

# The Meaningfulness of Objects

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I take as the epigraph for my memoir, *The Aunt's Mirrors*, three sentences from Edmund de Waal's memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*:

Objects have always been carried, sold, bartered, stolen, retrieved and lost.

People have always given gifts.

It is how you tell their stories that matters.

*The Aunt's Mirrors* and *The Hare with Amber Eyes* are both family memoirs, and both memoirs about Jewish families from Eastern Europe. But there is a deeper similarity between the two works. Both have a particular interest in the relationship between people, objects, and stories, and the meaningfulness that we might attach to these.

I took these lines as my epigraph because what appealed to me was the ambiguity in the final sentence: it is unclear whether 'their' refers to the 'objects' that the first sentence is about, or the 'people' that the second sentence is about.

What matters about objects are their stories and what matters about people are their stories too. At least, that is part of what matters about people. (We like to think that people have intrinsic value too; value that is independent of the stories we tell about them.) And it is interesting to think about the way in which the value of the stories that we tell about people interacts with the stories that we tell about objects, and the meaningfulness that comes from this interaction too.

What I think de Waal is driving at in the epigraph is the thought that the meaningfulness of objects and people is increased by the stories that we tell about them. And this is a particular kind of meaningfulness. For there are different ways in which things are meaningful to us, and any given thing can be meaningful in a number of different ways.

Today, I should like to think about the project that underlies *The Aunt's Mirrors*, and say something about the structure of the book that was the result of that project. Having done so, I should then like to think a bit about the meaningfulness of objects for de Waal, first, for him as a potter; and, secondly, for him as a memoirist. I shall then continue to reflect on my approach to the meaningfulness of objects for my memoir. I think that what will come out is an important difference in our respective approach to the meaningfulness of objects. For, where de Waal is concerned with the meaning that an object has for an *individual*, I am interested in something else: the shared sense of meaning that things have for people who participate in a shared form of life.

## 1. Structure of the book

I have designated *The Aunt's Mirrors* a 'family memoir'. It is a memoir in the sense that it is not a formal history of the subject, but a set of recollections; an informal account that does not aim at objectivity. But whereas memoirs are usually recollections about the life of an individual, these are recollections of the collective life of a family. It is an account of the life of my family, and it is an account based on the researches of my aunt and great-aunt, rather than my own researches.

The book is also unusual in its structure. It consists of seven chapters (most of my books are structured according to this good biblical number). Each chapter is named after one of the mirrors in my aunt's house: the black-framed mirror, the etched mirror, the gilt mirror, the armoire mirror, the chimneypiece mirror, the dressing-room mirror and the courtyard mirror.

Each chapter begins with a description of the mirror, and this leads on to a discussion of one of the branches of my family: my maternal grandmother's maternal family (the Lyons and Loewenthal families), who came to Australia in the 1850s and lived in Grafton; my grandmother's paternal family (the Brukarz family), who came to Australia in the 1880s and living in Rylstone; my maternal grandfather's paternal family (the Lasker family), who came to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s; my grandfather's maternal family (the Ferdinando family), who might be traced back to Abraham Israel Ferdinando Carvajal, a prominent Sephardi Jew in London at the time of the English civil war; and my maternal great-grandparents (Beryl and Baron Brukarz), who were both born in Australia, their two daughters, and five grandchildren, who all lived in Sydney.

But the discussion of my aunt and great's aunt's researches into each of these branches of the family is not really concerned with the minutiae of genealogy. I use each of these discussions to investigate one of the values that seems to have been important to the people in the book: the holiness of family life, the meaningfulness of objects, the reconciliation with the raging of family ghosts, the possibilities of reclaiming the past, and the love of ordinary people in all of their simple ordinariness.

So, as David Gonski observes in the foreword, it is a book that can be read on many levels. What matters to me about the book is the fact that it brings together these different aspects: objects, people, and values.

## 2. de Waal and meaningfulness of objects for him as a potter

Edmund de Waal is one of England's foremost potters. He is someone whose early life was deeply establishment, having grown up in and around the Church of England's cathedrals, where his father worked, and then reading English at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He has been making pots continuously since he was five years old. His practice as a potter has been influenced not only by the English tradition, but also by the Japanese tradition.

I have not met him, and have only seen a few examples of his work. I have heard others, who have met him, rhapsodise about his hands, which are huge and evidently quite distinctive. They are, it seems the hands one would expect a potter to have. But what he is

really known for is a distinctive style of pared back and contemplative ceramic art. More recently, he has moved from throwing individual pots to sets of objects. Often, these are commissioned for specific locations, and so they become installations, rather than individual objects.

There is no doubt that they betray the touch of a hand that is highly sensitive. De Waal's work demonstrates a sensitivity to the tactile properties of objects: how they look and feel. His work also has a contemplative quality, which is accentuated by the spaces in which the installations are created. So he is an artist who creates works that are expressive of emotion, and perhaps even spiritual in their contemplative qualities. This is a man for whom the practice of pottery is continuous with the practice of life. His work demonstrates the possibility of pottery as a contemporary art form. It is an expression of a certain form of urban life at the turn of the twenty-first century.

A man who creates thoughtful works of art, we might hope, would bring this thoughtfulness to the way in which he engages with the wider world. Indeed, de Waal has shown that he does just this. For me, what matters about his work is that he has stretched the possibilities for what matters about a pot. A pot is not something that can be valued in only one way. Yes, a pot must be functional. Yes, a pot must have certain formal properties that are appreciated in contemplation. But a pot's meaning cannot be reduced to either one or other of these. Both are part of the pot's meaning. And de Waal's work shows us that pots can have a range of other meanings too; meanings that resonate loudly with contemporary life. This approach to the meaningfulness of objects for de Waal the potter deeply informs the approach to the meaningfulness of objects adopted by de Waal the memoirist.

### 3. de Waal and meaningfulness of objects for him as a memoirist

Edmund de Waal comes from the Ephrussi family of Jewish bankers who were as powerful and influential as the Rothschilds, before the Second World War, but whose power and influence was utterly decimated by the War. And so de Waal grew up in an ordinary middle-class English household, albeit a somewhat unusual one, in that his father held numerous ecclesiastical posts which meant that the family lived in the cathedral close adjoining Canterbury and Lincoln Cathedrals in England.

De Waal was already an accomplished potter by the time that he decided to delve into his family history, and undertake the researches that resulted in *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. His researches were not those of the internet genealogist. His great-uncle has bequeathed to him a collection of netsuke, antique Japanese miniatures. The great-uncle lived for decades in Japan, where he died, and it was there that de Waal met him, and became close to him, while studying Japanese for a year.

De Waal's grandmother and her brother (his great-uncle) spent their childhood in one of the family's palaces in Vienna before the War. The family lost all of their assets during the War. Almost the only things that they recovered were these netsuke. A family maid hid these netsuke inside her mattress. She remembered the children playing with them in their mother's dressing-room, and she wanted to save them for the children. They were all that

she could save. After the War, she was able to hand them over to de Waal's grandmother, who gave them to her brother, who left them to his great-nephew.

De Waal's motivation was really to understand the history of this collection of netsuke. And his investigations took him back to the Paris of Proust, and beyond. Proust's Paris has a special meaning for the Ephrussi family, because Charles Ephrussi is thought to be the model for Proust's character, Charles Swann. It is also in Proust's Paris that de Waal's forebears acquired this collection of netsuke from a dealer who had imported them from the Orient. And De Waal is undoubtedly as interested in the history of these exquisite objects as he is in the history of his family.

So the collection of netsuke are meaningful for de Waal in a number of different ways. The meaning that they have for him as an inheritance from a beloved great-uncle. The meaning that they have for him as the only objects of his (once wealthy) family's collection to survive the collapse of the family fortune. The meaning that they have as a link with the family's history. The meaning that they have for him as a link with Proust, a consummate man of letters.

And the meaning that they have for him as beautiful artefacts. Experts have confirmed that this is a collection of the most exceptional quality. They exemplify the very best of the Japanese tradition of netsuke carving. For a potter, this is important. He is exceptionally sensitive to touch. And he writes exquisitely about the feeling of the netsuke; of what it is like to fondle one, or to carry it in his pocket. To my mind, the best writing in *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is the description of the netsuke: not the description of what they look like; but the description of what they feel like.

So there is a lot that can be said about the meaningfulness of the netsuke as objects, and the story of these objects, and the people who owned the netsuke at different times. At the time when I was working on *The Aunt's Mirrors*, I was rereading de Waal's memoir, and something struck me about the discussion of the meaningfulness of objects in *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. The kind of meaningfulness that seems to be central to de Waal's project in *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is strikingly at odds with the sense of meaningfulness that is central to *The Aunt's Mirrors*.

#### 4. Mirrors and their meaningfulness

My aunt's mirrors are central to the structure of my book, and my meditation on their meaningfulness is central to the project that finds expression in the book. But what is it that is meaningful about the mirrors? I approach this question from numerous angles in the book, and the book itself is my best attempt to answer the question.

I was reading or rereading a few memoirs at the time that I was writing this memoir. Some of them were fictional, or fictionalised. In particular, I was thinking about Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*. It is a set of interlocking short stories about his life in Berlin, which he leaves as the Nazis are starting to come to power, and the horrors are unfolding in the streets around him. So it overlaps with *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, and I was struck by

the fact that my family's history does not overlap with it at all, because I am writing about Jews who had the foresight to flee Europe some decades before the rise of the Nazis.

*Goodbye to Berlin* is, perhaps, famous for one passage more than any other:

“I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking... Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.”

Isherwood is quite explicit that he is simply recording what is going on around him in Berlin. He claims that he is not trying to make sense of it or ‘develop’ it. At once it was apparent to me that my memoir was fundamentally different from his. Because I cannot help thinking about what is going on around; of trying to make sense of it. I was house-sitting, and I was not content to observe the mirrors in the house. I needed to think about them.

In this respect, my memoir is akin to de Waal's. He is explicit about the fact that he is trying to engage with the meaningfulness of the objects around him and what they disclose about the people who owned them. It is an active, rather than a passive, business. For Isherwood, the question is whether he is going to think about the atrocities that are starting to be perpetrated around him, and the response of bystanders (including himself) to such atrocities. For de Waal, it is a question of thinking about the meaningfulness of objects around him. This requires a different kind of commitment. It requires a close attention to detail.

De Waal is at his best when he writes about the patina of an object, and also the way in which an object's patina can enhance the value of an object. And along the way, he comes to realise that objects have stories that are worth uncovering, through the historian's sleuthing, in addition to having a patina that is revealed by the connoisseur's eye. Perhaps, none of this should be surprising in the work of a potter. For he is someone who is naturally sensitive to the meaningfulness of objects, and the sense in which an individual object can be invested with meaning in numerous different ways. But then he does offer a remarkable insight.

Not content to write about the patina of his beloved netsuke and the story of them in the hands of their various owners, he then shifts his attention away from the netsuke, and onto the stories themselves:

It is not just things that carry stories with them. Stories are a kind of thing, too. Stories and objects share something, a patina... Perhaps patina is a process of rubbing back so that the essential is revealed, the way that a striated stone tumbled in a river feels irreducibly, the way that this netsuke of a fox has become little more than a memory of a nose and a tail. But it also seems additive, in the way that a piece of oak furniture gains over years and years of polishing, and the way the leaves of my medlar shine.

This passage was hugely important for me, because it led me to think about the significance of stories for understanding objects as well as people. But, more than that, it led me to see that stories themselves have levels of meaning, and the meaningfulness of stories becomes

enriched by their patina. And it is for this reason that I could not be passive as a camera, like Isherwood, when I engage with the people, objects, and stories in this book.

I have said that I am not a historian, and that this is a memoir, in which I reflect on the researches of my aunt and great-aunt. But this is an active process. Because the process of reflection adds to the patina of the stories of objects and people in this book. So in this sense, there is a great similarity with—and profound debt to—*The Hare with Amber Eyes*. But there is another sense in which I came to see that the meaningfulness of the patina that the stories and objects in my book have is quite different from the meaningfulness of the stories and objects in de Waal's.

## 5. Individual meaningfulness and collective meaningfulness

I take my epigraph from de Waal, and he takes his from Proust. In Proust's *Cities of the Plain*, Charles Swann makes the following comment, which de Waal apostrophes in the epigraph:

Even when one is no longer attached to things, it's still something to have been attached to them; because it was always for reasons which other people didn't grasp... Well, now that I'm a little too weary to live with other people, these old feelings, so personal and individual, that I had in the past, seem to me—it's the mania of all collectors—very precious. I open my heart to myself like a sort of vitrine, and examine one by one all those love affairs of which the world can know nothing.

Here we have a collector reflecting on the meaningfulness of his collection *for him*. What is important about things for Proust's Swann is that they meant something to him that other people didn't grasp; the feelings attached to Swann's objects are *personal* and *individual*, and this is precisely why he values them. I think it would be fair to say that Proust's work is perhaps one of the most profound studies that we have in personal and individual meaningfulness. And I think that it is also fair to say that de Waal's memoir falls within this tradition. It is precisely for this reason that the quote from Proust provides a fitting epitaph for de Waal's work.

But it would not be a fitting epigraph for my work, because my work is concerned with a fundamentally different kind of meaningfulness. Whereas Proust and de Waal are interested in the personal and individual meaning of objects, my memoir is concerned with something else: the shared and collective meaning of objects. This was something that resonated with Noel Pearson when he read the book, and he was kind enough to reflect on this when he launched *The Aunt's Mirrors* recently.

Let me read a few of the passages that Pearson quoted at the launch:

“And our lives gain meaning—at least in part—through our relationship with our forebears and the meaningfulness of their lives. In this way, our ancestors serve as something of a mirror for looking at the meaningfulness of our own lives. We see ourselves—and more than just ourselves—in a particular light when we look in the mirror.”

“My family remembers itself in simple, ordinary things, and in marriage and death. There is nothing out of the way; nothing particularly memorable, but we have remembered. We have loved to remember, and we have felt loved in remembering.”

“The family tradition of valuing objects has evolved. There are new ways of valuing them, but such values are continuous with the older values in the tradition. And there is a consciousness that valuing objects is a tradition that has endured within the family, and that engaging with objects is a connection with one’s forebears.”

Noel then explained:

“That is fundamentally resonant with the Aboriginal concept of family and the passing on of sacred and important objects between generations. The whole memory of the ancient past is carried in those objects.”

It would be a mistake to think that I deny the significance that the personal or the individual holds for the meaningfulness of our lives. However, my book does assert the significance of the collective meaningfulness that our lives might obtain from participating in a shared form of life. This is something that David Gonski picks up on in his foreword to *The Aunt’s Mirrors*; when he writes that we need to

“realise that we are a team with all the others who are lucky enough to live here, and that we need not just to fight for ourselves and to assume Australia will survive, but also to put our country in our thoughts. We live in a world that has an unhealthy obsession with personal authenticity: *The Aunt’s Mirrors* reminds us that generations of Australians have found that their lives gain meaning from participating in a shared form of life, and the more we reflect on this experience, the more we might come to embrace the meaningfulness that our individual lives have from participating in the life of the team.”

## 6. Personal and universal significance of my memoir

This book is a memoir. It is a memoir of family experience and meaningfulness. As such, it is obviously a deeply personal book for me. But I hope that it says something more universal about how a shared form of life gives collective meaning to the lives of the individuals who participate in it. In that respect, the story of my family in Australia serves to exemplify something more general about Australian society. It says something about the way that the lives of ordinary people can gain meaning from being part of a shared form of life.

And it also says something about the way in which objects can disclose the shared meaningfulness that individual lives have when they participate in a shared form of life. This is an important value that objects hold for us as individuals and communities. So I hope that you might buy a copy of the book, and, having bought it, read it, and, in reading it, gain some insight into the meaningfulness that is the sublime perspective from which the lives of seven generations of an ordinary Australian family form part of something timeless.