

The New Criterion

Features May 2017

Dialogues in Scrutopia

by *Daniel J. Mahoney*

On the recent works & widespread influence of Sir Roger Scruton.

How does one begin to classify the prodigious activities of Roger Scruton? He publishes a couple of books a year, one as good as the next. He is a philosopher (in the classical as well as the academic sense of the term), a man of letters, an astute political thinker, and a student of high culture in all its diverse manifestations. He has written successful operas as well as fine novels. “Public intellectual” doesn’t begin to describe the breadth and depth of his activities and reflection. He is the opposite of the “specialists without spirit” lamented by Max Weber in his famous 1919 essay “Science as a Vocation.” The academy has trouble finding a place for someone who wishes to think and speak authoritatively about the human world and its relationship to the whole of things. It is not surprising then that Scruton left the academic world in 1993 (after twenty years at London’s Birkbeck College and a stint at Boston University) to become a full-time writer and “man of letters” (his preferred self-description). As this volume well attests, he did so with few regrets.

As his faithful readers appreciate, Scruton is also a philosopher who can write. While he in no way shares the theoretical extremism and profound political irresponsibility of Nietzsche or Sartre (quite the contrary), he shares their aspiration to combine philosophy and literature, to speak and write with grace, eloquence, and profundity about the human world. He straddles the worlds of analytic and continental philosophy, sharing analytic philosophy’s desire for rigorous argumentation and continental philosophy’s ambition to speak about questions that really matter. While he admires first-rate analytical philosophers such as his friend David Wiggins (an analytic Aristotelian) and the American Thomas Nagel (who has recently challenged the reductionism and dogmatism at the heart of evolutionary theorizing), he is disturbed by the tendency of analytic philosophy to drive away “the human questions.” His project, if he has a project, is to recover philosophically the questions that matter to human beings.

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eloquence, and profundity about the human world.

This work is a narrated dialogue between Scruton and the Irish philosopher and journalist Mark Dooley.¹ Dooley is the author of the best book on Scruton's thought, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (2009), and is the editor of the indispensable *Roger Scruton Reader* (2009). He was once enamored of postmodern thought, writing sympathetic books on Jacques Derrida and the radical philosopher and theologian John Caputo. But under the influence of Scruton, Dooley has turned to philosophical conservatism and has become a thoughtful defender of what the Catholic Church has to offer modern men and women in search of truth and moral seriousness. Dooley is a perfect interlocutor for Scruton. He knows his work as well as any contemporary and is a fine thinker—and conversationalist—in his own right. In these exchanges, he brings Scruton's "settlement" in Wiltshire, England to life, allowing outsiders to experience the charms of Sunday Hill Farm, a largely self-contained world that Scruton whimsically calls "Scrutopia." At the beginning of the conversations, Dooley nicely captures how Scruton's thinking is "embodied in his homestead and lifestyle." This is a man with a precise sense of place, a man who loves England and its countryside and who embodies "the humane national loyalty" that he so eloquently defends. Scrutopia "is a world of farmers and philosophers, of Wagner and wine, of animals and Aristotle." In Scruton's rendering, this very English setting, which gives rise to humane judgment about what is a fitting way of life for human beings, is shorn of undue romanticism. Scruton does not despise cities or industrial civilization. He does not wish to universalize "Scrutopia," to make it the basis of an ideology or a political program. He writes eloquently about hunting as a way of life that connects three species and informs a dignified rural way of life. But he is not an "agrarian," or a "distributist," or an ideologist of any sort. That is part of the charm of "Scrutopia." It is a concrete reminder, a humanizing reminder, that human beings can live well in a modern world that gives little real thought to human flourishing.

Scruton rejects the entire modern "culture of repudiation" (a memorable term he has made famous), but he still finds a home for himself in the modern world. This is most evident in his 2014 book *How to be a Conservative*. While still rejecting the "hysteria of repudiation" he sees all around us, he finds much of value in liberal and even socialist accounts of modern politics and culture. His rhetoric is softer and his judgment is more equitable than it was thirty or forty years ago. Still, he is a man with a settled point of view, one who is committed to conserving what remains of high culture and civilization, not to mention decent politics in the modern world.

The formative intellectual experience for Scruton was being in Paris during the May events of 1968. He dedicates a wonderful chapter of his autobiographical *Gentle Regrets* (2005) to this frontal assault on civilized order. While the student rebels disrupted classes and proclaimed that it is "forbidden to forbid," Scruton instinctively sided with an authentically great man, General de Gaulle, who had saved France in 1940 and again in 1958. While the students tried to bring down the liberal university and the French Fifth Republic, Scruton's response to this crisis of civilization took the form of a careful reading of de Gaulle's *Mémoires de guerre*, a classic of French political literature, and a model of

humane political judgment. Asked to choose between the antinomians of '68 and the statesman who freely melded together magnanimity and moderation in his own capacious soul, Scruton chose de Gaulle. May 1968 also introduced Scruton to the continuing relevance of Edmund Burke. In his account in *Gentle Regrets* of how he became a conservative, Scruton writes that “Burke summarized all my instinctive doubts about the cry for liberation, all my hesitations about progress and about the unscrupulous belief in the future that has dominated and (in my view) perverted modern politics.” Scruton sided with Plato and Burke in defending a “form of politics that would also be a form of nurture—‘care of the soul,’” a care that would not forget absent generations. He had no time of day for “adolescent insouciance, a throwing away of all customs, institutions and achievements, for the sake of a momentary exultation which could have no lasting sense save anarchy.” By the early 1970s, Scruton was already a conservative in the sense of one committed to the preservation of Western civilization and “the best that has been thought and said.”

An important book would result from the experience of May 1968. *Thinkers of the New Left* (1985), revised and expanded in 2014 as *Fools, Frauds, and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left*, was Scruton’s response to the New Left’s nihilistic claim that all power is oppressive, that political and moral accountability and legitimate authority do not exist, that they are chimerical ideological justifications put forward by an ill-defined oppressor class. Scruton challenged the absurd claim that liberation and “social justice” would magically follow from the “easy holiday of destruction” and the “culture of repudiation” preached and practiced by the New Left. Yet Scruton’s response to the thinkers of the New Left was never simply polemical or narrowly “political.” For example, he carefully distinguished between Sartre the gifted philosopher and Sartre the shameful apologist for Communist totalitarianism. Sartre, for all his faults, did not belong to the Parisian “nonsense machine” of Althusser, Lacan, and now Badiou who really are impostors of the first order, spouting nonsense at the service of leftist “emancipation.” At his best, Sartre brought literature and philosophy together in a way that richly explored the challenges of human freedom. But a book like *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1961) was unworthy of Sartre’s gifts since it defends “fraternité-terreur” and reads, then and now, like a justification for Stalinist, Maoist, and Castroite terror and tyranny. Scruton makes all the right distinctions and gives serious thinkers their due while exposing ideological imposters for the frauds that they truly are. *Thinkers of the New Left* did not make Scruton many friends in the academy. But the revised version of the book has been widely recognized as a serious contribution to political philosophy and cultural criticism. It should be noted that in the book of conversations Scruton honors French thinkers such as Remi Brague, Pierre Manent, and Alain Besançon, who do not always receive sufficient recognition in the Anglophone work (outside of circles like *First Things*) even if they are highly respected in France and beyond. French thought, it must be insisted, is not exhausted by an obscurantist literature that is acclaimed “purely because of its left-wing credentials.”

Conversations with Roger Scruton dedicates an important chapter to Scruton’s efforts to help the intellectual underground in Poland and especially Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and 1980s (it should be noted that Scruton has been honored in both Czechoslovakia and Poland for these noble efforts that he made at some risk to himself). Dooley rightly notes that in his clandestine efforts on behalf of independent Czech and Polish thought, Scruton gave “concrete substance” to his anti-totalitarian convictions. As this volume makes clear, Scruton’s philosophy is profoundly anti-totalitarian,

opposed as it is to every form of scientism, reductionism, and contempt for the human person. Scruton has always defended three great “transcendentals”—the person, freedom, and the sacred. These are at the core of his metaphysical conservatism. Twentieth-century totalitarianism can be understood as a frontal assault on the bodies and souls of human beings—and of the three great transcendentals that give substance to human dignity.

Scruton saw in ideological revolution the self-deification of man.

In a revealing discussion, Dooley shows how these “three transcendental features of human experience” have direct relevance to the politics of ideological revolution. He cites Scruton’s powerful and profound 1989 essay “Man’s Second Disobedience: Reflections on the French Revolution.” Influenced by the work of Alain Besançon, Scruton saw in ideological revolution the self-deification of man through the positing of an “ideal community” that negated the existing order of things. “The worship of an idol”—self-deified man—“becomes a worship of nothing,” the triumph of pure negation. Only the restoration of the claims of a transcendental God can free humanity from a potent and destructive nothingness. One sees that, in 1989, Scruton was already on his way to a return to a more explicit Christian affirmation. In this chapter of *Conversations*, we learn of Scruton’s admiration for the great Czech philosopher (and spokesman for Charter 77) Jan Patočka, who applied the Platonic notion of the “care of the soul” to a political and social situation ravished by totalitarian mendacity. Scruton played a role in bringing Patočka’s great book *Plato and Europe* to the attention of the Western world. It should be noted that Scruton reads Czech and translated one of Václav Havel’s most philosophically discerning essays, “Politics and Conscience,” for *The Salisbury Review*.

In this context, mention must be made of Scruton’s superb novel *Notes from Underground* (2014). Set in Czechoslovakia circa 1985, this novel artfully conveys an atmosphere where brave souls can’t breathe freely yet hold on to hope and grace. *Notes* is not a hagiography of the “dissident” world—it, too, saw moral posturing and had its own sometimes insidious hierarchies. Scruton conveys a world where the ideological “lie” reigned and where brave souls successfully resisted it. He also captures that in-between world between moral integrity and open collaboration that was the fate of so many in a decaying yet frightfully repressive ideological regime. Scruton remains one of our best guides to a “surreal” world we are in danger of forgetting—or normalizing. My field, political science, provides little help in this regard. A literary work such as Scruton’s, informed by rich personal experience, can capture what reductive social science—obsessed with measuring “variables”—cannot begin to convey.

Anti-totalitarianism is one major facet—and consequence—of Scruton’s conservatism. His conservatism owes much to Burke and Hegel (the author of the *Philosophy of Right* and not the Marxified Hegel of Alexandre Kojève). In philosophy proper, the major influence is Immanuel Kant. Kant’s moral philosophy deeply informs Scruton’s account of moral and political accountability and

his view of the person as an “end” and not a “means,” a subject whose dignity needs to be affirmed and respected. Scruton’s Kantianism operates at “the flaming edge of things—where the empirical gives out and the transcendental glitters,” as he says in a particularly striking formulation. His emphasis is not so much on “the limits of knowledge,” as in more conventional accounts of Kant. Rather he explores those intimations of the “mysterious reality of the world” that can be gleaned from art, music, religious experience, and philosophical reflection on lived experience or the “life world.” He makes a reasonable, and not arbitrary, bet that these experiences are not mere projections but rather provide genuine evidence of the nature of reality. His philosophical reflections on what can be glimpsed of the noumenal realm have led him in recent years to a fuller embrace of the Christian religion. Scruton sometimes refers to his earlier period of “godless conservatism,” his “apprenticeship in atheism,” an apprenticeship most evident in his 1980 book *The Meaning of Conservatism*.

But as Mark Dooley points out, even during his “atheist” period, Scruton never repudiated religion as such. In *Sexual Desire* (1986), he saw human sexuality as the meeting of persons and not just the vehicle for the stimulation of “erogenous zones,” as Freud rather crudely called them. Scruton has always left a place for the sacred and for a conception of the person who is a soul and not merely a body, a subject and not a mere object in the order of nature. He has always been a theorist of the “life world” against every form of scientism and reductionism. This affirmation of the soul has led him back to a philosophical Christianity which is ever more evident in recent books such as *The Face of God* (2012) and *The Soul of the World* (2014). He is an organist in his local Anglican church and has even written a moving “personal history of the Church of England,” *Our Church* (2012). A critic of the scientific dogmatism at the heart of evolutionary theory, Scruton notes in *On Hunting* (1998) that the “freedom, translucency and moral presence” of the soul “are never mentioned in the book of evolution.”

Religion, unlike scientism, can do justice to the consciousness, freedom, and moral accountability inherent in the human person. In recent years, Scruton has concluded that God is not dead but is “waiting for us to make room for him” (see his 2008 article “The Return of Religion” in *The Roger Scruton Reader*). In *Conversations*, Scruton calls the Incarnation, the death of a mediating God on behalf of sinful man, a “profound thing” since God himself reconciles us to our own deaths. He also writes movingly about the penitence and forgiveness at the heart of the Christian dispensation. But his Christian affirmation is still incomplete. He confesses to Mark Dooley that he is “skeptical about the Resurrection and afterlife,” a skepticism that does not, he adds, rule out hope. Like all of us, Scruton has a hard time imagining the human form of “eternal life.” His philosophically minded Christianity, so attentive to the reality of the non-reducible soul, is only able to take this philosopher so far.

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reality of the human person.

In recent years, Scruton has defended a position he calls “cognitive dualism.” He illustrates it with the example of a smile. On one level, a smile is a merely physiological phenomenon, the movement of muscles, nerves, and bones. On another equally real level, it is the revelation of the human spirit and the “intentionality” at the heart of human freedom. It gives us access to another human person. As this example shows, cognitive dualism protects us against a scientism that denies the reality of the human person. But it can’t make a whole of the human being or of human experience. Perhaps Scruton needs to say more about the personal character of the scientific enterprise itself. As Marc Guerra has written, the distinctive operations of truly scientific inquiry “grow out of the desire to satiate human beings’ epistemic wonder about the full realm of nature, from the inanimate atom to the material and spiritual being who can scientifically study the inanimate atom.” “Cognitive dualism” cannot explain the scientific enterprise itself even if it is a provisional first step in responding to scientific reductionism.

Near the end of this delightful and instructive book, Mark Dooley notes “Scruton’s reputation is certainly not what it used to be.” He is now a Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature and has recently been knighted by the Queen. It is a far time from the 1980s when Scruton was something of an intellectual pariah and when his humane Conservatism was confused with fascism in some excitable—and decidedly illiberal—academic circles. Those old battles, too, are recounted in this volume. Thankfully, these days are mainly behind Scruton. In the conclusion of this volume, Dooley asks Scruton if he is hopeful “about the cause of conservatism generally.” Scruton responds that he is not. Yet he adds that the other side, the academic and cultural Left, has nothing to offer except “the repudiation of this feature of our inheritance, now of that.” Scruton ends on an elevating note. Despite everything, we must hold on to what we “know and love.” We must be practitioners of the Platonic “care of the soul” and upholders of the great and primordial Burkean “contract” that connects the living, the dead, and the yet to be born. Above all, we must be sensitive to the “glimmers of transcendence” that emanate from “the edge of things.” As all of this suggests, it is very rewarding to converse with Roger Scruton.

1 Conversations with Roger Scruton, by Roger Scruton and Mark Dooley; Bloomsbury, 213 pages, \$28.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 35 Number 9, on page 19

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newcriterion.com/issues/2017/5/dialogues-in-scrutopia