. In so doing he would have implied that it was in B-flat minor, calling into question all that we perceive as "real" when it comes to the meaning of "key." Given the pattern that he himself established, placement of this fugue in slot No. 22 would have been *contrived, unnatural, and unreal*.

Natural, Not Contrived

Tonality is a natural force, like gravity.
Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)

The foregoing analysis illustrates how Bach's music is *realistic* in that it subscribes to a natural order--a preexistent order (tonality and intonation), not of Bach's own creation. We may answer the earlier question by observing that Bach's music reveals not just a theoretical mind, but one that was committed to the Pythagorean view of music as "a venerable science of number and cosmic truth, one demanding of the pious observer deep philosophical contemplation and diligent, rational analysis."⁸

At the opposite end of the spectrum we have an ongoing "performance" of John Cage's *Organ2/ASLSP* ("As Slow as Possible"), begun in September of 2001 by the inflating of organ bellows in the city of Halberstadt, Germany.⁹ After a "rest" of 18 months, the first triad was sustained, with the help of weights, for more than a year until the next scheduled change, which happened to fall on Cage's birthday. Every year and a half, another triad will be articulated (I'm not making this up) until the composition concludes in slightly more than six centuries.

As a philosophical statement, *As Slow as Possible* attempts something. But as a work of art it fails. As mind numbing as the hum of a fluorescent lamp, it transcends nothing except anyone's ability to perceive or perform. *ASLSP* belongs, rather, to the category of what T. S. Eliot called the idyllic imagination, a self-absorbed enchantment with Cage's birthday for the next 600 years.

By way of contrast, consider the *Evensong* that has been performed every night except Mondays at Durham Cathedral for the last 900 years! This is a real work of art, with *real* philosophical implications, and a real impact. Nevertheless, the organizers of *ASLSP* consider it to be a "performance" because they have defined it that way. They see it as "an exciting and ambitious millennium project with consequences reaching far into the future," a work of such "importance" that they are soliciting financial endowment to its conclusion. They want us to give money, but I'll give it about four years.

Before the early moderns, Hobbes and Locke, the notion that one could

⁸ Thomas Christensen, "Bach among the Theorists," *Bach Perspectives* 3, University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. 27.

⁹ Halberstadt, 300 years B.C. (before Cage), was home to Andreas Werckmeister, whose *Musikalische Temperatur* (1691) sufficiently advanced the tuning of keyboard instruments to allow composition in every key. It was this potentiality that Bach proved in his *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Organists both, Bach and Werckmeister would not have been in tune with Cage's radical notion of the instrument.

define something into existence would have been considered laughable. But modernity is utterly committed to the idea; universals have no real existence apart from how we define them. The term for this philosophical orientation is *nominalism*: "The doctrine that universals or abstract concepts are mere names without any corresponding reality" (*O.E.D.*).

In his *Aesthetics of Music* (1998), Theodor Adorno defends nominalism in music by rejecting "trivial universality" and positing that vital and uncorrupted art is "synthetically processed." By this he means that everything is made up, contrived; music is whatever one defines it to be. Any theory that appeals to "the beautiful" is archaic, and "nothing is self-evident."

The logical conclusion to Adorno's nominalism is a world that can be turned upside down: where wickedness is re-defined as good, and the ugly as beautiful. The wages of nominalism are represented by the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's outrageous description of September 11 as "the greatest work of art ever." He marveled at how this "greatest work of art for the whole cosmos" had achieved "in one act what we in music cannot dream of." Similarly, British artist Damien Hirst described the attack as "visually stunning." He congratulated the terrorists for having achieved "something which nobody would ever have thought possible."¹⁰

If universality is trivial, "the beautiful" archaic, nothing self-evident, and art whatever one defines it to be, then why are we shocked by such comments? Isn't one artist's perspective as valid as another's? Isn't this just a matter of opinion? Is there such a thing as goodness in the universal sense? If so, is this fugue good because we like it, or do we like it because it is good? If the former, then is the fugue good only for those who like it and not good for those who don't? If so, then how can we converse intelligently about these things, much less agree?

We are shocked by September 11 because we understand that universals indeed exist, and that they derive their existence not from us, but from what is larger than us. There is a reality that does not come from us, something we cannot change by tweaking its definition. That universal might go something like this: it is corrupt to employ things to ends they cannot achieve, and for which they were not designed. It is corrupt to use a saw like a hammer, or vice versa. It is corrupt to fly an airplane (designed for safe transportation) into a building (engineered for a protective and productive work environment).

John Cage is remembered for introducing elements of chance or unpredictability into his compositions. His most famous aleatoric work is *Four Minutes, Thirty-Three Seconds*, where the pianist plays nothing. Often mischaracterized as silence, the work actually consists of whatever ambient sounds happen to occur between the "performer's" opening of the piano lid and taking a bow. Depending upon its context, the "music" might be a sneeze, a

¹⁰ Stockhausen made his remarks in Hamburg one week after the tragedy. In immediate response, the culture commission of Hamburg cancelled two of his concerts. Realizing that he had given offense, Stockhausen retracted his words and asked that they not be reported. He then departed the city "in distress." While Hirst later apologized for congratulating the terrorists, he apparently maintains his view of September 11 as a "work of art."

snicker, an embarrassed cough, somebody choking on a cough drop, booing in the back, or American Airlines Flight No. 11 slamming into the north tower of the World Trade Center, killing the 92 people aboard.

In *Four Minutes, Thirty-Three Seconds*, Cage implies that music is anything, therefore everything, therefore indistinguishable from anything, therefore nothing. Because "nothing" cannot be perceived as challenging or affirming anything, it denies the existence of any kind of order, and is therefore *immoral* (as per T. S. Eliot's understanding of that word).

Curiously, although John Cage scoffed at the idea of cosmic order, or a universal good in music, he understood the fallacy of chance when it came to eating wild mushrooms, of which he was an avid gourmet. There were *some* things that even he dared not leave to chance.¹¹ By declining to "define" the poisonous as edible, Cage acknowledged a reality that exists independently of definitions that elements of society may clamor to apply.

Islamists may call September 11 good, but that doesn't make it good. Stockhausen may call it art, but that doesn't make it art. When definitions are not in accord with reality, they do not change reality, just language. They hobble the meaning of "legs" by using them to swish flies from an ass. They represent what T. S. Eliot called the *corrupt imagination*.

The fugue is a representation of reality before the fact. Before this fugue, there were tones and time. These had the capacity to be combined in ways that were beautiful or ugly. They could be arranged so as to have relationships with each other or not, complement each other or not, resolve their dissonances or not, be monotonously similar, or introduce refreshing variety. Do you think that any of the foregoing criteria are universals? If so, what or who made them?

Did Bach create tones, time, beauty, relationships, complements, resolutions and variety, or was he entering into that which was bigger than himself? By entering the fugue ourselves, do we not join him in *theoria*, the contemplation of universals that exist to make our lives more peaceful and joyous?

Bach's music does what it was created to do, not something else. He has not collided typewriters with sewing machines and umbrellas, objects created for other purposes, and called them fugues. He has not made strettis of stray sounds that wandered through his brain. He has not flown airplanes into skyscrapers and called it art. His art is real and natural, not contrived; his music represents the moral imagination, not the diabolical and corrupt. And that is no "tale."

¹¹ Cage rationalized this inconsistency by declaring that there are poisonous mushrooms but no poisonous sounds. By the same "logic" (we might add), there are edible mushrooms but no edible sounds. Cage's reasoning here is typically obscurantist and modern.