Platonist, Aristotelian or simply Classical? Roger Scruton's Political Philosophy and the Great Tradition

Ferenc Hörcher

Abstract

This paper tests the hypothesis that Sir Roger Scruton's concept of politics has an ancient overtone. This ancient element amounts to the thesis that politics is an important element of the human condition. In other words, this paper attributes to the British philosopher a thick conception of politics. Yet there is a further point it wants to make: that Scruton's interest in the ancients is not only that of a philosopher, but it is an interest which made him also an engaged citizen. This ancient backbone of his philosophy turned him into a conservative public intellectual, who thought that engagement in civil activity is part of a flourishing human life. Finally, it wants to show that Scruton's interest in classical philosophy did not regard the Platonic-Aristotelian divide an either-or question. Rather, he had a synthetic vision of the relevance of ancient thought, bridging the Platonic and the Aristotelian paradigm.

Keywords

Scruton - Aristotle - Plato - Classical Philosophy - *Oikophilia*

Introduction

The late Sir Roger Scruton's philosophy is characterised by a parallel interest in political philosophy and in the philosophy of art and culture[1]. His political philosophy can be

---

[1] Sir Roger Scruton (1944-2020) is generally considered as one of the most influential Anglo-Saxon conservative political philosophers of the second half of the 20th century – comparable only to Michael Oakeshott in this respect. Coming from a lower middle class family, he was educated in analytical philosophy in Cambridge. He came to see the strength of political conservatism as a reaction to the 1968 revolution in Paris, which he witnessed on site. His speciality in philosophy was the philosophy of art, publishing both on architecture and music. He was for long professor of aesthetics at Birkbeck College, London, a position he lost for his conservative stance which took manifest form both in the publishing of his major book on *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980) as well as in the editing of the *Salisbury Review*, a major forum for intellectual conservatism. In the eighties he played an active role in supporting Central European intellectuals, giving underground lectures and courses in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. He spent years teaching in the US, but for the last part of his life he moved back to England and bought a

described as belonging to the tradition of British conservatism. In the introduction to his *Conservative Thinkers*, he identified conservatism as placing duty before right, and especially the duty of obedience, in a «society ordered according to three principles: tradition, consensus and the rule of law» (Scruton 1988, 9-10.) While the first and the last principles are well known, perhaps it is worth explaining what he means by consensus: «Consensual order arises through free association, through open discussion, through political participation, and through the slowly evolving habit of obedience which those engender» (Scruton 1988, 10).

Yet beyond what is typically British in Scruton's conservatism, we also find in it a continental element, which is manifested in his interest in both the ancient Greeks and such continental thinkers, as those of what is called German classical idealism. One aspect of this interest is that one cannot explain his conservative political thought without taking into consideration his views on art. This paper will focus on Scruton's ideas of politics to show that it has an ancient overtone. It will show that for Scruton, politics is an important element of the human condition. In other words, that his is a *thick description* of politics.

A related issue is the fact that Scruton's theoretical interest and his practical concerns coincided: he had a special interest in and sympathy with those living under the Communist regimes of Central Europe. For years, he participated in the underground movement, offering free lectures, courses and discussions about politics to young intellectuals and other dissidents. Also, he was an active editor of a journal on conservatism (the *Salisbury Review*), which tried to offer new material for public discussion in Great Britain. In other words, the duality of his political portfolio, his theoretical interest and his practical concern, recalls the ancient distinction and connection between the active and the contemplative way of life. This paper will argue that both aspects of Scruton's achievements are crucial, if we want to make sense of the nature of his views of politics, that is, of his practically oriented intellectual conservatism.

This paper will explore Scruton's interest in ancient thought and in particular his relationship to Plato and Aristotle. Starting out from the well-known fresco by Raphael of Aristotle and Plato, it will put forth an argument addressing why ancient political philosophy matters even today. This will be followed by a description of both the Platonist and the Aristotelian element in Scruton's thought. To show the deep anthropological dimensions of Scruton's political thought, inspired by ancient wisdom, two famous European paintings will be analysed. An analysis of Scruton's descriptions

---

farm in rural Wiltshire, where he lived with his family. He published approximately 50 books, on political philosophy, aesthetics, architecture, music, religion, culture, literature and many other subject matters. He received the order of merit for his «services to philosophy, teaching and public education» from the Queen, and several national decorations from the state of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. (O'Hear 2020).

of the paintings by Botticelli and Poussin, both of which had a direct link to his *oeuvre*, will show that he took the great tradition of Greek philosophy seriously, without taking side in the debate between the two great sages[2]. The paper will conclude with a claim that intellectual conservatism, in other words, political thought armed with the necessary philosophical armament, is unimaginable without this dimension of Greek thought behind it, and that the Greek ideal remained alive in 20th century discussions of the love of place, and the sustainable form of human "dwelling" in the city as well.

1. Plato and Aristotle in Raphael's *School of Athens*

The way Raphael presents Plato and Aristotle in his *School of Athens* (1509-1511) – the two of them in the centre, engaged in a lively debate – is genuinely accepted as a valid description of their place in the history of Western philosophy, and also of their – if one looks at their passionate gestures – agonistic relationship. Each of the two holds a famous work of his in his hand (for the details see Rowland 2007, 105). Plato holds his *Timaeus*, the work in which God is described as one being with three natures, which is sometimes claimed to be a prefiguration of the teaching of the Christian Trinity. One can argue that Raphael connects Plato's philosophical tradition to Christianity, a claim which is certainly supported by our knowledge of the circle of Christian Platonists in Florence. Aristotle, on the other hand, holds his *Ethics*, which translates high ideals into the practicalities of human behaviour, also much discussed in medieval Europe.

After the breakthrough of Christianity, the opposite demands of Plato and Aristotle (to look for the eternal, and to handle the particular, respectively) have been united in the dual command to love God and to love one's neighbour. In Raphael's composition the two Greek sages appear in a Christianised context, connecting ancient Greek philosophy and Christian theology, in the age of refined humanism. This is a sign that the High Renaissance and its Christian humanist ideology was fond of the ancient tradition. Yet we see many more of the representatives of the different philosophical schools in Raphael's picture beside these two leading figures. The two of them still dominate the scene, even if they were claimed to be rivals. Christian Platonism and Christian Aristotelianism were regarded as competitors by the humanists as well (Hankins 2019). One of the key questions that one could ask about a philosopher in Raphael's day was, if he (in his day most of the times, of course, philosophers were males) belonged to the Platonic or to the Aristotelian school. The question had an urgency even for those who did not see such a sharp contrast between the two orthodoxies. But does this question still have relevance today, when we certainly see in their relationship the continuities between master and disciple, and not only the break? Gadamer, one of the philosophically most relevant 20th century disciples of

---

[2] My use of the term "great tradition", of course, refers to Scruton 2017b.

ancient Greek philosophy, for example, famously claimed a much closer relationship of master and disciple, than what is argued about Raphael's fresco (for a short overview of Gadamer's position see Gadamer 2015).

1.1 Why do Plato and Aristotle matter?

The relevance of ancient philosophy for modern thought has always been a debated question. Since at least the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, which started in *Ancien Régime* Versailles in the 17th century, and concluded momentarily in the post-revolutionary era with Benjamin Constant's succinct overview of the difference between the ancient and the modern concept of liberty, Western culture has been struggling with its ancient inheritance. Modernity and progress became a buzzword in an age of revolutions and social unrest, which urged the intellectual élite to get rid of the burdens of the past, that is, its Greco-Roman heritage, including classical art and literature, philosophy and religion. Recently, what is called cultural war made a pledge to deconstruct and devaluate the past as the first requisite of intellectual credibility. Yet neo-classical revivals played their part ever since the 18th century: one only has to think about the Palladian moment in English architecture, neo-classicism in mid-19th century architecture, or the return of the classical myth in the modernist novel. In the 20th century we saw the revival of virtue ethics started by Anscombe, MacIntyre and others.

Scruton made the following comparison between Cambridge and Oxford in his student-days: «Aristotle was not studied much in Cambridge and only a few people were doing ancient philosophy. But in Oxford he was taken very seriously because of people like David Wiggins» (Scruton and Dooley 2016, 30). To have an interest in ancient philosophy, for him, was more than a sign of reactionary bent. It was the first step of an initiation into European *Bildung*.

The question whether Scruton belonged to the Platonist or the Aristotelian tradition was brought up in a recent publication by James Bryson, which bears the following question in its title: *Is Roger Scruton a Christian Platonist?* (Bryson 2020). Bryson, a Cambridge educated philosopher of religion, edited an important collection of essays on Scruton's late philosophy of religion in 2016, in which he already addressed the issue (Bryson 2016). While he argued in favour of a definite Platonic inclination in Scruton, my aim is to show that Scruton did not look at the Plato-Aristotle connection as an either-or question. He often referred to Plato and Aristotle together, as to a great tradition largely neglected by analytical philosophers. My understanding of Scruton in this respect is that he was neither an Aristotelian nor a Platonic thinker by choice, but one for whom a nuanced understanding of both Plato and Aristotle, as well as what they meant together, was crucial. Although perhaps less engaged in a constant and direct dialogue with the

ancients, than the 'Platonising hermeneutics'[3] (Bryson 2020) of Hans-Georg Gadamer, or the sensitive account of the relationship between ancient Greek drama and philosophy of the early Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1986), or the innovative work of his one-time friend, Bernard Williams (Williams 1986), Scruton's work offers itself for interpretation in the context of the great tradition.

2. Care of the Soul – in search of the Platonic element in Scruton

Scruton was a courageous public intellectual and a daring writer. Both in speech and in writing he was happy to surprise his audience. He was ready, for example, to connect Edmund Burke, founder of modern conservativism and Plato, usually considered the arch-utopian by conservative authors, and a totalitarian thinker according to Popper. The following reference, found in Scruton's autobiographical writing, *Gentle Regrets*, makes it obvious that for him, politics is closely tied up with human nature, and with the requirements of a flourishing life, what the ancient called the education of the soul.

> In effect, Burke was joining in the old Platonic cry for a form of politics that would also be a form of nurture – 'care of the soul', as Plato put it, which would also be a care for absent generations (Scruton 2005, 44).

This quote comes at the end of a narrative in which Scruton describes how he became convinced of the truth of Burke's position. It is the sign that Scruton strives to understand the philosophical preconditions of conservatism. He has an unusual historical interest in British conservatism. He wants to dig below the level of political ideology. One of his main concerns in the last decade of his life was what is called philosophical anthropology: a philosophy of human nature, based on the ancient quest for the education of the soul. Scruton's philosophical anthropology is a tradition-based account, rooted in ancient wisdom and, in particular, built on Plato's account of Socrates's teaching of the 'care of the soul' in his *Apologia*. Plato's Socrates famously confesses:

> […] no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god. For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls, or even so much; and I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state (Plato 1966, 30a-b).

In the last decade of his life Scruton embarked on an examination of the human person in the totality of her experiences, including books edited from lectures: *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures* (2012), *The Soul of the World* (2014) and *On Human Nature* (2017a).

---

[3] This is how Bryson refers to Gadamer, in his article mentioned.

Scruton approached here metaphysics and philosophy of religion, a territory which must have been for him both challenging and distant. It was challenging for him very early on: in his essay on Hegel published in the *Salisbury Review* he emphasized: «We must understand the realm of institutions through the study of *Geist* (Spirit)» (Scruton 1988, 139). His way to metaphysics led through German classical idealism. But of course, the great moment of German philosophy, from Kant to Hegel, was embedded into a reception of ancient philosophy, so that by making this move from Burke to Kant and further to Hegel within German culture, Scruton directed his lens towards the classical past as well. The point where German idealism, both in its classicist and romantic phase, was close to the Greeks was its notion of humane education, which in the day's terminology was called *Bildung*. Scruton claimed that the phenomena covered by the term aesthetics in the discourse of German idealism were not discovered by the Enlightenment, but «are as old as history, and the problems of aesthetics are discussed (in other terms) by Plato and Aristotle» (Scruton 1998, 30).

Scruton's turn to philosophical anthropology served as a way to substantiate his research into political philosophy and the philosophy of art. His research into human nature encouraged him to turn to metaphysics. But his metaphysics was not a *l'art pour l'art*, as natural science is, in his reading. His interest in metaphysics was driven by a practical concern for what the ancients called a flourishing life. He shared much of the German idealist and romantic tradition according to which in modernity «[t]he aesthetic began to replace the religious as the central strand in education […] Art and literature […] became *studies*, devoted, as divinity had been devoted, to the nurturing and refining of the soul» (Scruton 1998, 30)[4].

After showing the connection between Scruton's interest in metaphysics, his philosophy of art, and his political philosophy, let us take a closer look at the Platonic element of Scruton's thinking, with the help of his refined philosophical analysis of a painting.

3. Scruton's description of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*

Let us consider his description of Botticelli's iconic composition, *The Birth of Venus* (1480s). As Scruton explains it, this is an imaginary scene of an imaginary being, a perfectly formed Goddess, called Venus. Botticelli had a model for the painting, a famous beauty of Florence in the days of Botticelli, by the name of Simonetta Vespucci. As Scruton reads the painting, what Botticelli achieves is to illustrate the Platonic idea of *eros*. According to this Platonic interpretation of *eros*, «desire calls us away from the world of sensual attachments to the ideal form of the beautiful». What is achieved by

---

[4] Importantly, Scruton mentions Adam Smith and Hugh Blair in the context of the birth of aesthetics, a proof of his detailed interest in the history of aesthetic thought in the early modern period.

the painter is something that was not achieved by the philosopher: «This painting helps to make Plato's theory both clear and believable» (Scruton 2014, 56).

One can certainly ask what it is exactly that enabled Botticelli to represent the Platonic idea in a clearer and more believable form than Plato did in his writings. This question is made all the more urgent by the fact that Botticelli became a devout Catholic by the time he had returned to Florence from Rome in the 1480s, as painter of religious masterpieces. According to Vasari, in the 1490s his devotion even made him a sectarian follower of Savonarola, so much so, that he gave up painting as a this-worldly pleasure, and got poor by the end of his life. Yet it is certainly remarkable that Scruton explains the Platonic view of human nature and, in particular, of erotic love, with the help of an *ekphrasis* of Botticelli's picture. It is a proof that Plato is less important for him as a political philosopher than as a philosopher of human nature.

4. The Aristotelian side of Scruton's philosophical anthropology

Let us turn now to the Aristotelian component in his philosophy of the human person. When he explains human nature, Scruton's starting point is a claim that beside the empirically verifiable reality that surrounds them, humans build up their common, communal mental realm, which he calls *Lebenswelt* – of course a term he takes from German *Lebensphilosophie*. This is the basis of what he calls a cognitive dualism, i.e. that the human being is part of nature, but also part of her own culturally constructed realm (for this term, see O'Hear 2020). His supposition of a cognitive dualism enables Scruton to distinguish science, which aims to explain the empirical world, that is, the realm of chemistry, physics and biology, the topic of the natural sciences; and the form of understanding (*Verstehen*) that is required to make sense of the *Lebenswelt*, an interpersonal realm, the topic of the humanities. While science relies on rational calculation and causation, the human world turns out to be underdetermined, a realm of free and therefore unpredictable choices, which cannot be forecast by reason. Here even the items we deal with are not stable and solid.

Scruton's human person, like that of Kant or Husserl, is an embodied, rational being. With the help of her rational faculty, she is able to make sense of the world. Yet this detached, rational form of sense-construction, the ability to explain the facts of the empirical world, is not enough for her to make sense of herself. Her own self, the 'I' remains a mystery for her – she only learns about it through her exchanges with another human being, the 'You' (sometimes Scruton uses the traditional form of the word: Thou). And this sort of interpersonal exchange is only made possible by what is called human imagination: the subject is able to imagine herself as seen from the perspective of the other. In this mental activity she is helped by her own view of the other. The result of this imaginative exercise is not, however, knowledge in the sense of natural sciences,

even though it is based on real experiences. Yet it has its significance in our life. It is through my own experience of my exchange with you, made possible by the imaginative efforts of both of us, that I become able to reflect on myself, and you become able to identify yourself.

Scruton's phenomenological description of the I-You relationship certainly capitalises on Martin Buber but, even more importantly, on Hegel on recognition, on the private language argument of Wittgenstein, and on the insight of 20th century phenomenology (see Scruton 1988). Here is how Scruton summarizes the relevant thought of his phenomenological description: «First-person awareness arises with the mastery of a public language and therefore with the recognition that others are using the Word I as I do, in order to express what they think and feel directly» (Scruton 2017a, 53). And still further, he once again adds a Kantian point: «In addressing me as 'you', you address me as a person and are asking me to respond as an 'I'» (Scruton 2017a, 55). To be a person in this context means an awareness of oneself as a subject. «The subject is a point of view upon the world of objects and not an item within it». Scruton employs the Kantian-Husserlian language in a restrictive manner: instead of using the term of the transcendental subject he refers «to the subject as a horizon, a one-sided boundary to the world as it seems» (Scruton 2017a, 57).

When Scruton presents the *Lebenswelt* as the result of an exchange between I and You, along the classical German lines, he focuses on the *differentia specifica* of the experience of the person: it is through the exchange that the 'I' is called to account, which means that the 'I' in this process of reflecting on herself through the exchange with the other, finds herself (creates herself as) both free and responsible. This is where the conservative, communal aspect of Scruton's account of the birth of human personality becomes apparent. This description is, however, not simply a short account of the genealogy of the humanities and self-knowledge. It is also a radical view of the education of the soul: «Without socially endorsed forms of education, without families and spheres of mutual love, without the disciplined approach to erotic encounters», there is no interpersonal exchange, in other words no chance to create a common culture, without which there is no hope for self-development (Scruton 2017a, 111). And even if one is happy enough to get through all these, it is «a long path of self-development, in which imitation, obedience, and self-control are necessary moments» (Scruton 2017a, 112). Scruton connects this whole German philosophical narrative of a slowly growing awareness of ourselves to Aristotle, calling it «the development of personality in the terms suggested by Aristotle» (Scruton 2017a, 112). Certainly this move has its reasons: already Hegel's teaching of recognition was linked to Aristotle (Ritter 1982).

5. The Platonic side of Scruton's philosophical anthropology

Above we saw a balanced, Aristotelian account of the natural sociability of the human being, based on the phenomenological concept of the *Lebenswelt*, the realm of interpersonal attitudes. This was a rather optimistic view, based on the assumptions of the communicative and imaginative skills and capacities of human beings, which make them persons, and therefore which create community between and among them. It presented human sociability as a primary precondition of the birth of a political community. The communicative capacities enabled the subject to engage in a learning process, which helps her to become a fully developed personality, embedded into her different communities, of which she is a member.

Yet persons will still remain embodied human beings. And their interpersonal connections are not always so balanced and moderate, as one would presume from the Aristotelian account. As Scruton dramatically phrases it, they

> are drawn to each other as such, trapped into erotic and familial emotions that create radical distinctions, unequal claims, fatal attachments, and territorial needs, and much of moral life is concerned with the negotiations of these dark regions of the psyche (Scruton 2017a, 116).

In other words: the human psyche has a part which is drawn by less elevated forces and therefore lies often beyond rational control, in the world of unbridled desires and passions. Scruton is here in line with the Platonic assumptions that these dark regions can cause disorder in the *polis*. This Platonic teaching was re-appropriated in the Augustinian view of the earthly city, and it came to surface in different forms in different phases of modernity: both in the Machiavellian realist account of politics, and in the agonistic view of politics, like that of Carl Schmitt. It also resurfaced, but this time with a positive indication, in 18th century British thought, in the discussions of the passions and interests, as Hirschman influentially phrased it (Hirschman 1977).

To make sense of the dark regions of the human being is not possible by any obvious rational mechanisms and techniques. Human beings' sexual urges and temptations are rooted in the darker side of the psyche, just as much as their appreciation of beauty: «The love of beauty, too, has its roots in our embodied life» (Scruton 2017a, 115). According to Scruton's argument, it is because the individual is not in full control of his drives (a Platonic idea), that human beings are «bound by ties that we never chose» (Scruton 2017a, 116). Therefore, in order to «encompass» these dark impulses «human beings have developed concepts that have little or no place in liberal theories of the social contract – concepts of the sacred and the sublime, of evil and redemption» (Scruton 2017a, 117). As he sees it, liberal contractarians cannot handle the problem of sexuality, as they do not employ a thick concept of the person. Neither can one defend the idea of «submission and obedience toward authorities that you have never chosen»,

which, however, are necessary forms of social discipline in social coexistence (Scruton 2017a, 125). In this respect a lack of a conceptual analysis of authority by most of the liberal thinkers turns out to be crucial. It is also crucial, however, that authors of the liberal canon, such as Hume and Smith, were actually deeply interested in the phenomenon of obedience to authority. Importantly, Scruton discusses them in his account of the Great tradition of European conservatism, which is a sign of his close connection with the British liberal-conservative tradition of thought (Scruton 2017b).

Scruton's philosophical anthropology enables the philosopher to execute an anthropological ground work behind, below or above his politics, focusing on the concept of piety, which he claims comes «from the ontological predicament of the individual» (Scruton 2017a, 125). His example is the traditional filial obligation – this demand of obedience does not require the consent of the son or daughter, which makes it, therefore, the opposite of contracts. Scruton contrasts contracts with vows. Vows are commitments, that cannot be finished so easily as contracts can. They are open-ended, and they «tie their parties together in a shared destiny and what was once called a 'substantial unity'» (Scruton 2017a, 90). Scruton's example is the vow of marriage, which results in a companionship beyond mutual utility, enabling the pair to have children. Scruton refers to the social function of marriage. The point he makes about vows is that they are not to be perceived as contracts. Rather, they have a transcendent, sacramental quality, while they also have an existential character. That is why the help of God is traditionally requested for the vow of a sustainable marriage connection. Scruton pushes the issue even further, and jumps from the conceptual pair contract/vow to that of «justice and piety» (Scruton 2014, 90), which is a conceptual pair of morals and politics. While justice is the explicit aim of contracts (for example in Rawls's meta-theory), in the case of vows piety takes over the function of justice. Justice is based on the concept of right: one is obliged to conform to it, because the other has a right that one has to take into account. The obligation of piety – of which (Scruton 2012a, 158) adds, that the term comes from Roman *pietas* – is not the result of an undertaking. His aim is to substantiate his point in political philosophy: that Hobbes's claim that «a man is under no obligation that ariseth not from some act of his own» (quoted in Scruton 2014, 92) is not true. Referring to Hegel, Scruton argues that both the obligation to parents and political obligations show that «a complete account of human obligation must acknowledge piety as a distinct source of the 'desire-independent reasons' that govern our duties» (Scruton 2014, 92).

It is surprising, that this conservative overview by Scruton of the necessary social mechanisms to control subliminal impulses, including unchosen obligations, is part of a subchapter on piety. This is a Hegelian point, as he admits, which is there to counterbalance his Kantian leanings, as Plato is there to complement his Aristotelian account, and *vice versa*. It is from Hegel that Scruton takes the virtue of piety as part of

the relationship of the subject to her community. It is here, that he sums up in a strong point his conservative political philosophical conviction: that «the main task of political conservatism, as represented by Burke, [de] Maistre, and Hegel, was to put obligations of piety back where they belong, at the center of the picture» (Scruton 2017a, 126). And why is piety central in a description of uncontracted social obligations? Because all the major turns of our life happen in a social context, preserving their «sacramental character». «Rituals of birth, marriage, and death are […] prime examples of the sacred» (Scruton 2017a, 128).

6. The political implications of human destructive impulses

In his examination of the destructive forces in human nature, Scruton started out from the thinking of René Girard. Yet, in spite of all his admissions of the dependence of the subject's life on supra-individual powers, Scruton maintains a philosophical position, which looks for a synthesis of what he calls «the philosophy of the freely choosing person» and the philosophy of piety, pollution, and the sacred, beauty and evil (Scruton 2017a, 133). As he puts it, this vocabulary of our common language to handle the dark side of the soul, is helpful to handle philosophically the full picture of human life, including our political duties.

To show the connection between these dark human impulses and the political realm, he refers to the concept of evil. While this term is directly taken from religion, its use in ordinary political language is well-established, as a result of the evil deeds of 20th century politics and, in particular, of the Holocaust. The distinguishing mark of this sort of mass murder was that it attacked not only the body, but the soul of the victims. (Scruton equates this Platonic-religious concept of the soul with the self, a term introduced by Mead among others.) This is why we can say that «the death camp was not just a bad thing that happened but an evil that was done» (Scruton 2017a, 133). Scruton once again relies on the concept of the soul in his definition of evil: «I would identify this as a paradigm of evil: namely, the attempt or desire to destroy the soul of another, so that his or her value and meaning are rubbed out» (Scruton 2017a, 138).

By making explicit that the dark forces of the human soul are present in political life, and that human reflection can only explain them with a language of transcendence, Scruton in fact wants to reconstruct a richer philosophical vocabulary of moral and political life. He re-establishes connections that have faded away from the terminology of much of professional political reflection and analysis. Relying on ordinary discourse, where such expressions are still conventional, he returns to the transcendental underpinnings of our moral intuitions. In ordinary language use, we cannot make sense of our own first person experiences without expressions like sacred and evil, sacrifice and piety. This is why he thinks that «the connection between morality and religion is not an accident», adding

the paradoxical claim that «religion […] is both a product of the moral life and the thing that sustains it» (Scruton 2017a, 141).

This way Scruton seems to accept the criticism formulated by the German constitutional judge Böckenförde in his own famous dilemma: «The liberal [*freiheitlich*], secularized State lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself» (Böckenförde 1976, 60). In other words, Scruton also admits that the secularised constitutional state cannot secure those safeguards which can ensure that the citizens will be able and ready to live in accordance with the expectations of its constitutional arrangements. It is rather frustrating that at this crucial point, once having reconnected politics and morality with religion, Scruton admits that philosophy cannot pursue any further the basic conditions of the political survival of present day Western political culture. Instead of offering further insights into the *arcana imperii* of liberal democracy, he suggests his readers to turn to two great works of art, Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and Wagner's *Parsifal*.

7. Poussin's *Landscape with a Calm*

As these are rather long and complex works of literature and music, we cannot follow Sir Roger's advice here. Instead, let us rather have a glance once again at a single painting, the one that appears on the cover of Scruton's *The Soul of the World*. This is a landscape painting by one of the most remarkable landscape painters of Western art, Nicolas Poussin. *Landscape with a Calm* (1651) is one of a pair of paintings, its twin being *Landscape with a Storm* (1651). We try to connect Scruton's thought to this landscape by Poussin. Let us start out from this quote by the art critic of «The New Republic», on the occasion of the Metropolitan's exhibition on Poussin and nature: Poussin «seems to begin with a psychological or moral idea and then to bring together the landscape elements that will support it» (Perl 2008). Poussin deals in his art with this moral idea in a Platonic manner. He is starting out from an *eidos*, and turns the elements of the work of art into an emanation of this *eidos*. It is not accidental, that the art critic calls Poussin with a conscious anachronism «the ultimate conceptualist», whose «steeliest set pieces are suffused with a speculative spirit». He also characterises the painter the following way: «[Poussin] never forgot that idealism must be wrested from realism, that general principles must be deduced from particularities» (Perl 2008). This realist idealism makes Poussin and his mode of painting characterised here as Platonist.

In fact, there is another line which can be traced back from Poussin to Plato. It leads through the theoretical concept of the sublime, a notion which is famously associated with Poussin, for example by the French art theoretician Louis Marin. His posthumous book entitled *Sublime Poussin* (1995) was a collection of articles planned as parts of a monograph on the landscape painter. Marin quotes the contemporary art theorist Félibien's account of the intentions of the artist: «The following year (1651) Poussin

painted […] two landscapes for M. Pointel, one representing a storm and the other calm and peaceful weather» (Félibien 1705). Here is Marin's summarised interpretation: «on the one hand, one of the paintings represents a tempest, the figure of the sublime; on the other hand, in the schematism of variation, the two together, as a pair, present the unrepresentable of representation, the sublime» (Marin 1999, 125). Certainly, the concept of the sublime is crucial for our search of the Platonic element in Scruton. It leads us back to Neo-Platonism, to Longinus's piece *On the Sublime* in the 1st century, but it also points forward to both Edmund Burke's youthful work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), and to Immanuel Kant's use of the term in his systematized piece of aesthetics, the *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

What is the relevance of the sublime, as presented by Poussin, for Scruton's political philosophy? To answer this question, we turn first to his small book on *Beauty* (2009). Here, in a subchapter on *The sublime and the beautiful* in the chapter on *Natural beauty*, he recalls Burke's distinction between beauty and the sublime.

> Burke discerned two radically distinct responses to beauty in general, and to natural beauty in particular: one originating in love, the other in fear. When we are attracted by the harmony, order and serenity of nature, so as to feel at home in it and confirmed by it, then we speak of its beauty. When, however, as on some wind-blown mountain crag, we experience the vastness, the power, the threatening majesty of the natural world, and feel our own littleness in the face of it, then we should speak of the sublime (Scruton 2009, 72-73).

There can be hardly any doubt, that the two paintings of Poussin on the calm and the stormy landscape can be regarded as paradigm cases of these two understandings of beauty and the sublime. Yet Scruton makes one more step. This is how he connects the sublime beauty with the transcendental:

> the experience of beauty also points us beyond this world, to a 'kingdom of ends' in which our immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered. As Plato and Kant both saw, therefore, the feeling for beauty is proximate to the religious frame of mind, arising from a humble sense of living with imperfection, while aspiring towards the highest unity with the transcendental (Scruton 2009, 175-176).

And then, mentioning Poussin among other famous representatives of landscape painting, he adds: «Landscape painters […] point to the joy that lies incipient in decay, and to the eternal that is implied in the transient». In other words, with the help of a reference to the sublime of the landscape painter, Scruton leads us to connect art and the religious feeling of the transcendental, as a counterpoint to the this-worldly and the transient.

Yet we know that Burke's aesthetic taste plays a crucial role in his major work, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), too. If the sublime had its part to play in aesthetics, leading to the realm of the transcendental, Burke seems to be rather

cautious with its use in politics. His main argument against the French Enlightened philosophers, who were ready to turn over the social order in favour of a perfectionist vision which had never been tried earlier, was that one should not risk order and stability, the crucial pillars of a political edifice (Hörcher 2011). He was aware that the political *status quo* was never perfect, and that *ancien régime* France faced major challenges, too, yet there is no way to surpass the human condition in this life. Burke referred to notions of reverie and piety, to submission to accepted authority, ideas which he found crucial in his view of politics to heal the wounds caused by our fallen nature. Without preserving these tradition-based attitudes and gestures, the political community would not be able to avoid chaos, he seems to imply.

8. *Oikophilia* and patriotism – classical Greek ideas of political attachment to home

In the final section of this article, I would like to concentrate on a further aspect of the connection between politics, art and the sacred – on the concept of *oikophilia*. As we have seen, politics can only be conceptualised if we look at the whole personality of the politically active human being. *Oikophilia* is a concept, which is based on Scruton's analysis of the human person, as well as on his appropriation of the Greek classics, connecting the Platonic and the Aristotelian element in his thought. A concept, which was constructed by him from obvious Greek roots. A reference to Greek *oikos* is already present in his first book on conservatism, where he refers to a sense of home and writes: «The Homeric *oikos* [...] referred not merely to a social unit but also to a household, endowed with property, and standing under rights of ownership and obligations of hospitality» (Scruton 1990, 101). The most detailed elaboration of the concept is in his book on *Green Philosophy* (Scruton 2013), but he refers to it, and to its opposite, *oikophobia*, in a number of other works as well. Let us search for those references to the concept where the relationship between politics, beauty and the religious is brought forward.

First of all: how does Scruton define *oikophilia*? It is «the love and feeling for home» (Scruton 2012b, 3), or «the love of the *oikos*, or household» (Scruton 2012b, 26). This seems to be an obvious mirror-translation, and therefore not really informative. However, we have once again a German concept to help us comprehend it: *oikophilia* is «the deep stratum of the human psyche that the Germans know as *Heimatgefühl*». This is, in fact, a synonym of *local patriotism*. Scruton identifies patriotism as «love of country, [...] a sense of belonging and of a shared and inherited home» (Scruton 2012b, 171). He seems to bring the wider term, a love of country, close to the narrower one, the love of place. Yet *oikophilia* is apparently a primeval, earlier and more elementary attachment than the patriotic attachment of the citizen to her state. Reflecting on Burke's notion of a primeval contract or generational partnership, he mentions that

«this motive extends no further than our local and contingent attachments», and he explicitly refers to the «little platoons» mentioned by Burke to identify those local attachments (Scruton 2006, 37).

Let us think about the notion of home. It has an existential touch, which makes it more closely connected with our life narrative than the notion of nation or country: «home, the place where we are and that we share, the place that defines us, that we hold in trust for our descendants, and that we don't want to spoil» (Scruton 2012b, 25). This is, indeed, a refined description of our sense of home. It approaches the phenomenological description of the home that we find in Heidegger's writing on dwelling (Heidegger 1971), or in Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1964).

But we should decide if *oikophilia* is a political concept, or a term of moral philosophy, close to *philia*, friendship, in the sense discussed by both Plato and Aristotle, as the highest form of human interpersonal relationship. The meaning of the term friendship, in Aristotle, had a well-defined political layer. Citizens of a *polis* had to feel political friendship towards each other. In this respect it is with the concept of *oikophilia* that Scruton gets closest to Christian Aristotelian Thomists, like MacIntyre, who looked at local communities as the primary units of political life (Hörcher 2019a). John Haldane, for example, referred to MacIntyre, Scruton and Taylor, in one breath, stressing also their religiosity (Haldane 2017). In fact, Scruton himself made an effort to show that *oikophilia* is indeed related to the sacred, to what he calls piety. He connects *oikophilia* to the sacred, bringing also the aesthetic dimension into the picture. Yet the question is if the term can still preserve its political meaning, or whether it turns into a term of moral philosophy.

In Chapter Eight of his green-conservative book Scruton connects the following terms: *Beauty, Piety and Desecration*. It is in this chapter that he bravely connects the two fields, aesthetics and religion, with the third one, the love of home. But does he connect the first two with politics, as well? As he understands it, *oikophilia*, as a motive, «absorbs and transforms many subsidiary motives, two of which deserve our attention, since they have inspired almost all the major conservation movements of recent times: love of beauty and respect for the sacred» (Scruton 2012b, 253). He writes about aesthetic taste and natural piety, according to the Kantian scheme, but he also refers in connection with this to a number of late Enlightenment, early Romantic thinkers who agreed on the connection between these two fields: «for thinkers like Burke, Kant, Rousseau, Schiller and Wordsworth, the beautiful and the sacred [were] connected» (Scruton 2012b, 253). And indeed, Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1795), an important theoretical piece by the poet, recalled ancient wisdom about the fullness of the embodied human person in the ancient Greek *polis*, this way making the same point made here by Scruton himself. One's attachment to the beauty of her local surroundings

can be compared to one's relationship to one's beloved friend. According to Scruton, beauty has or is an intrinsic value in a paradoxical Kantian manner: «it is the intrinsic value of beautiful things that renders them useful». Their particular unintended effect is the education of the soul. The same is true about friendship – we can add in the highest sense of the term, in the Aristotelian scheme: «Friendship is useful, so long as we do not think of it as useful» (Scruton 2012b, 254). We can draw a temporary conclusion: both beauty and friendship, as natural piety, will indirectly contribute to preserving political order in a well-guarded political community. This claim holds even if a local community does not pay specific political attention to this political side-effect of *oikophilia*: simply caring for the beauty of their surroundings, and cultivating friendship, will help the survival of communal ties.

It is perhaps somewhat strange that Scruton compares interpersonal human relationships to a relationship towards a beautiful object: «*Oikophilia* […] shares the moral roots of friendship». The point of the comparison is that in Aristotle, too, real friendship, at least the highest form of it, is for its own sake, without any utility function. This description of friendship is elaborated in Book VIII of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, while book VI discusses, among other concepts of knowledge, practical wisdom. The same way, when we appreciate the beauty of an object, we appreciate it for its own sake, without further considerations of its utility. However, by their intrinsic value, they both point towards something, which is beyond them, in other words, towards something transcendental, originally the dimension of religion. And they also mediate a message of order, which touches upon the political, this way connecting the experience with socio-political concerns.

Speaking about the love of place we have to mention the name of Heidegger. Scruton's *Aesthetics of Architecture* (Scruton 1979) was partly inspired by Heidegger's famous piece on *Building and Dwelling* (Heidegger 1971). The concept of *oikophilia* has connections to Heidegger, too, as Scruton explains:

> Heidegger's philosophy is a philosophy of settlement, a set of mystical instructions for being at home in a godless world, a liturgical spell for changing solitude and alienation into the comforted fullness of being *here* and *now* (Scruton 2012b, 232).

While Heidegger returns here to a popular theme of German idealist philosophy, his intention is to get back to the original Greek sense of the love of place. The exceptional relationship between the natural and the humanly constructed, both leading to the divine in different ways, is exemplified by Heidegger's memorable description of the phenomenon of the Greek temple, standing on a bare rock, close to the sea (Heidegger 2006). Through the poetic-rhetorical power of his descriptive language, Heidegger was able to recall the beauty of the place in Greece, a place where the gods dwell.

It is perhaps not accidental that, instead of referring to Heidegger, Scruton refers to Pausanias, the 2nd century Greek geographer, and his descriptions of ancient Greek temples. For obvious reasons, Scruton cannot accept Heidegger's political thought. Yet Heidegger's phenomenological analyses are quite relevant for Scruton's concept of *oikophilia*. Certainly, Heidegger in this respect relies on Greek thought, and the reference to Pausanias can perform the same task. Scruton also mentions Simon Schama's work on classical landscape and memory. It is to Schama that he attributes the strong claim that «land and landscape have been portrayed as sacred in all our human attempts to belong in the world» (Scruton 2012b, 284; Schama 1995).

In order to connect Scruton's love of home with the ancient Greek concept of dwelling, one should also recall the transcendental moment of dwelling in the work of Fustel de Coulanges. The French historian of antiquity, too, developed a Platonic-Aristotelian, as well as politically conservative account of the origins of the city. This is how Scruton comments on his predecessor: «In *La Cité antique*, published in 1864, the historian Fustel de Coulanges tells the story of the ancient city, which he sees primarily as a religious foundation, one in which people assemble to protect their households, their ancestors, and their gods, and in which each family gains an enduring foothold» (Scruton 2014, 118). He also mentions the «cult of the hearth» and «the worship of ancestors», recurring themes for Fustel de Coulanges (Scruton 2014, 117).

Scruton's *oikophilia* is a love of place, of the beauty of the natural surroundings and of the cultural legacy of the place. When describing it, Scruton has in mind «the old cities of Europe», including «Paris, Rome, Florence, Bath or Prague», all of them illustrations of «aesthetic judgement […] as the expression of a community» (Scruton 2012b, 260). This is the late Scruton, who discovered urbanism as a basic theme of political thought. He served as the chair of the "Building Better, Building Beautiful" Commission, set up by the British Government, offering his expertise and advice in aesthetic theory for public and political benefit to restore the original order of the traditional British towns. He writes that public beauty, including the beauty of streets, squares and natural environments, can help communities both in a political and in a moral sense: shared beauty is a «co-ordinating device, whereby individuals can adjust to each other and live on terms» (Scruton 2012b, 262). In other words, it is a crucial device to sustain political culture, and to teach human cooperation for the new members of the community. When shared judgements of beauty are born, they turn out to be «bound up with the social identity of those who express them» (Scruton 2012b, 264). Not surprisingly, Scruton turns back to the finding of Jane Jacobs, who taught lessons of modesty to urban planners, and advised local communities to become more alert to defend what belongs to them, their property as well as the inherent values which they embody. But Scruton does not stop there: through Lewis Mumford's classic historical summary, *The City in History* (1937), the British philosopher

points back to the «tightly packed and field-surrounded medieval city as his [both Mumford's and Scruton's] ideal» (Scruton 2012b, 269).

9. Conclusion: the classical ideal of the citizen of the *polis*

Léon Krier, the inspiration behind the model new town of Poundbury in Dorset, itself a returning theme in Scruton's writing on urban development, was a close friend of Scruton. An advisor of the Prince of Wales in this project, he is Scruton's example of the modest architect (Krier 1998). Krier worked as an urban planner and a theoretician of planning. As we saw, Scruton, too, became active at the end of his life in urban matters, applying theoretical insights to practical decisionmaking in the politics of urban planning. In the last year of his life, he served as the chair of the independent body of the "Building Better, Building Beautiful" Commission, translating philosophical ideas to practical advice. The philosopher's involvement in this work proves that he held the ancient view that a responsible citizen has to take part in the management of the affairs of his political community. This symbolic gesture on his part is in a way a denial of the contemporary separation of professional politics, expertise, and intellectual reflection. It can easily be interpreted within the framework of ancient practical philosophy, where practical wisdom and philosophical wisdom were indeed continuous. In this sense, Scruton thought of himself as an active citizen in accordance with the great European tradition, based on the classical Platonic and Aristotelian *thick description* of political engagement, which connected a flourishing human life with the active involvement in the affairs of the *polis*. His participation in the communal decision making process was a reaffirmation of «ideas of home, beauty and consecration, through the sense of responsibility and tradition» (Scruton 2012b, 290; see also Hörcher 2019b).

Bibliography

Böckenförde, Ernst-Wolfgang. 1976. *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit. Studien zur Staatstheorie und zum Verfassungsrecht*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Bryson, James. 2016. "The Problem of Plato." In *The Religious Philosophy of Scruton*, edited by James Bryson, 111-120. London: Bloomsbury.

Bryson, James. 2020. "Is Roger Scruton a Christian Platonist?" *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 81 (2): 136-154.

Félibien, André. 1705. "8th Conversation". In Id. *Entretiens sur les Vies et sur les Ouvrages des plus excellens Peintres anciens et modernes*. Paris: Mortier.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2015. "The Socratic Question and Aristotle," translated by Carlo DaVia. *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (1): 95-102.

Haldane, John. 2017. "MacIntyre Against Morality." *First Things* May 2017.

Hankins, James. 2019. *Virtue Politics*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 2006. *The Origin of the Work of Art*, translated by Roger Berkowitz and Philippe Nonet. Draft available at: https://www.academia.edu/2083177/The_Origin_of_the_Work_of_Art_by_Martin_Heidegger.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." In Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated and collected by Albert Hofstadter, 145-161. New York: Harper&Row.

Hirschman, Albert. 1977. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hörcher, Ferenc. 2011. "A fenséges zsarnoksága: Edmund Burke új esztétikai paradigmájának eszmetörténeti kontextusai. (The tyranny of the sublime: The contexts of Edmund Burke's new aesthetic paradigm in intellectual history)." In *Edmund Burke esztétikája és az európai felvilágosodás*, edited by Ferenc Horkay-Hörcher and Márton Szilágyi, 45-88. Budapest: Ráció Kiadó.

Hörcher, Ferenc. 2019a. *MacIntyre on Practice, Narrative and Identity: The Case of the Fishing Community*, conference talk, available at: https://www.academia.edu/39723667/MacIntyres_Philosophy_of_Practice_Narrative_and_Identity.

Hörcher, Ferenc. 2019b. "A léptékhelyes város dicsérete – A herceg, az építész és a filozófus beszélgetése (In Praise of the Rightly Scaled City)." In *A kisváros dicsérete (In Praise of the Small Town)*, edited by Ferenc Hörcher, Imre Körmendy and Krisztián Tóbiás, 111-131. Balatonfüred: Tempevölgy, available at: https://tempevolgy.hu/online/konyvespolc/horcher-ferenc-a-leptekhelyes-varos-dicserete-a-herceg-az-epitesz-es-a-filozofus-beszelgetese.

Krier, Léon. 1998. *Architecture: Choice or Fate*. Windsor: Andreas Papadakis Publisher.

Marin, Louis. 1999. *Sublime Poussin*, translated by Catherine Porter. Stanford: Leland Stanford Junior University.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1986. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Hear, Anthony. 2020. "Roger Scruton." In *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XIX, edited by Ron Johnston FBA, 447-465. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Perl, Jed. 2008. "A Calm and A Storm." *The New Republic* April 23.

Plato. 1966. "Apology." In *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1, translated by Harold North Fowler, introduction by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., available at: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.01 70%3Atext%3DApol.%3Asection%3D30a.

Ritter, Joachim. 1982. *Hegel and the French Revolution. Essays on the Philosophy of Right*, translated with an Introduction by Richard Dien Winfield. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.

Rowland, Ingrid. 2007. "The Vatican Stanze." In *The Cambridge Companion to Raphael*, edited by Marcia B. Hall, 95-119. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schama, Simon. 1995. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Random House.

Scruton, Roger. 1979. *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Scruton, Roger. 1990 [1980]. *The Meaning of Conservatism*. Second edition. Houndmills and London: MacMillan.

Scruton, Roger. 1988. *Conservative Thinkers: Essays from The Salisbury Review*. London: Claridge Press.

Scruton, Roger. 1998. "The Aesthetic Gaze." In Id., *Modern Culture*, 30-46. London: A&C Black, Bloomsbury.

Scruton, Roger. 2005. *Gentle Regrets. Thoughts from a Life*. London, New York: Continuum.

Scruton, Roger. 2006. *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism*. London, New York: Continuum.

Scruton, Roger. 2009. *Beauty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scruton, Roger. 2012a. *The Face of God*. London, etc.: Bloomsbury.

Scruton, Roger. 2012b. *How to think seriously about the planet. The Case for an Environmental Conservatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scruton, Roger. 2013. *Green Philosophy. How to think seriously about the planet*. London: Atlantic Books.

Scruton, Roger. 2014. *The Soul of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Scruton, Roger and Mark Dooley. 2016. *Conversations with Roger Scruton*. London: Bloomsbury, Continuum.

Scruton, Roger. 2017a. *On Human Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Scruton, Roger 2017b. *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*. New York: All Points Books.

Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ferenc Hörcher is a political philosopher, historian of political thought and poet. He studied in Budapest, Oxford and Brussels. He defended his PhD thesis on *The Philosophy of Moderation in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1996). He is the head of the Research Institute of Politics and Government of the University of Public Service, and a senior fellow of the Institute of Philosophy in Budapest. His latest books are *A Political Philosophy of Conservatism* (Bloomsbury 2020) and *The Political Philosophy of the European City* (Lexington Books 2021). He is in the process of writing a book length study (contracted with Palgrave MacMillan) on politics and art in Scruton's philosophy.

Email: horcher.ferenc@uni-nke.hu