

Interpretation

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Roger Scruton, *On Human Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 151 pp., \$22.90 (hardcover).

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On Human Nature is not Roger Scruton's most profound philosophical book, which would probably be either *Sexual Desire: A Moral Philosophy of the Erotic* (1986), largely ignored in academia, or the more recent *The Soul of the Word* (2016). But *On Human Nature* is certainly Scruton's most beautiful piece. It is a short book, at merely 144 small pages, based on a series of lectures he gave in the fall of 2103 at Princeton. This "revised version of the three Charles E. Test memorial lectures," to which he adds an additional lecture on reverence, is "at best," as he himself states, an abridged version of his ideas; he does not attempt to deal with the obvious difficulties into which the reader may stumble. The book is therefore a summary, one that points toward the more extensive *The Soul of the Word* or that looks ahead to "later attempts."

Scruton is a famous (or infamous) British writer and philosopher, member of the Royal Institute and fellow at several other think tanks. He is also a self-exiled scholar, living in the countryside, but one who nonetheless enjoys a regular presence in newspaper headlines and publishing houses for writing on a variety of subjects: art in general and music in particular; modern philosophy in general and Spinoza and Kant in particular; but also notorious dead and living intellectuals, novelists and composers, the Cold War and the fallacies of Communism, to mention just a few. He feels more at home, however, when writing against the current on subjects such as animal rights (where we find his deepest reflections on personhood), global warming (where we find his deepest reflections on cosmology), hunting (where

we find his deepest thoughts on animals), wine, culture, and education, old nations and the birth of the new federal European republic—that is, “against” any imaginable politically correct view that should indeed be questioned if we want to avoid the pervasive conformism that has taken over contemporary academia. This constant challenging of the dominant views of our increasingly secularist society made him an “enfant terrible” that some find immensely entertaining, and others altogether outrageous. The truth is, he might be both.

According to his own moving account in *Gentle Regrets*, this did not come naturally to Scruton. Faced with the turmoil in France of May 1968, he decided to become a conservative and, finding that the British conservative tradition was curiously lacking, he resorted to a bouquet of many thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott, and T. S. Eliot, among others.

Notwithstanding, born and raised in Oxford and trained in analytical philosophy, he never abandoned his conviction that all there is, or all that philosophy can deal with, is what language can allow us to talk about (Ryle, Ayer, Brentano, and even Russell remain his main philosophical references). He also asserts, in *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, the fruitfulness of the “standpoint of analytical philosophy” (*Short History*, vii) and of the late Wittgenstein’s antiprivate view of language (*On Human Nature*, 53, etc.). Moreover, he sees “the main current in modern philosophy as springing from the Cartesian theory of the subject, and from the consequent divorce between subject and object” (*Short History*, viii). This current, he argues, runs through all modern philosophy, up to “Wittgenstein’s detailed demonstration of the untenability of the Cartesian vision” that, by the same token, discredited modern phenomenology and brought “a period of philosophical history to an end” (ix). Despite occasional quotes from Plato or Aristotle, Scruton never even considered the possibility of a return to greener pastures. We will see how this deep-rooted conviction makes of *On Human Nature* an amazing book in its attempt to overcome this straitjacket, but also how this sets clear limits on the book’s achievements: Scruton often finds himself falling into the pitfalls of positivism and historicism.

First and foremost, *On Human Nature* is a surprising book because it asserts that there is such a thing as human nature, an obvious biological truth that has nonetheless been questioned by every current of historicism, from Burke’s questioning of the natural man to Foucault’s more recent “discourses” (13). Burke considered the rights of man as unreal as unicorns or witches—and he opposed to them the rights of Englishman, Frenchman,

and German—while Foucault’s discourses “aimed at discrediting common prejudice” about our “essence” (14). It is also immensely salutary that Scruton’s approach begins with the statement that humankind has not only the (partial) nature of an animal, but also the nature of an (embodied) person (30)—in opposition to all Kantian, Hegelian, and merely poetical attempts to begin with the human consciousness. In this way, Scruton avoids all reductionist attempts at explaining the higher out of the lower or, in other words, all easy dissolutions of man into evolutionary, Freudian, sociologizing (Marxist et al.), and other simplifying schemes.

On Human Nature is composed of four chapters: “Human Kind” (1–49); “Human Relations” (50–79); “The Moral Life” (80–112); and a later-added chapter “Sacred Obligations” (113–44). The largest by far is the first one. There, Scruton shows the limits of attempts at explaining man through evolutionary psychology. Resorting to ethology, game theory, the role of *Lebensraum* (9), *Rigoletto* (10), Kant’s famous analysis of laughter (19–25), and the smile of a face painted on a canvas (30–34), Scruton ends by countering all reductionist views of man with his peculiar view of intentionality and personhood (34–49). One possible reading of this book is, therefore, a (somewhat desperate or, on the contrary, hope and faith-filled [see 47–49]) effort to rescue man from all those who believe that evolutionary psychology provides the only scientific and, therefore, the only true explanation of the behavior of man.

The next chapter, “Human Relations,” draws on Kant and especially on Darwall’s “second-person standpoint” (50). Using with some freedom Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” terminology, Scruton here resorts to two arguments: a first that is based on language (i.e., Wittgenstein: see 53) where he asserts that, without the other, an intimate and untransferable feeling such as “I am in pain” would be a meaningless statement; and a second that is based on a somewhat cavalier Hegelian account of self-awareness (53–55). The Hegelian recognition accorded to the self by the other is then equated to Kant’s paralogisms of pure reason (*Critique of Pure Reason*, part 2, chapter 1) and to Husserl’s phenomenology. The fecundity of this particular combination of I-Thou existentialism (we are by the regard of the other), together with Wittgenstein’s contention that the privilege of the I belongs to the grammar of self-reference (68), is demonstrated *ad oculus* in a leisurely comment on desire (69) and the decentering of the passions of the soul (71–75) in sexual relationships and in art (Giorgione’s *Tempest* being the example: see 76–77).

The core of Scruton’s view of man is briefly presented through the idea of “personhood,” here taken much farther than a mere juridical concept

(more on this at the end). Nevertheless, the conflation of so many different and opposed philosophies (Boethius and Locke, e.g.: see 76) makes the book prey to accusations of inconsistency and contradictions. Scruton wonders: “Should we be worried by this? My answer is no. The possibility of divergence between our two ways of counting people...does not subvert the practices that have been built on those rival schemes” (78).

The third chapter is an extension of the previous one. Scruton here searches for a foundation for “morality,” but without ever explaining what morality is. The main distinction here is between “stuff” and “things.” Contrarily to water, Scruton’s horse Desmond cannot be cut in two, or he would lose his individuality (81–82): “things” have a deep individuality. Nonetheless, Scruton says, there are animal “things” that have awareness but lack self-awareness, that is, the capacity to praise, blame, and forgive, all actions that only self-aware things can *will*. Scruton however points to an exception: pollution and taboo in the Greek tragedies; in other words, there are offenses that do not depend on our will (thus the example of Oedipus, the offense imposed on him by the gods, Oedipus’s sense of *pollution*, contamination, and his final acceptance of the punishment) (86–88). Such a case allows him to grant some “measure of historical variation” (88), the essential features of morality being universal, but with enough margin to ground the “moral community” (89) of the Anglo-Saxon practices of common law (90) and the general theories of moral sentiment from Adam Smith to Peter Singer, but also the theories of Parfit and others “who speak for our times” (92) through their lifeboat and trolley dilemmas (92–96). Once more, all this syncretism could confuse the reader if Scruton had not spelled out his “fundamental intuition”: that morality exists (in part) because it allows us to live with others through negotiation (98). Even Aristotle’s *Ethics* is but a showcase of how morality or ethics really means taking full responsibility for our own actions and making reasons “my reasons” (101), a consequence of a constructivist approach to morality, based on the I-Thou relationship. Should we be concerned about the fact that Aristotle, Kant, and the Bible are all present in very different or even “rival schemes”? Scruton’s answer is again: no. Virtues, he grants, are “not available outside a tightly woven social context,” although, according to him, virtues are not hard to understand, but hard only to practice.

As we noted, the final chapter is a newcomer. Scruton here criticizes all egalitarianism that upholds a benevolent conception of the state (114): such positions, he argues, fail to take into account our embodied selves (the example, again, being erotic love) and the fact that they are based on what, in *The Uses of Pessimism*, Scruton dubs the “born free” fallacy: noumenal selves

do not come to the world, we are born in a world of encumbered ties and attachments (116). Scruton's attempt to challenge these two objections make the most interesting part of the book, although it comes late (117–25 are on sexual desire and 125–43 are about religion and the moral life).

Scruton says that “we are not entitled to reify the self as a distinctive object of reference” (*On Human Nature*, 33), which means that the subject “is not part of the empirical world” and does not exist in “another realm” (32). But we may wonder, “is the subject a real part of the real world?” The question, Scruton argues, is “misconstrued,” since language does not support it. The self is an “emergent feature of the organism” (37), like colors on a canvas, and no other input is required but the biology of the body (38). There is no “impassable gap” between man and other animals: Wallace is wrong and Darwin is right (cf. 14 with 66). “From Plato to Sartre,” many thinkers presented different views of this idea, but they almost all “agreed in searching for a philosophical account rather than a scientific account” (28). In fact, “we are objects, caught in the currents of causality” (66–67) and if our responses to others seem to aim at a horizon that “passes beyond the body,” to the being that incarnates, this is no more than a “compelling” illusion that is the root of the “idea of the soul, of the true but hidden self that is veiled by the flesh” (67).

In the end, Scruton is very much a modern man, for whom a philosophy opposed to the account of science (32) is just a *façon de parler* (40). As veiled in the flesh as the soul is, the hidden assumption here is that all that (modern, obviously) philosophy can do is speculate about how we talk about “things” and “stuff.” By taking as our starting point modern philosophy and modern language, however, we might be simply clarifying and making increasingly more formal and exact our own prejudices. Philosophy per se is not historical, but today's philosophy could perhaps begin by undertaking a (Socratic) examination of the works that constitute the history of philosophy: there we can find the sources of our confused, contradictory current opinions that pervade our common language. Scruton takes as good some kind of Averroistic double truth that is also suggested here, in passing, as congenial to modern philosophy (48): he believes that science as we know it leaves something unexplained, but the solution is to be found in a supplement of poetical and philosophical account of human things.

Whatever flaws we may find in this book, we should not make the mistake of thinking them too important. Even the book's most obvious inconsistencies and silences are mere ink spills on a beautifully painted canvas. Scruton's unfailing humanity pervades all its pages.