

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 31 | Issue 3

Article 12

7-1-2014

Roger Scruton, HOW TO THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT THE PLANET: THE CASE FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATISM

Daniel E. Ritchie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Ritchie, Daniel E. (2014) "Roger Scruton, HOW TO THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT THE PLANET: THE CASE FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATISM," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201431317

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol31/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

How to Think Seriously About the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism, by Roger Scruton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 464 pages. \$29.95 (cloth).

DANIEL E. RITCHIE, Bethel University

In Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), the eponymous hero and his companions meet an astronomer who may be the one person to have achieved what they're seeking: true happiness. As their conversations progress, however, *Rasselas* begins to doubt this expert's hold on reality. It transpires that he believes he controls the weather:

I have possessed for five years the regulation of weather and the distribution of the seasons: the sun has listened to my dictates, and . . . the clouds, at my call, have poured their waters. . . . What must have been the misery of half the globe if I had limited the clouds to particular regions?

Rasselas asks the astronomer to consider whether he has confused his powers of prediction with those of control, but the man is insistent. He begs *Rasselas* accept his mantle of authority so that he can retire, leaving the weather under the control of *Rasselas*. The bemused hero agrees, and to his smiling friends *Rasselas* remarks, "Few can attain this man's knowledge and few practice his virtues. . . . There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason."

To Johnson, this expert, who grossly overestimates his reason and his ability to control nature, is insane. My, how times have changed! On August 20, 2013, *The New York Times* reported "near certainty" that human activity causes most global warming. To express doubts about our rational grasp of environmental factors is now the insane position. And to doubt our ability to control nature is similarly suspect. On October 11, a *Times* op-ed promised that a global price on carbon dioxide was "the best way to . . . put global warming on [a] sharply decreasing path."

The extent of our reason and our ability to control the outcome of our actions are subjected to sustained, intelligent analysis in Roger Scruton's conservative approach to environmentalism. He doesn't doubt that global warming has occurred (you may now exhale), or that human activity is a major cause (now take a long cleansing breath). He credits many in the environmental movement with the "knowledge and virtues," extolled by Johnson, that we must seek and admire. His style is lively, and his tone is respectful and engaging. It is also pointed: he thinks that most large-scale attempts to regulate the environment have failed and are undermining the very resources we need to clean up and care for the world.

Oikophilia

As perhaps the leader of Anglo-American conservative thought, Roger Scruton has earned the right to invent a new term. Let us therefore welcome his underlying principle of environmental conservatism, which he calls “oikophilia”:

a motive that comprehends all our deepest attachments, and which spills out in the moral aesthetic and spiritual emotions that transfigure our world, creating in the midst of our emergencies a shelter that future generations also may enjoy. (214–215)

From its literal meaning of “love of the household,” Scruton mines the rich vein of conservative thought, from Smith, Burke, Tocqueville, and others to fill out the “motive” that makes up oikophilia. It is nurtured by local attachment, gratitude, and “feedback loops” that keep environmental accountability and liability where they belong. It enables him to seek common cause with left-leaning Greens on the basis of their common love of local resources. For the most part, he argues, conservatives and Greens should be able to agree on how to use and care for these resources. His opponents are not so much environmentalists as “oikophobes”—those who seek transnational solutions that rest on command and control to the detriment of local, regional, and national attachments.

Scruton’s argument is straightforward: “environmental protection comes from the oikophilia of people, not from those who use money, influence and political power to impose large-scale projects from on high” (p. 349). It takes him until the middle of the book to adumbrate exactly what he means by oikophilia, but once there he fully delivers. Although he doesn’t mention Adam Smith in this connection, Scruton’s oikophilia is rooted in the moral sentiments. He rejects the model of a rational *homo economicus* with no concept of the ends of life. Instead, Scruton discerns in human beings the sentiments of gratitude, attachment, and piety. These motives—or sentiments—support sacrifice and responsibility to others.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Scruton’s approach and that of his opponents is that his oikophilia is based on love and friendship, “in which things around us are regarded as intrinsically meaningful and irreplaceable” (p. 256). His opponents often exhibit the combination of fear and control that motivated the astronomer in *Rasselas*. Over the last thirty years, for instance, the fear of environmental harm has produced the “Precautionary Principle,” the basis for the European Union’s approach to environmental policy under the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. Scruton considers it limitless and therefore useless:

When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. (105)

This version of the principle, quoted from the 1998 Wingspread Statement, puts no limits on intervention and regulation. It overlooks the historic

resilience with which people respond—often quite successfully—to environmental problems and its consequences for nature. Virtually every activity, from the flatulence of cows to the use of ethanol, contains “threats of harm,” for which the statement provides no principle of discrimination. And it opens the door for a disdain of scientific analysis. The book is rife with well-documented examples of fear-based interventions, from over-regulation by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to anti-nuclear energy campaigns. One of his strongest examples of ill-managed efforts at control comes from the European Union’s “Common Fisheries Policy,” which overrode British and Danish coastal rights and saw fish stocks decline steeply. In all of these cases, liability and risk are, for the most part, removed from the actual users of environmentally fragile resources.

By contrast, Scruton explains how British rivers recovered from industrial pollution (to take just one example) to illustrate the working of oikophilia. Although nineteenth-century Pollution Prevention Acts gave local authorities the power to act against polluters, they themselves were the ones discharging the sewage. Pollution worsened. The post-World War II socialist government was of no help either, as nationalized industries and politically privileged groups continued to shift liability and risk away from themselves. But when the civil courts recognized riparian property rights (1952), anglers’ clubs could defend the streams they used and loved, and the rivers and fish populations returned to health.

The practical elements of this process, Scruton observes, include a strong regime of property rights, local civic associations, and effective tort laws. These are three key elements of what Scruton calls, throughout the book, a “feedback loop.”

Feedback Loops

In Scruton’s view, property rights (or some analogue that distinguishes proper use from theft) are basic to good stewardship. Under state ownership or a property vacuum, no one is ultimately responsible for the rightful use of resources, resulting in desertification in Africa, overhunting by Native Americans, and environmental catastrophe in the former Soviet empire. My personal reason for doubting the effectiveness of state superintendence of the environment is simpler and comes from the faculty lounge: while professors are lecturing their classes on the evils of private ownership, they leave their food to rot in the communal refrigerator. Outsource the fridge to a private contractor, and the bad food would vanish. Scruton sees property rights as the foundation—but only the foundation—for long term, responsible use of environmental resources.

If the resources are renewable, such as fish, arable land, or timber, the relationship between care and stewardship is obvious. But Scruton takes on harder cases as well, which leads to the other “feedback” elements—local associations and torts. Through negotiation with local institutions with real property rights—especially the National Trust, its forerunners and allies—historic buildings in Britain have been preserved, footpaths

recognized, organic townscapes nurtured, and environmentally friendly railroads built. Finally, an effective tort law ensures that those who inflict damages will pay them. Here, Scruton favors Ronald Coase's argument on the problem of social cost as against A. C. Pigou's view that regulatory action is the best solution to that problem. Regulation's purpose is not to prevent risk, but to return transaction costs to those who incur them.

At this point it should be clear that Scruton, like most conservatives in the Burkean tradition, views human action arising from a combination of rational self-interest, love of the local, and cooperation. For the most part, his solution to the environmental "tragedy of the commons" rests on these elements, many of which are found in well functioning markets. He criticizes the caricature of market competition as little more than a dog-eat-dog contest. Like other conservatives, he admires Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom's analysis of how institutions and citizens with local knowledge are often better at managing scarce resources than planners. Referring to her influential *Governing the Commons* (1990), he writes: "Markets, like the common pool arrangements discussed by Ostrom, depend on promise-keeping, conflict resolution and the punishment of cheats" (144). Surrounded by a robust "feedback loop," he is optimistic about our prospects for maintaining the environment using these resources and sentiments.

Climate Change

Except for climate change.

Scruton states early on that global warming is different. For this problem, ordinary forms of resilience to environmental problems may be catastrophically inadequate and "negative feedback" too slow in coming. And so, in his final chapter—misleadingly titled "Modest Proposals"—he writes:

[W]e should introduce a flat-rate carbon tax. The more you emit, the more you pay. Moreover, this tax should be imposed on products regardless of their origin. . . . A sensible environmental policy must, therefore, concede an important role to the state: taxing carbon emissions, and funding the research needed to reduce them. (387, 391)

This is the exception to the aim of a conservative environmental approach, as Scruton ultimately defines it: "to achieve a managed environment, in which good results arise spontaneously from what ordinary people do. This means maintaining or creating the feedback loops that cause people to bear the cost of their own activities, and to prevent them from passing that cost to future generations" (391–392). To me, the book is stronger for admitting this exception. I believe it was the first Mayor Daley who said that sometimes in politics it is necessary to rise above principle. And while that has a particular meaning in Chicago politics, I find it refreshing to see so principled a writer as Scruton come to the limits of his own perspective and embrace an exception.

How to Think Seriously About the Planet provides the richest context of which I am aware for a conservative approach to environmentalism. The shameful treatment of Bjørn Lomborg and Richard Lindzen by the environmental establishment has produced such mistrust that many conservatives simply dismiss even its strongest consensus. It is to Scruton's credit that he acknowledges these battles concisely, then moves beyond them. Unlike some conservatives, whose environmental thinking begins with property rights and ends with free markets, Scruton places these elements in the context of the feedback loops and oikophilia, which do justice to both the Burkean and (if I may add an American) Hamiltonian strains of conservatism. He has done much to move the discussion forward and deserves a wide audience.

Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life, by Mark R. Wynn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 206 pages. \$99.00.

ROBERT MACSWAIN, The School of Theology, The University of the South

I am writing this review while sitting out on my covered screened-porch on a perfect Saturday afternoon in early October. The sky is a clear and flawless bright blue, the leaves are just starting to yellow, the temperature is around 75 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity is low. Crows are cawing in the woods around me, the wind is stirring the branches, and in the distance I can hear the muted sound of a dormitory air-conditioning unit. My bare feet are placed on the black and brown matted area-carpet and I can feel the weave with my toes; on the glass-topped coffee table in front of me, a plastic bottle of cold water has built up a cloudy but translucent skin of condensed droplets.

Mark Wynn's latest book invites us to consider our perception and reception of such sensory details in greater depth, considering their implications for philosophy, theology, and spirituality. Exemplifying a recent trend in Anglophone philosophy of religion, in which authors trained in the analytic tradition engage with topics normally associated with Continental philosophy, Wynn focuses on phenomenological issues without being a classical phenomenologist. Thus, using the term in its literal rather than technical sense, he says that *Renewing the Senses* can be read as a "phenomenological rendering" of some central themes in David Brown's *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2004) (8, note 9).¹ Wynn explores the general claim that "religious

¹I reviewed this volume of Brown's, along with four others, in *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012), 362–366.