ROGER SCRUTON

Roger Vernon Scruton

27 February 1944 – 12 January 2020

elected Fellow of the British Academy 2008

by

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There can be little doubt that by the time of his death in 2020 Sir Roger Scruton had become one of the most important thinkers of his time, not just in Britain, but throughout the English-speaking world and in Europe, particularly in Central Europe. The term 'thinker' is used advisedly here. For while Scruton was primarily and pre-eminently a philosopher, indeed an academic philosopher, his range and influence extended into many fields, including religion, music, architecture, politics, the environment, culture in a general sense, the writing of novels, the appreciation of wine, defences of hunting and traditional country life and the nature of animal rights. In addition to his writing, he composed music, including two operas, was a publisher and editor and advised governments. He was active politically in this country and played a significant role in dissident movements in the Eastern bloc before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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ROGER SCRUTON

Academic career

Roger Vernon Scruton was born in Lincolnshire in 1944, and educated at the Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe from 1954 to 1961. He then attended Jesus College, Cambridge, from 1962 to 1965 and again from 1967 to 1969. He took a Double First in Moral Sciences (Philosophy) in 1967, after which he spent a year as a lecteur in the University College of Pau. Returning to Cambridge in 1967, he worked on a PhD in Philosophy for a thesis on aesthetics (gained in 1972). From 1969 to 1971 he was a Research Fellow at Peterhouse, Cambridge, moving to a Lectureship in Philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, in 1971. He became Reader in Philosophy in 1979 and Professor of Aesthetics in 1985. While teaching at Birkbeck College he studied for the Bar, being called at the Inner Temple in 1978. In 1992 he moved to Boston University as Professor of Philosophy and University Professor, a post he held until 1995. Thereafter, until his death, he worked as a freelance writer and scholar, based in his Wiltshire farm, though holding a number of part-time or temporary academic posts. These included Research Professor at the Institute of Psychological Sciences in Arlington, Virginia (2005–8), Visiting Professor in the James Madison Program, University of Princeton (2006), Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Fellow of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford (2009 until his death) and Visiting Professor in the School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Film Studies at the University of St Andrews (2011–14). From 2015 he was Visiting Professor in the School of Humanities at the University of Buckingham, leading the MA programme in Philosophy and supervising PhD candidates. He was also a Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington DC. Scruton gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of St Andrews in 2010,[1] and the Stanton Lectures in the Divinity School at the University of Cambridge in 2011.[2]

Among Scruton's many honours were Fellowships of the European Academy of Arts and Sciences (1995), of the Royal Society of Literature (2003) and of the British Academy (2008), and his knighthood (2016, for services to 'philosophy, teaching and public education'). He received prestigious awards from the governments of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in recognition of his contribution to the liberation of those countries from communism and the Soviet empire. This is not the place to go into detail on this chapter of Scruton's life, save to say his work in Eastern Europe involved considerable personal courage as well as organisational ability. For those interested in this side of Scruton's life and career, a revealing account of the work of the Jan Hus Foundation in Czechoslovakia (of which Scruton was Co-Founder and a

[1] Published as *The Face of God* (London: Continuum, 2012).
[2] Published as *The Soul of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Trustee), can be found in *The Velvet Philosophers* by Barbara Day.[3] We should also note his work with the Jagiellonian Trust in Poland and Hungary (Co-Founder and Trustee) and with the Anglo-Lebanese Cultural Association (Founder and Trustee). For different, but easily understandable reasons, both of these organisations are now defunct. Scruton himself tellingly evoked the atmosphere of 1980s Czechoslovakia in his novel *Notes from Underground*,[4] while the fall-out from the Velvet Revolution is the subject of *An Angel Passes*, an opera libretto which Scruton completed shortly before his death (and which has been set to music by David Matthews under the title of *Anna*).

During his lifetime Scruton published more than fifty books. These include half a dozen novels and collections of short stories, two Platonic dialogues and works of personal reflection and polemic. Well over half of his books will, by any standards, count as philosophical, indeed rigorously so. Many are on aesthetics, on music and architecture in particular, but there are also works of political philosophy, of philosophy of religion, of environmental philosophy, of the history of philosophy, including succinct studies of Kant and Spinoza, together with an important study of the nature of sexual desire and a magisterial survey of modern philosophy.

As far as his philosophical writing goes, Scruton's approach is firmly anglophone. That is to say, he is always clear, he gives arguments, which are normally as rigorous as these things should be, and he attends to and answers objections (or at least gives answers to objections). But, as even the briefest of surveys show, the topics with which Scruton mainly deals are not those which command the most prestige and attention in the Anglo-American philosophical academy. His interest lies in topics of clear and immediate interest and relevance to any moderately reflective human being. They are not the abstruse and increasingly scholastic matters treated in a semi-technical language bespattered with otiose symbolism bearing only a passing resemblance to English, which occupy so much time and effort in British and American philosophy departments. Scruton was perfectly at home in the subject matter of standard Anglo-American philosophy, as his writing at times demonstrates.[5] Having a background in science at school, changing to philosophy only when he entered Cambridge, he was also at home in technical work in the philosophy of science. But his style was never that of the technophiles, nor would his work ever lapse into what Ruskin would have seen as the 'mere rotatory motion' of so many of his philosophical peers. In his philosophical interests he was more continental than analytic, touching on topics that featured in the writings of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Badiou and the like, rather

[3] London: Claridge Press, 1999.
[4] New York: Beaufort Books, 2014.
[5] Scruton's *Modern Philosophy: an Introduction and Survey* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

than those of his British and American colleagues. However, his continental leanings did not lead him to ape either the style or the conclusions of Foucault, Derrida and their followers. Far from it; he abhorred what he took to be their shiftiness, their deliberate misuse of language and their systematic subversion of morals and decency. In short, there is a sense in which Scruton was a continental philosopher, rather than an analytic, as he himself said at times, but, as we will see, his was a conservative continentalism.

Controversy

If Scruton had confined himself to academic writing, and had not been the courageous and energetic figure he was, he would have saved himself and his friends a deal of trouble. His thirty or so books on philosophical themes would have been enough to establish his reputation and would in all probability have gained him a Fellowship of the British Academy long before 2008, an honour which, when it came, gave him great satisfaction. But as Tharaud memorably said of Charles Péguy, so with Scruton: 'all through your life the sound of breaking glass'. Two early experiences had a considerable influence on Scruton, and glass was then broken, due to his adoption of a conservative political philosophy, and its promulgation in a way that many inside the academy found objectionable. Outside the academy too there were many who objected vociferously to Scruton's views and expression, but also many others who found his writing compelling and fascinating, which hardly endeared him to his critics.

The first of Scruton's formative experiences was intermittent and long term, namely his relationship with his father, which was difficult and combative. It even resulted in the young Scruton leaving home before he went up to Cambridge. As he himself tells us,[6] Jack Scruton was overbearing and 'full of gall'. A primary school teacher, he was an enthusiast for the English countryside and ancient building, which influenced the young Scruton positively, but he was also an implacable opponent of the political status quo and what he saw as the English establishment and class system. He even opposed the grammar school system from which his son was benefiting. All this inclined the young Scruton to value the very objects of his father's disapproval, a trait which developed gradually over the years, but the second experience was much more definitely focused.

Roger Scruton was in Paris in May 1968, during the student riots of that year. He saw the destructive behaviour of the rioting students as brattish in the extreme, a case of a self-indulgent *jeunesse dorée* despoiling the inheritance which made their

[6] *England, an Elegy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), chapter 1.

privileged lives and gestures of revolt possible. But the thinking of the intellectuals who inspired them was even worse:

> Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, the bible of the *soixante-huitards* … seemed to justify every form of transgression, by showing that obedience is merely defeat. It is an artful book, composed with a satanic mendacity, selectively appropriating facts in order to show that culture and knowledge are nothing but 'discourses' of power. The book is not a work of philosophy, but an exercise in rhetoric. Its goal is subversion, not truth, and it is careful to argue … that 'truth' requires inverted commas, that it changes from epoch to epoch … imposed by the class that profits from its propagation… Look everywhere for power … and you will find it. Where there is power, there is oppression. And where there is oppression there is the right to destroy. In the street below my windows was the translation of that message into deeds.[7]

This passage is worth quoting at length, not only because it is a succinct expression of Scruton's own objection to what he saw from his window in 1968, but because his words are, if anything, even more relevant in 2020. In university departments of humanities and social sciences of our day it has become fashionable to think that there is no such thing as truth, but only the discourses and rhetoric of the oppressors and the powerful. It is also taken for granted that any form of inequality is per se objectionable, and, as Foucault and his followers would have it, usually the result of some form of systematic or institutional oppression or racism, a point to which we will return.

On his return from Paris to Cambridge, Scruton found his view of the student riots and his growing conservatism put him at odds with the prevailing attitude in the academy and also with what passed for enlightened opinion generally. He began to seek out those few in academia and professional politics who felt like him (which, even in the Conservative party, was always a minority). From 1974 onwards he engaged in what he referred to as 'opinionated' journalism, notably in the early days in *The Times*. Feeling a need for a forum for what had crystallised into a form of Burkean conservatism, and which he had already adumbrated in *The Meaning of Conservatism*,[8] in 1982 he launched and edited a quarterly magazine called *The Salisbury Review*. For a small-circulation journal of ideas and comment (never as much as 2,000, and usually closer to or below 1,000), *The Salisbury Review* exercised an extraordinary influence, gaining an even more extraordinary notoriety. Its influence and indeed its notoriety were due largely to Scruton's own contributions and his editorship, which continued until 2001. (Under different editors the *Review* was still appearing in 2020.)

[7] *Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 35.
[8] London: Penguin, 1980.

Scruton's work as editor included soliciting contributions from prominent conservative thinkers, such as Enoch Powell, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Quinlan Terry, C. H. Sisson and Norman Stone, but also, and admirably, often anonymous pieces smuggled out of Eastern Europe, including articles by Václav Havel and Ján Čarnogurský (later to become Prime Minister of Slovakia). The articles from the East did not show much appreciation for the Western 'peace' movements prominent in the 1980s, but did stress the often under-estimated importance of religion in the fight against communism. Even more controversially, Scruton published articles questioning the multi-cultural policies and attitudes then prominent in education and elsewhere in the public services in Britain. Both the articles and the *Review* were inevitably immediately branded as 'racist', with all the opprobrium such an accusation brings, whether justified or not.

One of these articles was by a then unknown headmaster from Bradford, Ray Honeyford. Despite the fact much of what Honeyford said is now widely accepted even on the left, in 1984 it provoked outrage nationally and daily demonstrations outside his school, some organised with support from within Bradford University. Honeyford was sacked and, though reinstated after a bitter struggle, eventually resigned, which no doubt served to warn off other potential contributors. *The Salisbury Review* was now known throughout the country by name and reputation, if not by readership—few actually read it, in part because its opposition made it difficult to get hold of. Scruton himself rapidly became a hate figure, subjected to libel, violence, and 'cancellation' (as it would now be called). Then in 1985 he published a selection of his own articles from *The Salisbury Review* under the title of *Thinkers of the New Left*. The publisher was Longman, which was attacked for having published Scruton's robust but never unfair attacks on such iconic figures as E. P. Thompson, Ronald Dworkin, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács and Jean-Paul Sartre. Of the author of *Being and Nothingness*, it is worth recording that Scruton was always in a sense an admirer: Sartre's 'writing is charming, mephistophelean, enticing the reader with a kind of diabolical grace towards the altar of Nothingness … (his) intellectual power and literary gift have no match in recent left-wing writing, and (his) genius is not unfairly compared to that of Marx'.[9] The 1985 book was reissued in 2015 under the new title of *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands*. Bloomsbury/Continuum placed its hand into the fire in which Longman had been burned thirty years earlier, and others, including Ralph Miliband, Eric Hobsbawm, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, were added to the original list.

The 1980s were a difficult time for Scruton. In addition to the controversies aroused by his journalism and *The Salisbury Review*, he had published serious

[9] *Thinkers of the New Left*, p. 176.

academic books on politics (*The Meaning of Conservatism*), sexuality[10] and architecture.[11] While serious and seriously argued, each of these books promoted unfashionable views, and, in the case of the architecture book, offended a powerful vested interest. In 1987 he founded a small press (the Claridge Press) for the publication of pamphlets and books which reflected Scruton's own positions, and which continued until 2004. All these forays into the unthinkable, both academic and polemical, underlined in many people's minds the sense that Scruton was himself, in a sense, beyond the pale.

At least, if that were not true generally, that is how it came to seem to Scruton himself: academic life was not fit for him, nor he for it (though, against this perception, it is worth recalling not just that many readers outside the academy cherished his writings, but also that among his many students he was regarded with genuine appreciation for his excellent teaching and for the personal attention he gave them, way beyond what was required or expected). Scruton was indeed a Professor at Birkbeck College, but Professor of Aesthetics, not of Philosophy. This was due to the fact that one of the academic assessors for his promotion considered that, the undoubted quality of his strictly academic work notwithstanding, his articles for *The Times* demonstrated that his intellectual powers were such as to disqualify him from a university chair. 'In time I came to see that he was right. Someone who believes in real distinctions between people has no place in a humanities department, the main purpose of which is to deliver the ideology required by life in the postmodern world. What the *soixante-huitards* had hoped to achieve by violence has been accomplished far more effectively by the peaceful self-censorship natural to the academic mind.'[12] Scruton left Birkbeck in 1992 and spent three years at Boston University, after which he turned his back on the academic world, to focus on his writing and farming, having bought a farm in Wiltshire. But farming did not slow down his literary or his philosophical output.

Aesthetics

In his early work, beginning with his Cambridge doctorate and *Art and the Imagination*,[13] Scruton developed a subtle and distinctive approach to aesthetics. In a summary of his position,[14] he places aesthetic experience somewhere between the objective and impersonal accounts afforded by natural science and the strictly

[10] *Sexual Desire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986).
[11] *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen, 1979).
[12] *Gentle Regrets*, p. 55.
[13] London: Methuen, 1974.
[14] *The Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 13.

obligatory domain of the moral, but nevertheless connected to both. The aesthetic imagination 'represents the world' (or the aspect of the world we are attending to) 'as informed by the values of the observer'; the world as speaking to us, rather than in terms of the objective impersonal categories of science which prescind from our reactions and present the world and its workings as they are in and for themselves, independently of us. But in leading us to see the world or the object in question in terms of its value for us, the aesthetic 'also has a peculiar practical significance', which will include moral significance, but is not confined to that. Practical significance will include the delight or disgust an object or situation affords, and much else besides its strictly moral worth or significance, whether it is fitting, funny, beautiful, bizarre, tragic, graceful, awkward and so on. Indeed an aesthetically apprehended object may have no moral significance, beyond being what it is, as in the case of a beautiful flower, which we cherish for its own sake, and about the beauty of which the categories of science are silent.

But, in perceiving something aesthetically, we are not evincing a purely idiosyncratic reaction. We are going beyond mere individual taste (such as a preference for dark over milk chocolate) into a realm expecting and seeking the agreement of other similarly placed observers. (Here, as so often in his thinking, Scruton follows Kant.) 'In the light of a theory of the (aesthetic) imagination we can explain why the aesthetic judgement aims at objectivity, why it is connected to the sensuous experience of its object, and why it is an inescapable feature of the moral life.'[15] It aims at objectivity because aesthetic response expects agreement from other observers; it is connected to the sensuous experience of the object because our imagination needs experience of the object to work on—a mere description of its qualities will not do; it is connected to the moral life, because the moral dimension is a crucial element in much of how and why we place value on things. In Scruton's analysis of the aesthetic, art is significant because artistic objects are created primarily for an aesthetic response, though, as we will see, the aesthetic realm is not confined to the world of art.

Aesthetic experience is thus grounded in the imaginative experience of the perceiver, which sees the world and its objects in terms of the meanings implicit in our aims, actions and emotions. The concepts and explanations generated in this type of understanding and the means developed to express them have evolved in answer to the needs of generations, and cannot be replaced by the deeper-level scientific accounts which abstract from the appearances of things in order to reveal their impersonal and underlying structures and causation. Science displaces the observer and his or her experience from the centre of the picture, treating it as of no more significance than any other part of the world of naturalistic causes and events. Thus a purely scientific

[15] *The Aesthetic Imagination*.

picture of the world may lead to an estrangement of the human subject from the world, from how the world appears to us and how we are to conduct our lives within it. In science these matters are given no more weight or significance than any other state or event in the physical universe.

In an example Scruton uses a number of times, he contrasts the pigments and blobs of paint that a painting such as the *Mona Lisa* consists of physically, and which are analysable in the value-free categories of chemistry and physics and their causal explanations, with how we actually see it as a painting and what the painting means to us. Key to Scruton's thinking at this point is the way the painting conveys a sense of what life means (very strong in Leonardo's case, as Walter Pater among many others has shown), of how our hopes and fears might be shown forth within it, of how the human relates to the organic and the inorganic (again crucial in Leonardo) and so on. It is easy to see how analyses of this sort might apply in the case of representational and discursive arts, such as painting, sculpture, fiction and poetry.

Thus Leonardo conveys a deep sense of the unity of creation and created forms in his work, but he is not just telling us this; he shows it by drawing and painting the exquisite patterning of rocks, water, plants, bodily organs, human hair and much more. He thus brings out unseen analogies and isomorphisms to articulate our sense of who and what we are, of how we stand in relation to the world, and of how the world stands in relation to us (sometimes, in Leonardo's case, a sublime power by which and within which we are submerged, but at other times with humanity as the centre and apex of that world, its timeless consummation and interpreter). An inferior artist might strive to convey the same sorts of feelings about the world, but fail in the execution, be lacking in delicacy, depth, strength, insight, perception, invention and other such crucial dimensions. Similarly, a work of art might fail or succeed on a moral level. Titian's *Rape of Lucretia* shows the brutality and uncontrollable passion of Tarquin and the desperation of his victim; Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* is more questionable, revelling in the sensuous decadence of the horror; and one wonders just what Warhol was intending with his photomontages of car crashes and executions.

Seeing works of art aesthetically, in terms of how they relate to or affect our values, opens the necessity of asking whether what the work is showing is true. Is it worth showing? Does it succeed in what it attempts and in what sort of way? Does it ennoble, or does it, in D. H. Lawrence's terms, 'do dirt on life'? In this regard, Scruton follows in the footsteps of writers such as Ruskin and Leavis, as he acknowledges. And he found, as they would have found, much or even most of what passes for art in the twenty-first century as wanting in various respects, including the moral. Much of what we see in contemporary art galleries is, in Scruton's memorable phrase 'real junk in quotation marks'.

Music

Scruton argued that, though his aesthetic theory is less easy to apply to the non-representational form of music, music can still be brought within it. As with his example of the *Mona Lisa*, we can see a work of music in terms of its separate and distinct sounds, ultimately wave patterns in the atmosphere, but that is not how we hear it. We hear it in what he calls an 'acousmatic' realm, in which the sounds have an inner meaning or logic of perceived or imagined feeling and movement. We hear in music not noise and the physical notes, regarded purely as the product of sound waves interacting with our ears and brain, but personality, feeling and an attitude to the world, pure and abstracted from the contingent circumstances which give rise to such things. Scruton's acousmatic account of music, importantly, notes that what music expresses as music must be hearable, even if the ability to hear it fully or properly requires (as it surely does) habituation and education. But insisting on the essential ability to hear music leads Scruton to reject demands that music be composed according to patterns and systems whose existence can be discerned only by analysing scores and understanding quasi-mathematical formulae and instructions not apparent in the hearing of the composition. Insisting on the way we actually hear music to be based on tonal patterns with deep historical—even biological—roots also made Scruton hostile to theoretically inspired attempts to write music in defiance of what has emerged through long evolution and practice.

Even without anything expressible in words, in music a form of agency is revealed. Like Plato and Nietzsche (though disagreeing with the latter over Wagner), Scruton finds much music to inculcate sentimentality, violence and other negative emotions and attitudes. But in the case of what he thought of as the meditative masterpieces of our tradition, he sees a transcendental meaning: a 'You' (the composer, as composer rather than the empirical personality) addressing and summoning an 'I', the individual listener, and indeed a 'we'. This 'we' is all of us who listen and understand. Entering the spirit of the piece, we find ourselves and our feelings, including feeling we hardly knew we had, endorsed and enshrined in a community of understanding and appreciation. For a moment isolation is overcome; for better or worse, we know we are not alone.

As befitted one who was himself a musician, some of Scruton's most powerful writing is on music.[16] In it he combines and interweaves development of the theoretical

[16] See particularly *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and the three Wagner studies: *Death Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); *The Ring of Truth: the Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); and *Wagner's Parsifal: the Music of Redemption* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

ideas on the acousmatic which we have been sketching with detailed and perceptive discussions of a wide range of the meditative masterpieces he so revered. We can hint at his tone and ambition here by quoting directly:

> Art is the record of human ideals, and in abstract music these ideals concern the highest order of our feelings—the order that is free from pretence, which confronts hardship in the way that we hear Beethoven confronting hardship in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony; which gives itself completely as Mozart does in his instrumental works; or which wins from tragedy the consolations of tenderness that Schubert finds in the sublime C major Quintet.[17]

Architecture

Art may be the record of human ideals, but crucial to Scruton's thinking was the insight that aesthetics is not confined to the art we have to make a special effort to encounter. As he was fond of saying, if you do not like modern music or contemporary art or literature, you can avoid it; but architecture cannot be avoided. All of us encounter works of architecture every day, and not just the grand or grandiose ones that get studied and written about, but the houses, shops and other buildings and townscapes in which we pass our lives. Much of Scruton's most impassioned writing, philosophic and journalistic, concerned what might be called the everyday aesthetics of the environment, a campaign which received recognition when in 2018 he was appointed to chair the government commission 'Building Better, Building Beautiful'.

It was in 1979, with *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, that he established himself as a figure to be reckoned with in a field that had been almost wholly neglected philosophically. In it he took issue with many of the dogmas used to justify the modernist approach to architecture, including memorably a forcefully critical analysis of the work of Siegfried Giedion. Ornament was not crime, as Adolf Loos averred, nor was there something inherently immoral in working in old styles, as contemporary architectural dogma would have it. Neither did form have to follow function, another architectural sacred cow, which on analysis proved to be almost meaningless, but whose spirit led to the building of so much that was both ugly *and* functionless.

What Scruton was objecting to was an environment without charm, grace, comfort, livability and the potential for individual taste, which is what he saw many post-war developments in the Britain of 1979. Instead, our cities and towns were increasingly dominated by the geometric, angular, concrete, blandly shadeless and all too often graffiti-ridden and crime-infested estates and shopping centres produced according to

[17] *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 55.

the principles, or what were thought to be the principles, of the heroes of modern architecture, such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. And, appearances aside, there was, in Scruton's view, a political dimension to the schemes of modernist architecture, apart from the clearly questionable (but often unquestioned) claim that only modernist architecture was legitimate in the twentieth century. In his own words, writing about Le Corbusier's plan to demolish all of Paris north of the Seine and replace it with high-rise towers: 'The modernist pioneers were social and political activists, who wished to squeeze the disorderly human material that constitutes a city into a socialist straightjacket. Architecture, for them, was one part of a new and all-comprehending system of control… Le Corbusier never asked himself about whether people wanted to live in this new utopia… History (as understood by the modernist project) required them to be there, and that was that.'[18] *The Aesthetics of Architecture* coincided roughly with the Prince of Wales's campaign against modern architecture, which did nothing to endear Scruton to the architectural establishment.

Oikophilia and nation

Underlying much of Scruton's thinking about architecture, and against the grandiosity and historical slate-cleaning of the most fashionable architects of the day, was a deep sense that ornament, form and familiarity have their own intrinsic value, which make both space and shelter livable, and which transform a 'unit of habitation' (to use the modernist phrase) into a home. Home, indeed, became a central concept for Scruton, both philosophically and practically, particularly in his later years. He came to see human beings as first and foremost home seekers, in what he used to refer to as this 'vale of tears'. As individuals we seek ontological rootedness, to use a phrase of Simon May's, to which Scruton referred on a number of occasions. We depend on, or seek, a person or persons, a place and a community to form the ground of one's being. To express this sense Scruton coined the term 'oikophilia' (love of home), a concept which came to dominate his thinking about towns and architecture, but also about the land and the country.

Here, in part inspired by his own life as a farmer and countryman, Scruton developed an approach to the environment which cherished the traditional and the natural against the depredations of industrial agriculture, urbanisation of the countryside and, above all, plastic. In *Green Philosophy: How To Think Seriously About the Planet*, an important treatise on the environment and our place within it,[19]

[18] *Gentle Regrets*, p. 198.
[19] London: Atlantic Books, 2012.

alongside a measured and informed discussion of global warming/climate change and other narrowly environmental issues, Scruton also develops his account of oikophilia. It should be stressed that oikophilia does not imply xenophobia, a charge which can hardly be laid against Scruton himself, with his command of Turkish and Arabic, alongside most of the major European languages and his love of many other cultures. One can love one's home, without hating or fearing the foreigner. But oikophilia will make one cautious, as Scruton was, about globalisation and mass migration where these phenomena uproot old identities and forms of belonging.

In *Green Philosophy* Scruton wrote eloquently about the relationship between home and nation:

> It is in contrast to tribal and religious forms of membership that the nation should be understood. By a nation I mean a people settled in a certain territory, who share language, institutions, customs and a sense of history and who regard themselves as equally committed to both their place of residence and to the legal and political process that governs it. Members of tribes see each other as a family; members of religious communities see each other as the faithful; members of nations see each other as neighbours … a first person plural adapted to the society of strangers, and to the peaceful co-existence of people who share no family loyalties or religious creed… Nations are defined not by kinship or religion but by a homeland. Europe owes some of its greatness to the fact that the primary loyalties of the European people have been detached from religion and reattached to the land.[20]

This sense of nationhood, which will include the USA and some other non-European jurisdictions, is interestingly developed in *The West and the Rest*.[21] Many will doubtless disagree with Scruton on much of this, particularly those free marketeers insistent on global trade and the large number of political theorists and bureaucracies currently advocating 'no borders' and a transnational universalism. There are questions to be asked about what Scruton says here, particularly about what happens when a would-be nation has no territory or when two mutually hostile groups occupy the same territory. Perhaps Scruton's account of the nation is easier to apply from the point of view of a land which has not been successfully invaded since 1066 (despite the efforts of the Spanish, the Dutch, the French and the Germans to do so). Nevertheless, the picture Scruton paints here, one few others are even beginning to sketch, obviously chimes with the largely unspoken feelings of many in Britain. In Scruton's favour it can be said that one should be cautious in undermining the basis on which these feelings have for long rested, because they have clearly contributed to a peace and order in Britain over many centuries, during which other places have been riven by war and revolution.

[20] *Green Philosophy*, pp. 240–1.
[21] London: Continuum, 2002.

Politics

To turn directly to Scruton's politics, against socialists and progressives of all stripes, including architectural revolutionaries, the first thing that Scruton will contest is the claim that history ever *requires* anything. As Edmund Burke recognised in 1790, insisting that history requires anything, and forcing recalcitrant humans to march to its tune, is to take a large step down the road to tyranny; and, as Burke also recognised, upsetting a settled social order in which power is gentle and obedience liberal in order to push through utopian blueprints, will usher in a succession of unforeseen and probably bloody disasters. The offences consequent on such policies would be the more reprehensible if, as Burke and Scruton both believed of Britain, they were to be imposed on a nation with a settled constitution with the history of a long and peaceable evolution within a social order both continuous and vital.

Of that history Scruton wrote eloquently in his contribution to the symposium *Town and Country*,[22] which encapsulates much of his thought and feeling:

> The past is not a book to be read, but a book to be written in. We learn from it, but only by discovering how to accommodate our action and lifestyles to its pages. It is valuable to us because it contains people, without whose striving and suffering we ourselves would not exist. These people produced the contours of our country; but they also produced its institutions and laws, and fought to preserve them… We do not merely study the past: we *inherit* it, from people to whom we are bound by natural piety. Inheritance brings with it not only the rights of ownership, but the duties of trusteeship. Things fought for and died for should not be idly squandered. For they are the property of others, who are not yet born.[23]

That inheritance includes for Scruton what he called 'congenial government', which, with order, he placed above the somewhat elusive sprite of freedom.[24] He valued the common law tradition above all, through which specific rights and customs have emerged gradually and peacefully, without recourse to abstract principles and formal legislation, in tandem with the development of the other institutions of our constitutions. And as a true Burkean, he valued the little platoons, the autonomous activity of groups and individuals acting on their own initiative without government interference, direction or regulation—the increasing amount of which he deplored.

While Scruton valued the free market as the best way we know of producing and distributing goods, he was, as already remarked, no enthusiast for globalisation. At the same time, when we operate within a market, it is brought home to us in a salutary

[22] Co-edited by Scruton and Anthony Barnett (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998).
[23] *Town and Country*, pp. 320–1.
[24] *The Meaning of Conservatism*, p. 19.

way that goods do not exist without work and effort. This basic reality is ignored or evaded by most contemporary political philosophers who, like many of today's intelligentsia, take the pursuit of equality as a premise, and advocate state-organised legislation and redistribution to achieve it. For Scruton, any such attempt is not only potentially tyrannical; it also ignores salient features of human existence, those that make us who, what and where we are, including one's birth and upbringing, one's own effort and one's own responsibility, as well as individual difference and diversity. The attempt to equalise human beings, except before God and the law, amounts, in the telling words of David Wiggins, to 'a metaphysical crusade against contingency'. It cannot end well; indeed, it cannot end at all, because zealots will always discover yet new inequalities that need action. Worse, the passion for equality makes envy and resentment the driving force of political endeavour, ignoring better and more important ends, political and personal, such as personal security, defence against one's enemies, the transmission of our culture in schools, the treatment of the sick and the cultivation in society of a sense of honour, piety and gratitude. In contrast to the hatred which too often motivates egalitarian activism, Scruton saw his conservatism as founded on love of what has been good to us, and forgiveness of what has not.

Intrinsic value and religion

The notions of values, intrinsic value and of piety and gratitude, which underlie Scruton's thinking about aesthetics and politics, lead naturally to religion, a topic which increasingly preoccupied him. The basis insight here is that human life, personal and social, requires for its flourishing a recognition that some things are sacred, and that there are boundaries that may not be crossed. Against the prevailing trend in modern moral philosophy and indeed against a certain type of free-market thinking, Scruton emphasises that moral reasoning is not economic reasoning, nor is it infinitely malleable, according to whichever sets of preferences dominate at a given time. The soldier who gives up his life in battle does not 'prefer' to die, nor is the mother who gives up a career to care for a disabled child following a preference. Both are safeguarding things on which there is no price. There are things that we withdraw from the market and place outside what we might legitimately desire and manipulate according to preference.

In his early book *Sexual Desire*, he had elaborated what this might mean in relation to sex, seeing sexual desire not as the expression of a purely physical appetite, in itself cost-free, indiscriminate and disposable at will. Human sexual desire is not directed towards a purely physical sensation, but towards a person, towards one particular individual, and bringing with it the possibility either of consecration or desecration of

that person, and indeed of oneself. This view is further developed in his study of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which Scruton saw as a truly *religious* work, with the lovers redeemed because they value their love in such a way as to renounce all else for it, and thus expressing the transformative power of carnal love when it is seen as it should be seen.

Whatever we might think of *Tristan* (Wagner's or Scruton's) and however we might evaluate his claim in *Sexual Desire* that in heterosexual love one opens oneself 'to the mystery of another gender',[25] it is clear that stressing the intrinsic value of the one who is loved, and who should therefore be treated with ultimate respect, suggests an attitude to human persons which goes beyond the utilitarian or the purely biological. Extending this sense of the other as intrinsically valuable beyond the realm of sexual relations into our dealings with others more generally, as we surely should, led Scruton to speak of the world itself, in which we live and from which such feelings seem to emanate, as having an aspect or a face other than that revealed in natural science. For we neither invent these moral absolutes ourselves (or they would not be absolute), nor do they stem from the explanations of science, which see us as merely one meaningless part of an equally meaningless causal nexus: 'Behind our daily negotiations certain experiences cause this world to erupt through the veil of compromise and to make itself known.'[26] In these experiences things are, as he put it, rescued from the flow of time and made sacrosanct. They also enable us to overcome the estrangement from the world which seeing it in purely scientific terms tends to bring about. It is in religious practice that this dimension of reality is made most explicit and articulate, which is what Scruton explored in his Gifford and Stanton Lectures.

There is, though, a deep cultural problem here, one that is poignantly explored in the late opera libretto, *An Angel Passes*. The type of materialistic society in which we live has little time for religion; as one of the characters in the opera puts it, reflecting on what seems to be Prague before and after the Velvet Revolution: 'When freedom came, God disappeared'. Under oppression, religion flourished, but in the new dispensation, money, sex and rock and roll have replaced the furtive visits to decaying churches and the quiet meditative study of literature and music which had previously occupied many people below the drab and frightening communist surface, as Scruton knew from his own experience. Materialism and the supposed freedom of a materialistic culture will tend to undermine any sense of the sacred. It will tend to desecration.

But the problem is not only cultural. In elaborating his position on religion, Scruton deploys a doctrine not unlike the position of Kant, which he calls cognitive

[25] *Sexual Desire*, p. 307.
[26] *The Soul of the World*, p. 178.

dualism. As with his analysis of the *Mona Lisa*, we can look at the world in two ways, either in terms of the categories and explanations of natural science, or in religious and human terms, as having aspects of sacredness prompting awe and gratitude. But, following Kant, Scruton sees each of these ways of looking at the world as complete in itself. The religious, moral and aesthetic meaning which we see in the world co-exists with the scientific, supervenes upon it, but cannot take us beyond the equally complete account revealed in science. Scruton is doubtful that it can take us into a world of divine transcendence.

It looks as if Scruton's religion may be what Eric Heller once described as a *religio intransitiva*, a religion of awe at and gratitude for the world, but going in no way beyond the world: it is cognitive dualism, not ontological dualism. Scruton concludes a very late article with the words 'I had not, as I had hoped, found in cognitive dualism an escape route to the divine'.[27] And, as if to underline the point, in his final book, the study of Wagner's *Parsifal*, drawing on Wagner's own words about it remaining to art to salvage the kernel of religion, he argues with apparent approval that the redemption in the opera is a purely human redemption, which is wrought by the sense the main characters acquire for the need for compassion and forgiveness—which gives a timeless dimension to the message and the experience, but not an other-worldly one.

Final year

In his last year, Scruton finished the *Parsifal* book, wrote an opera libretto and chaired and completed a major report for the government on the built environment, which was issued in January 2020, shortly after his death, under the title *Living with Beauty: Promoting Health, Well-Being and Sustainable Growth*. But in this year, he was suffering from the cancer which was to kill him, and also from the second of two attempts to derail his chairing of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission by finding him guilty of having and uttering unacceptable opinions. Controversy dogged him to the end, his knighthood and the other considerable official recognition he received and enjoyed in his later years notwithstanding. The first attempt at defenestration he survived, but the second led to his summary and outrageous dismissal from the Commission by the government, with no chance to explain himself. It subsequently emerged that, in the article in the *New Statesman* which caused the trouble, he had been egregiously misquoted. He had not said what had been found so offensive. Scruton was then reinstated, and with Christian and Parsifalian magnanimity, forgave the journalist responsible. The remarkable thing about Scruton in his last year is that,

[27] 'Things as They Seem', *Philosophy*, 94 (July 2019), 461–71.

even with a terminal illness and the venomous personal attacks following the *New Statesman* article, he achieved more than most people manage in a decade.

At the time of writing, it seems that the government is minded to implement the recommendations of *Living with Beauty*, which would be an appropriate legacy from one of the most original and wide-ranging thinkers of our time in a field about which he was passionate. But an even more important legacy is Scruton's writing, astonishing in its depth and coherence. To be sure, as with any honest thinker, questions and problems remain, as we have seen in connection with nationhood and with *religio intransitiva*. There is little doubt that he would have had more to say on these topics and on much else. He would undoubtedly have surprised his readers with more of his ever-telling insights. Despite his confessed failure to find 'an escape route to the divine', he always denied that his religion was actually intransitive. He never closed the door. Appropriately enough, he leaves us in a state of tantalised suspension, owing him gratitude for the many ways he has contributed to and enriched our intellectual and cultural life.

Note on the author: Anthony O'Hear OBE is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Buckingham. From 1994 until 2019 he was Director of the Royal Institute of Philosophy and Editor of the journal *Philosophy*. *Picturing the Apocalypse*, co-authored with Natasha O'Hear (Oxford University Press, 2015), won the ACE/Mercers Prize for the best book on art and religion internationally in 2017. Author of many books and articles on philosophy and the philosophy of science, his *Transcendence, Creation and Incarnation* was published by Routledge in 2020.