

**Roger Scruton – *The Soul of The World* (Princeton University Press 2014)
205 pp.**

Peter Strawson distinguished two metaphysical projects: the descriptive and the revisionary. Whilst the descriptive metaphysician is content to characterize the actual structure of our thought about the world, the revisionary metaphysician is concerned to produce a better structure. That makes descriptive metaphysics sound like a rather unchallenging and unpromising enterprise yet many descriptive metaphysicians harbor great intellectual ambitions. Focusing on what Strawson called the ‘massive central core of human thinking’ that ‘has no history and does not change’, they seek to uncover a structure within this central core, one that will constrain the malleable periphery of our thought. It is precisely on this periphery that we find the ideologies and theories that come and go and form the substance of our intellectual history. If reflection on the unchanging central core could indeed constrain the rest of human thinking, descriptive metaphysics would share the importance and excitement of its revisionary cousin.

Scruton is a descriptive metaphysician, one who attempts to capture how things appear to us, to characterize the ‘lived world’ or *Lebenswelt*. Over several decades he has formulated a distinctive conservative critique of various aspects of contemporary culture, arguing that they conflict with essential features of the human *Lebenswelt*. For example, Scruton’s 1986 book *Sexual Desire* moves from the incontrovertible premise that we must think of ourselves and of our sexual partners as embodied persons to the conclusion that the permissive sexual morality of the West is misguided. Starting in the same place, *The Soul of The World* seeks to demonstrate that various other traditional notions currently threatened with extinction are no less essential to human life than the old sexual morality. These include inherited bonds of loyalty, classical music and architecture, a sense of the intrinsic value of place and, more generally, the sacred character of the natural world. Scruton concludes that human beings will never be ‘at home’ in the disenchanted world of modernity.

Scruton's conservatism, though currently a minority view, is by no means unfamiliar. The interest of his project lies rather in the way he establishes his conclusions. Most conservatives place great weight on contingent features of the human condition. They emphasize our cognitive limitations, our anti-social impulses and the sheer extent of our ignorance, or else they delve into the details of human history in order to establish that the old ways cannot be so quickly abandoned. Scruton's conservatism is more rationalistic. Like Kant, he thinks he can arrive at concrete prescriptions by assuming only that human beings are embodied persons. For instance, Kant thought the fact of our personality was enough to ground the immorality of suicide: we need make no inquiry into the contingencies of human psychology or history to see that we ought not to kill ourselves. Analogously Scruton moves from an immediately obvious feature of our *Lebenswelt* – namely that we are surrounded by other people – to practical recommendations and criticisms.

In *The Soul of The World* Scruton begins his exploration of the *Lebenswelt* with an illuminating account of our experience of the human face: 'I lie *behind* my face, and yet am present in it, speaking and looking through it at a world of others who are in turn both revealed and concealed like me.' (97) For Scruton, people *haunt* their faces: they inhabit a space that is simultaneously embodied in their flesh and yet lies beyond it. 'In all our responses to each other, whether love or hate, affection or disaffection, approval or disapproval, anger or desire, we look *into* the other, in search of that unattainable horizon from which she or he addresses us ... Each human object is also a subject, addressing us in looks, gestures and words, from the transcendental horizon of the 'I'. Our responses to others aim towards that horizon, passing on beyond the body to the being that it incarnates.' (74)

People transcend their material embodiment: they 'haunt themselves' (123). For Scruton that metaphysical fact makes us sacred, makes us into things capable of being violated or *defaced*. The relationship between people and their faces, that distinctive combination of presence and absence, serves as Scruton's model

throughout this book. Places and buildings become sacred once haunted by the people who built and inhabited them. A musical melody haunts the sounds that embody it: it is a 'movement of nothing in a space that is nowhere'. And finally God haunts the world, revealed in it and yet also concealed by it in a realm that transcends his spatio-temporal creation. That is why the Earth too can be defaced.

If Scruton is right, the notion of the sacred is no less essential to our experience of the world around us than the notion of a human person: 'God is a real presence in his temple, as you are in your body' (123). And if Scruton is right, the special value of persons (their sacred character) comes from the same source as the values embodied in buildings, music and nature. It is all a matter of what he calls 'the overreaching intentionality of interpersonal attitudes'. Intentionality involves directness – my experience of the world represents an object as being a certain way and is thereby directed towards that object. Intentionality becomes 'overreaching' when it involves attending to some object that is not fully revealed in our experience of it. Such is our experience of other human beings (of their faces) and such is the foundation of our respect for them and of received morality.

From this rather lofty vantage point, Scruton casts a critical eye on various social phenomena including disco music, modernist architecture and sexual promiscuity. Both those who share Scruton's cultural pessimism and those who don't may wonder how reflection on something as unspecific as the nature of interpersonal intentionality could tell us just what is wrong with spending time listening to 'I Wanna Be a Hippy' (151). True Scruton is not alone in his attempt to use abstract philosophical theory as a tool of cultural criticism (e.g. Adorno) but most recent Anglophone philosophers do not share that ambition, perhaps suspecting that the gap between philosophical theory and social reality won't be bridged without a large amount of extraneous (non-philosophical) material. To see why they might think this, consider Scruton's discussion of one large-scale social change, what Maine called the move from status to contract (90-1).

On Maine's picture pre-modern man was bound by all sorts of familial, economic, political and social **obligations** over which he had very little control (i.e. those inherited bonds of loyalty). By contrast, our obligations are much more likely to be contractual, both created and destroyed at will by the parties concerned. An instance of this is marriage. As Scruton has it, traditional marriage (like feudal allegiance) was an affair of *vows*, sometimes voluntarily entered into but indissoluble once made. Traditional marriage had a sacramental character: the obligations involved were 'transcendent bonds', open ended in content and indefeasible. Modern marriage you can walk away from (under certain conditions) even without the consent of the other party; it is an exchange of promises with a quite specific content from which you can gain release.

Scruton is unhappy with this development. He tells us that vows like those of traditional marriage 'were far more deeply woven into the fabric of our experience than Enlightened people tend to think, and that the world without transcendent bonds is not a variant of the world that has not yet been cleansed of them but a completely different world, and one in which we humans are not truly at home'. Perhaps that's right but we can't show that it is by simply reflecting on the nature of interpersonal intentionality. As Scruton himself emphasizes, to make someone an ordinary promise is precisely to treat them as a person i.e. as an agent capable of thinking about what they ought to do, of controlling their body accordingly and thus of being held to account for what they actually do. And it is only because we are persons that being released from a promise would mean anything to us. The promise quite as much as the vow presupposes and involves 'overreaching interpersonal intentionality'. Should modern man be alienated from modern marriage, there must be more to his humanity than being an embodied person.

Scruton's cultural criticism extends well beyond the boundaries of inter-personal ethics for Scruton's *Lebenswelt* sanctifies the material world. The religious experience of nature involves an impersonal form of 'overreaching intentionality', a deeper sense of concealed presence, a type of intentionality that has no object, what Scruton calls a 'pure aboutness' (162). Here, as Scruton says,

he is leading us to the 'edge of a mystery' (185). Having no regard for such mysteries, modern man has tried to unweave the *Lebenswelt*, to cherry pick its elements and dispose of the sacred. We (mostly) acknowledge the intrinsic, the ultimate value of persons but many of us deny any similar value to our own bodies, to buildings and the places in which we live and also to nature as a whole. The latter are all mere objects: tools for us to use or enjoy.

Without claiming to grasp Scruton's reasoning at this point, I shall raise a difficulty. Scruton presents himself as a descriptive metaphysician, basing his case on how things do (or must) *appear*. This stance is problematic since his critique would have no target unless the world had ceased to appear that way to many of us. Places, buildings, nature no longer strike the disinherited mind as sacred, as having any value in themselves beyond the use we can make of them. But if this is so, how can a metaphysician find any basis for disapproval without turning revisionary? Our attempts to see other people as mere objects with no value of their own may not succeed for long but it takes no great effort of will (or course of brutalization) to regard the natural world in that way, to drain a marsh without a qualm in order to build a car park. Once people have ceased to revere nature, description alone will not re-enchant it.

Though his conservative moral and political commitments make Scruton a dissident within contemporary philosophy, in one way he follows secular liberal thought quite closely. Many Anglophone philosophers seek to derive fairly detailed conclusions about what constitute just social and political arrangements from the fact that we are all persons without regard to the course of human history and the distinctive features of human psychology. In evaluating our social arrangements, Scruton takes the same tack and then goes on to construct a religious and aesthetic metaphysics on a similar foundation. Starting in the same place as your opponents is dialectically astute but it is hard to see how Scruton will get from there to where he wants to go.