

# Philosopher par excellence

*Beyond the breaking glass of his public interventions, Sir Roger Scruton was a peerless intellectual*

*by Anthony O'Hear*



**S**IR ROGER SCRUTON RECEIVED the Hungarian Order of Merit as recently as 3 December 2019, following similar awards from Poland and the Czech Republic and, of course, his knighthood here. These in part reflected Scruton's clandestine endeavours in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s and no doubt his more public campaigning persona in this country, which was all too often, as was said of Charles Peguy, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.

As a writer and an intellectual, Scruton, who died last month, was eminent in many fields including musical composition, the music of Wagner, novel writing, literary criticism, country living and even connoisseurship of wine. But beneath and behind all this Scruton was first and foremost a philosopher par excellence, as Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban reminded us when awarding him the Order of Merit.

However, in the recent flood of comment on Scruton's life and achievements, his philosophy has received scant attention. To remedy this, we could begin by recalling that Scruton saw his philosophical work in what he called "continental" terms. Philosophically he had been formed in the Anglo-American analytical

tradition, with its stress on formal logic, quasi-scientific rigour and overwhelmingly a respect for natural science and a desire to ape its methods in philosophical work. Scruton never abjured the clarity of the analytical school, but he saw philosophy as an unapologetic attempt to make sense of the world in those very areas regarded as less than central and less prestigious by the analytics: aesthetics, music, religion, personal and sexual relations, the environment, lived and natural, the nature of society and politics.

But if Scruton saw himself as a continental in the range and nature of his philosophical interests, he repudiated the studied obscurity and above all the destructive and transgressive nature of the thought of leading continental philosophers, such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Badiou. Tempered by repulsion at what he saw as the hypocritical and brattish self-indulgence of the student radicals in the Paris of 1968, if Scruton was philosophically a continental, he was a *conservative* continental, with an analytically purified mind.

**FUNDAMENTAL TO SCRUTON'S THOUGHT** was the distinction between the causes of things, what made things happen (as revealed in natural science) and the reasons why things happen as they do, a distinction which becomes crucial for Scruton in looking at ourselves as human beings. Although we are crea-

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tures in a physical world, biological beings analysable in causal-scientific terms, we are also persons whose activity is to be explained in terms of the reasons we have for what we do and criticisable in terms of the values we have in what we do and how we act. In drawing the distinction between causes and reasons Scruton stands in the tradition of Kant, who distinguished between the world as seen under scientific explanations (causes) and the moral and aesthetic understanding we bring to it (reasons).

According to Kant, science presents us with a full description of the causes of what happens in the world, but as human beings we are also subject to the demands of morality and open to the experience of beauty, in both of which areas we operate outside what is given to us in science. In Kant's own case this was the science of Newton, in which every event that took place could be explained in deterministic terms.

**A RADICAL TAKE ON THE KANTIAN** dichotomy is given by the young Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: everything that can meaningfully be said

can be said in the factual language of science, but everything of importance in our lives (ethics, art, religion) lies outside what is sayable. More prosaically but more perspicuously and less self-defeatingly, the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars distinguished between the scientific image of the world — that presented in the theories of physics, in which value and much of what we experience is abstracted away from — and the manifest image, the world in which we as persons live and move and have our being.

And in a classic article from 1962 entitled “Freedom and Resentment”, P.F. Strawson showed how the categories of value, of praise and blame, of human agency in a general sense, are not accommodated in the value-free language and explanations of natural science, but are nevertheless central to our lives and indispensable practically and morally.

Scruton himself spoke in similar terms of a contrast between the world as revealed in science — the world of bloodless categories and mathematical laws — and what he called the *Lebenswelt*. This is the world of human experience, which Scruton himself calls the world of appearance, or the world as it seems. Scruton is emphatic that in speaking of the *Lebenswelt* he is not thinking that there is a world beyond that which is revealed in science. But while there is nothing beyond the boundaries which science draws, there are aspects of what is within the scientifically explicable world which science does not and cannot reveal.

Primary among them is the personal, everything to do with our lives as personal agents, free, valuing, praising, blaming, loving, hating and so on. According to Scruton, “The personal is not an *addition* to biological; it emerges *from* it, in something like the way the face emerges from the coloured patches on a

canvas.” And having emerged, we then have to deal with it in the terms appropriate to persons, which are not those of natural science. Here Scruton follows in the footsteps of the later Wittgenstein, who painstakingly showed that the terms in which we speak of our emotional, mental and intellectual activity can be properly applied only to us as whole persons, and not to our bodies or parts of our bodies. *People* think, calculate, are angry or in pain, brains do not. Neurons underlie what we do and feel,

but neurons do not think or reason or emot; they simply function according to whatever laws govern such bits of matter.

Most of the things we correctly see people, ourselves and others, as doing, we and they do because of interaction with other people. Scruton, like Wittgenstein, repudiated the picture of a Cartesian soul, thinking its thoughts in isolation, in and by itself. Although we can have private thoughts and feelings, an inner life so to speak, it is because we are in a world of other people with a public language that we have learned to think rationally and to exercise most and the most important of our mental capacities, even when we do so in private.

In living with others, we learn how to think and speak and have sophisticated emotions beyond mere animal reactions. In interacting with others, we develop a sense of our own identity and also of those others as, like ourselves, endowed with personality and freedom. We see ourselves as accountable to them and them to us.

And in growing up with others, we also inherit a human culture which enables us to see not just others as persons but the world itself as endowed with a type of significance, beyond what is given to us in the concepts and explanations of science. As Scruton himself put it, “through culture, we supply ourselves, our fellows and our surroundings with a face”; adding enigmatically that “if we do it right, we will see the face of our maker in the face that we make”, a point to which we will return.

**T**O BEGIN TO FILL OUT this somewhat heady line of thinking we will now turn to what Scruton says about aesthetics, the topic of his earliest philosophical work. Key to Scruton's aesthetic theory is the imagination, whose role is to show what life means, and how our hopes and fears reside in it. It is easy to see how this notion works in the case of representational or verbal forms — such as painting, sculpture, and literature, including poetry — and also why, holding this view, Scruton might have been attracted to articulating his philosophical views in novelistic form (half a dozen or more of them).

We should note that this conception of art not only immediately suggests a distinction between the content of a work of art (what it is showing) and its form (the adequacy or otherwise of the work to what it is attempting to show). At both levels, this

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involves the critic in what might broadly be called morality. Is what the work is showing 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 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. He found, as they did, much (most?) of what passes as art as wanting in numerous respects, including the moral. Much of what we see today in art galleries is, in his words, "real junk in quotation marks".

Scruton admitted that his aesthetic theory is less easy to apply to the non-representational form of music. Here he argued that even without meaning anything expressible in words, in music a form of agency is revealed; we hear in music not just notes but personality, feeling and an attitude to the world, pure and abstracted from the contingent circumstances which give rise to such things.

Like Plato and Nietzsche (though disagreeing with the latter over Wagner), he finds much music trash or worse, but in certain supreme instances, in what he calls "the meditative masterpieces of our tradition", a transcendental meaning: a "You" (the composer, as composer rather than as empirical personality) summoning an "I" (the attentive listener), something that, in an echo of the early Wittgenstein, is shown but cannot be said.

#### CRUCIAL TO SCRUTON'S THOUGHT

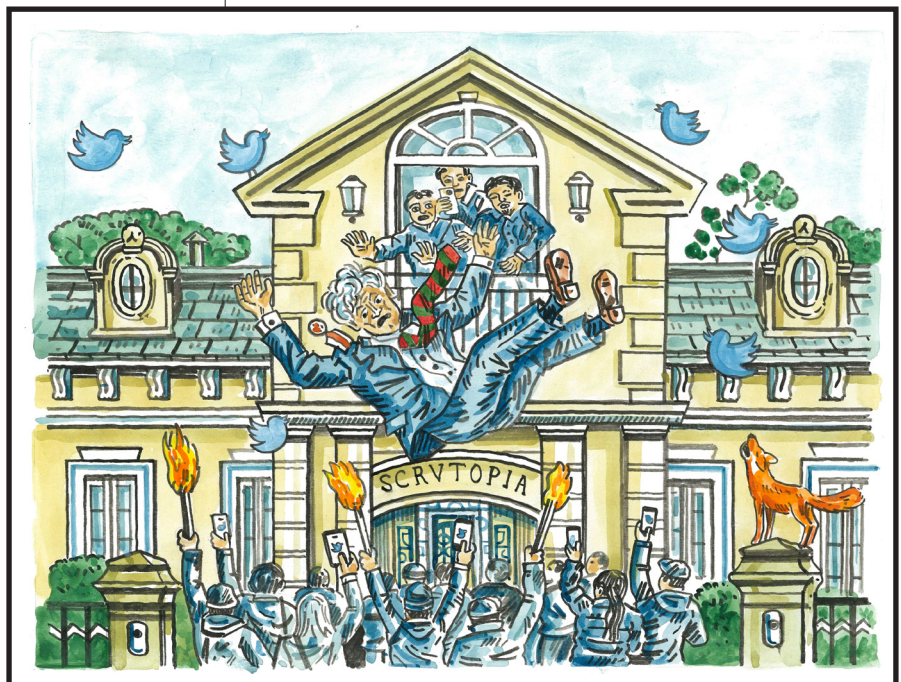
and practice was the insight that aesthetics should not be confined to the art we have to make a special effort to encounter. Architecture is an art whose creations all of us encounter every day — not just the grand or grandiose ones but the houses, shops and other buildings and townscapes in which we all pass most of our lives. Much of Scruton's most impassioned writing, both philosophical and journalistic, concerns itself with the importance of what might be called the everyday aesthetics of the environment.

Here too Ruskin stands as a forbear, though Scruton loved the classical and the neo-classical in a way Ruskin never did. What both objected to is an environment without charm, grace, comfort, livability, and the potential for the expression of individual taste, the very environment which has become de rigueur in the geometric, angular, concrete, blandly shadeless and all too often graffiti-infected creations of modern architecture. Far from ornament being crime, as Adolf Loos averred, and far from form having to follow function as contemporary dogma has it, for Scruton, ornament and form have their own intrinsic value which makes both space and shelter livable, and which transforms a unit of habitation into a home.

Home became a central concept for Scruton in his later

years, philosophically and practically. He saw 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), in the sense of depending on a person or persons, a place and a community for 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 both on the town but also on the country.

Here he 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. Oikophilia, it should be stressed, does not imply xenophobia — one can love one's home, without fearing or



**Defenestrated by the mob: The sacking of Roger Scruton from his role as a government adviser on beautiful buildings, as seen by Adam Dant**

hating the foreign or the foreigner, as Scruton conclusively demonstrated in his own life and person. But it will make one cautious, as Scruton was, of globalisation and mass migration where these phenomena uproot old identities and forms of belonging.

Oikophilia connects neatly with Scruton's political philosophy. Indeed it was at its heart, and explains Scruton's anger at the *soixante-huitards* who were nothing if not oikophobes, soiling not just their own nests, but dishonouring and insulting those who had so generously provided them. Conservatism for Scruton was a matter of finding intrinsic value, in the community in which one lives, ideally in that in which one is brought up. Intrinsic value means valuing something because it is itself — we would not value another thing in the same way, even if it had exactly the same properties as the thing we love.

For Scruton, England had intrinsic value and was the object

of his attachment. He particularly valued its common law tradition, in which customs, institutions and freedoms have emerged, gradually and peacefully through long experience, in contrast to attempts in other places and times to base a polity on abstract principles and formal legislation — not that Britain in 2020 is immune from such tendencies.

While Scruton valued the free market as the best way we know of producing and distributing goods, as already observed, he was no enthusiast for globalisation and unrestricted free trade. At the same time, when we operate within a market, it is brought home forcibly that goods do not exist without work and effort.

This basic reality is ignored by most contemporary political philosophers, and also by the radicals of 1968, both of whom advocate state-organised redistribution in order to achieve equality of possession and status. For Scruton, any such attempt would ignore the salient features of human existence — those make each of us who, what and where we are, including of course one's birth and upbringing, one's own effort and sense of responsibility — and would amount to a hubristic and ultimately unavailing crusade against contingency.

Worse, it makes envy and resentment the driving force of political endeavour, ignoring more important and more beneficent political aims, such as personal security, defence against one's enemies, the transmission of culture in schools, the treatment of those who are sick, and the cultivation in a society of the duties of honour, piety and gratitude.

**T**ALK OF INTRINSIC VALUE and of piety leads naturally to religion, a topic which in his last years had increasingly come to preoccupy Scruton's thinking. The basic insight here was 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. Hence in matters of sex, Scruton inveighed against pornography and promiscuity, which make of what should be treated with ultimate respect a matter of use and disposability.

For Scruton, the intrinsic value of the one I love means that they are not disposable or replaceable, but are loved for who, not what, they are, mysterious as this may be metaphysically. It certainly suggests an attitude to human persons 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 — Scruton was led to speak of the world having an aspect or face other than that revealed in natural science. "Behind our daily negotiations certain experiences cause this world to erupt through the veil of

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compromise and to make itself known."

Scruton's position here needs careful stating. In our interactions with others, in certain experiences of art, and in the sense of awe or maybe gratitude many of us experience before the very existence of the world itself, we are taken out of the realm of natural science, with its complete accounts of the causes of things, and also out of any sense that other people and nature itself are to be seen as objects to be used and disposed of as we wish.

In these experiences things are, as he put it, rescued from the flow of time and made sacrosanct. It is in religious practice that this dimension of reality is made most explicit and articulate.

But, and this is a big but, there is only one reality, which can be looked at either scientifically or religiously. This position Scruton calls cognitive dualism, one reality perceived or known in two ways. We are back with the scientific image and the manifest image, with the manifest image now bearing moral, aesthetic and religious meaning. Cognitive dualism, not ontological dualism: one reality to be perceived in two ways, each way necessary, but each way complete in itself.

**MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO**, Erich Heller wrote of the sense of awe and wonder and almost religious mysticism evoked in the philosophy of Nietzsche and the poetry of Rilke, which he called a *religio intransitiva*, intransitive because in their work there was no Being, no God to which the cosmic feelings they evoked referred.

My feeling about Roger Scruton's late reflections of religion is that his is also a *religio intransitiva*, a feeling reinforced by one of the last sentences he published in his lifetime: "I have not, as I had hoped, found in cognitive dualism an escape route to the divine."

He explicitly rejected the Hegelian principle that in order to see a boundary you had to stand on both sides; along with Kant, Scruton was adamant that we could have no knowledge of anything beyond this world. This self-confessed failure to see the face of our maker in the face that we make, as he put it earlier, does not, however, detract from his arguments for the indispensability of a religious dimension to our deepest human feelings, nor from the profundity and breadth of his philosophical reflections on art, architecture, politics and life, natural and human.

It does, though, deepen my sadness that it will no longer be possible in this world to continue discussing the adequacy of the doctrine of cognitive dualism and just where our religious feelings might take us with the one who was, in our time, *the* philosopher par excellence. ☪

**David Womersley: Scruton on wine, page 82**

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