

Environmentalism as Love of Home

By MARTIN WITKERK

After my late venture into the fun house of academic philosophy (see “The Philosophy Department Looks at Immigration,” *The Social Contract*, Spring 2012), it is both a relief and a delight to turn to the work of a man with real philosophical insight: Roger Scruton. While that earlier review demonstrates what happens when philosophers are ignorant of the specialized disciplines relevant to their subject matter, the book under review here demonstrates rather the limitations of specialized disciplines themselves and the need for a broader perspective which it ought to be the proper task of philosophy to supply. Scruton is a rare contemporary up to this task. In *How to Think Seriously about the Planet*, he searches for, and finds, a coherent justification for conservatism — environmental protection — which cannot be supplied by the data of, e.g., biology or economics.

How to Think Seriously about the Planet The Case for an Environmental Conservatism*

By Roger Scruton

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012

457pp., \$29.95 hardcover



Protection of man’s natural environment is today widely considered a “left-wing” cause, yet it is not obvious why this should be the case: all men want clean air to breathe and clean water to drink. Moreover, a glance at history reveals that in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, natural preservation was the concern of traditionalists and radicals in about equal measure. And if one were to judge by etymology, conservation would seem to be a natural fit with conservatism. The author explains the connection this way:

Conservatism and conservation are two aspects of a single long-term policy, which is that of husbanding resources and ensuring

their renewal.... Environmentalists and conservatives are both in search of the motives that will defend a shared but threatened legacy from predation by its current trustees.

What, then, is the quarrel between left and right over the environment? It is over a subtle difference in attitude which must be teased out from the particular measures each group favors. So let us start with some examples. The left-wing efforts at environmental protection which Scruton criticizes consist mainly of first, governmental takeover; second, governmental regulation; third, NGO (nongovernmental organization) campaigns; and fourth, mass panics. The author gives examples of each and shows how they have been useless and even counterproductive.

First, let us consider governmental takeover:

a) Ravenna Park was established in Seattle in 1887 by Mr. and Mrs. William W. Beck, who bought several parcels of land on the outskirts of the city, in order to preserve and provide access to the giant fir trees growing there — some 400 feet high and 20 feet in diameter. They built a pavilion for concerts and nature lectures, and charged a 25 cents entrance fee to the park, which would be visited by around 10,000 people every day. In 1911 the city, *in response to conservationist pressure*, [our emphasis] bought the park under a compulsory purchase order for \$135,663. Almost at once the giant trees began disappearing, cut down and sold by park employees, sometimes with a bureaucratic rubber stamp that condemned a particular tree as a ‘threat to public safety.’ By 1925 none of the trees remained.

b) The British Forestry Commission was established during the First World War under conditions of national emergency. Although the Commission was established with the purpose of maintaining and preserving British

Martin Witkerk writes from the mid-Atlantic region and has a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Tulane University.

* Note: The book under review is a revised edition of the same author’s *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet*, published by Atlantic in 2011.

woodlands, it has been shown that, during the fifties and sixties, when it controlled most of the marketable timber, the rate of destruction of the woodlands was greater than ever before, and entirely without historical parallel.

Next, central regulation:

a) An EU directive issued in response to the slight risk that meat from sick animals might enter the food chain insists that no abattoir can function without the presence of a qualified vet. Qualified vets are expensive in Britain; hence, smaller abattoirs had to close. When Foot and Mouth disease broke out in 2001 it was not, as in the past, confined to the local source of the outbreak, but carried around the country by animals traveling a hundred miles or more to the nearest legal abattoir. Some 7 million animals were slaughtered in the attempt to confine the disease, and the cost to the economy was £8 billion.

b) In 1993 the federal government forbade private landowners from creating firebreaks around their homes in California's Riverside County for fear of disturbing the protected Stephens' Kangaroo Rat, which had taken up residence there. When as a result wildfires swept through the county, both the homes and the rats were destroyed.

Third, there are the campaigning NGOs, such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and Earth First! A fairly typical case history is provided by the dispute between Greenpeace and Shell Oil over the Brent Spar oil platform:

Shell had proposed to dispose of [the platform] by sinking it in the sea. Greenpeace countered with a massively orchestrated hate campaign against Shell, involving boycotts, advertising, leaflets and pressure on shareholders, in order to prevent the sinking of the platform. The reason given was that the platform contained many thousand tons of oil and would be an environmental hazard for years to come: a reason that turned out to be false. No suggestion was made that Greenpeace and Shell should sit down together and

discuss the problem. This was a fight to the death, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.

Greenpeace won, and the platform was lifted and conveyed to a Norwegian fjord, an unsightly wreck that was eventually dismantled at a cost of £43 million (as opposed to the £3 million required to sink it). Because of the energy required to dismantle the rig, and the polluting side effects of doing so, this was the worst way, from the environmental point of view, of dealing with the problem. Having cost Shell millions of dollars and unjustly damaged its reputation, Greenpeace, on proof that the platform contained no oil, offered an airy apology and went on to its next campaign.

Fourth, mass panics. Global warming is the obvious example today; yet, as the author observes:

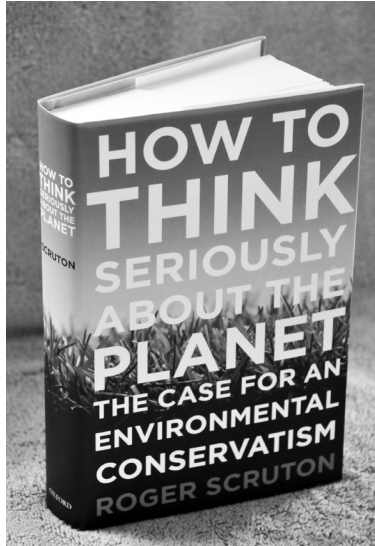
alarms of this kind are a recurring feature of human societies, and there is good reason for this. Alarms turn problems into emergencies, and so bring the ordinary politics of compromise to a sudden stop. Faced with an emergency, we prepare ourselves to obey orders, to follow leaders. People who pursue a politics of top-down control therefore find emergencies extremely useful.

In this connection, Scruton discusses Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), which predicted that global overpopulation would lead to massive famines by the 1970s. Another pertinent example is the "global cooling" or "new ice age" scare of the '70s. One proponent wrote in 1976 that "the cooling has already killed hundreds of thousands of people in poor countries."

Christopher Booker and Richard North have written a book on mass panics, *Scared to Death*; they note that "many of those who had devoted their energies to warning the world against global cooling were, within a year or two, spreading alarms about global warming instead."

The aim of mass panics is identical to that of the left in general — thoroughgoing social change under the tutelage of a revolutionary "vanguard":

[The panic mongers'] intransigent doom-day posture involves a full-scale repudia-



tion of life as it is. Radical eco-warriors have demanded total life-changing commitment from their followers. Climate change has been not merely believed in but seized upon, as a convenient way of turning a political problem into a moral and spiritual challenge, a wake-up call to mankind as a whole, which can be addressed only by change so radical as to amount to a change of life. When people propose some less demanding response to the problem, they may be greeted with surprise and indignation, since they are undermining the faith.

Many criticisms have been made already of these types of environmental action, and Scruton repeats some of them: regulation disaggregates problems in an attempt to solve them one by one, which inevitably leads to unintended consequences; government control infantilizes people by taking away their responsibilities; neither governments nor crusading NGOs are responsible to anyone; and so forth. But it is less the author's concern to assess particular policies than to show us, as his title suggests, "how to think about" environmental issues in general.

Scruton labels his approach "conservative," yet he immediately warns American readers that their understanding of conservatism is likely to be different from that of an Englishman such as himself. Americans, he believes, have a tendency to see politics in terms of a dichotomy between individual freedom and state control. This is because Americans collectively have long possessed an abundance of land and natural resources which have enabled them to put problems of scarcity and overpopulation out of mind — so far. Europe, on the other hand,

is an assemblage of constricted states, settled throughout recorded history and with precious habitats, both human and animal, cared for and fought for over centuries. European conservatives are acutely aware of the constraints that surround them. This does not mean that they reject market solutions. It means that they will pay more attention than their American counterparts to the things that make markets possible: to law, tradition and the moral life.

A properly grounded conservatism will not advocate economic freedom at all costs; rather, it will recognize that ecological costs often do arise from economic activity and work to find ways of reducing them. Indeed,

the market is of interest in this context mainly as an example of a *homeostatic system*, i.e., a self-correcting social system which can confront and overcome shocks from outside, and in most cases adjust to the needs and motives of its members. Other such systems include families, representative government, the common law, and civil associations; and each of these also has a part to play in proper stewardship of the environment.

Philosophical arguments for environmental preservation come in two principal forms: utilitarian reasoning that weighs the claims of the present generation against future generations, and pleas for a new "biocentric" ethics to replace our supposedly outdated "anthropocentric" way of thought. Both approaches face considerable difficulties.

Utilitarian reasoning comes up against the indefinite number and qualitative unpredictability of future generations:

Not only do we not know how future generations will manage their environment; we cannot know how their interests, their vision of the future, their sense of responsibility will evolve in time to match the unforeseeable circumstances that will prevail when they are around. Should we be planning for a future in which people are as selfish as they are today? Or should we be striving to arrange things so that better people are selected for—say, by creating an environment in which it pays to be unselfish. Maybe we shouldn't measure our bequest to future generations in terms of our momentary preferences, but try to see what their preferences might be. Maybe we could maximize the good of future generations if we insured that there weren't so many of them, or that they had desires that were easier to satisfy. Maybe we should be thinking of Huxley's 'brave new world', in which desires and their fulfillment are manufactured so as to be in total harmony. Or maybe we should be working toward one of those 'transhuman' futures imagined by Raymond Kurzweil and others, in which desires and interests remain, but affixed to a new kind of creature that has escaped the limitations of human nature. And, suppose we produce a solution that answers all those questions and describes the 'best' case that we can now aim for: who is to impose that solution, how and with what instruments of repression in the face of inevitable resistance from the losers?

The author concludes: “The confusions, contradictions, and fantasies that immediately invade the human mind when it tries to take charge of the entire future of our species are so evident, that it is an unending source of wonder that the human race still contains people who issue advice based on utilitarian reasoning.”

Even apart from the practical impossibility of carrying out the “felicific calculus” on a field so vast as the total future history of mankind, an important objection has been raised — usually by the left — to the entire economic model of practical reasoning:

Market solutions subsume human motivations under the model of cost and benefit, and see all rationality in instrumental terms: the agent wants x , believes y is the means to x , and therefore pursues y ; the agent prefers a to b and b to c , and therefore prefers a to c ; and so on. Something seems absent from this picture, and even if the theory of preference and preference orderings can be developed to give a neat mathematics of practical reason, the resulting theory of *homo oeconomicus* seems to many people to be little better than a caricature of the human being.

Scruton shares these misgivings, and clarifies them by introducing a distinction between the things people *want* and the things they *value*. The distinction is precisely that valued things are held *extra commercium*: kept out of the market, neither bought nor sold.

The soldier who give his life in battle does not ‘prefer’ to die rather than to flee. His identity, his being, all that he is and values, are wrapped up in the decision to fight, and in the face of these things his ‘preferences’ are silenced. Likewise the mother who gives up all prospect of a career in order to nurse her disabled child is not just following a preference: she is realizing a conception of herself, and one that justifies her life as no self-interested project would justify it. To put it simply, moral reasoning is not economic reasoning. In moral reasoning we are not trading preferences, but safeguarding things that cannot be traded. There are things on which we put a price and things on which we don’t put a price. Morality is primarily concerned with the second of those—the things that we withdraw from the market.

If there is such a thing as an environmental ethics, therefore, it would seem to be because our natural

surroundings embody some sort of intrinsic value not reducible to their use to human beings, whether living now or in the future. So let us turn to the proposals for a “biocentric” ethics (also labeled “geocentric,” “ecocentric,” or even “physio-centric”).



Philosopher and author Roger Scruton

The author remarks that much of the writing produced by this school of thought resembles not so much philosophical argument as “the literature of religious conversion, telling the reader of how the ‘scales have fallen’ from the writer’s eyes.” This makes it “in a peculiar way private,” and difficult to assess rationally. Moreover, it is difficult to infer specific practical conclusions from the biocentric approach? Are we to value the hungry leopard as much as the human child it stalks? Are we to welcome the epidemics and malnutrition by which sub-Saharan Africa has remained within the bounds of sustainability?

Some writers of the biocentric school, such as the late Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, actually do recommend a substantial decrease in the human population. Of course, they are quick to add that this decrease must not be achieved by cruel means; but their understanding of *cruelty* turns out to be identical to that of “anthropo-

centric” thought, which already shows up their supposedly new ethic as something of a pretence.

Scruton observes — and this is the most important step in his argument — that what is needed both for extricating us from these philosophical quandaries and for grounding a practical conservation policy is a way of *connecting the idea of intrinsic value more closely with the motives of people*. Now, the motives of people have their own wellspring, unrelated to any reasoning, utilitarian, biocentric, scientific, economic, or otherwise. The author believes that the philosophical school or tendency known as phenomenology, and associated with Edmund Husserl, gets us closest to this wellspring:

Husserl reminds us that our experience and our concepts are interwoven, and that the way the world appears to us will be affected by the way in which we interact with it. Human beings may live in a world of nature which they seek to explain in terms of cause and effect, but they also, and primarily, live in a life-world to which their primary attachment is not explaining but belonging. This world is known through appearances which we conceptualize in terms of our interests and needs, rather than in terms which would enable us to understand how it functions.

Our motives [as well] are not governed by the way the world is but by the way it appears. The concepts that are vital to us, and on which we build our social life, are not scientific concepts embodying incipient theories of natural kinds. They are concepts of functional, moral, aesthetic and spiritual kinds which have no place in the ‘laws of nature’. For example, the concepts of house, tool, friend, home, music; the noble, the majestic, the sacred; legality, politeness, justice. To imagine reasoning beings who live without such concepts, who never divided up the world into friend and foe, sacred and profane, just and unjust, home and not home, is to imagine a race of inhuman creatures, to whom we could not relate as we relate to each other, I to I.

In short, the fundamental source of our concern for the world which surrounds us is our own *belonging* or *attachment* to it, and this is the essential point missed by left-wing environmental crusaders.

The British psychologist John Bowlby assembled a great mass of empirical evidence concerning the importance of the early experience of attachment for nor-

mal human development. He shows that

interpersonal love and relational competence are rooted in an original experience of attachment, that children deprived of this attachment are disturbed and often profoundly asocial, and that both normal adult relations and the capacity for love are critically dependent on finding that core experience at home. Social research has confirmed that broken homes and out-of-wedlock births, which communicate the absence of commitment to the child, are indicators for later depression and delinquency, and the evidence abounds that home is not merely ‘where we start from’, but the place of sacred memory to which our longings return.

Husserl’s student Martin Heidegger made the concepts of home and our care for it central to his phenomenology of attachment, and, as Scruton acidly remarks, “his otherwise unaccountable popularity is almost entirely due to that fact.”

For Heidegger, care is a kind of redemptive relation to the world, a taking responsibility that is also a settling down. Technology [on the other hand] has ceased to be a way of relating to the natural world and has instead become a challenge to nature. Modern agriculture has been *set upon* nature, and we too are submitting to the challenge, becoming ‘human resources’. And, in language that suffers from a notorious deficit of concrete words, Heidegger exhorts us to turn back from this false way of seeing our predicament, so as to rediscover the path that leads to dwelling.

A more recent German philosopher, Karen Joisten, has put it this way: man, unlike other animals, is a home-ish [*heimatlich*] being, in need of, in search of, and fulfilled through a home which he sees not simply as mine or yours, but as *ours*.

To this feeling of love and attachment to home, Scruton gives the name *oikophilia*. He believes this to be the root of all human concern for the natural environment. Consider in this light the arguments about justice toward future generations.

It is true that we are motivated in this concern [for our successors] by arguments of justice, like the father who looks after his property *in justice* to the children who will inherit it. But—as that example shows—our concern for other generations does not arise from

some abstract theory of just distribution. It arises from our attachment to others: it is our ancestors, our children, our successors in title who awaken our concern. To evoke our responsibility for other generations through some vision of intergenerational justice that takes no account of the distinction between *us* and *them*, *ours* and *theirs*, is to detach the idea of responsibility from the practice that gives it sense.

A typical human life can be divided into three stages: first, the early experience of attachment to the home; second, the loosening of this primal bond and gradual exploration of the world outside the home; and third, a resolution of the first two stages in the founding of a new home for a new generation.

As the author observes, one aspect of the second stage in this development is a certain *oikophobia*, or the repudiation of home, experienced by the maturing adolescent as constricting. Some persons never get past the second, wandering stage or the oikophobia that goes with it: the author considers this failure a major source of the leftist mentality. A good illustration is the global warming panic, attractive to the radical precisely because it seems to call for a total, revolutionary repudiation of the way people have, historically, lived their lives.

Left-wing environmentalism thus rejects the fundamental and normal experience of oikophilia and neglects its social and political significance, and this is what makes it so counterproductive. "In so far as it despises the motives that attach ordinary people to their home and inspire in them a small but genuine feeling for stewardship," concludes Scruton, "the movement merely undoes what hopes we have of ecological balance." He also rejects the argument that the unprecedented size of today's environmental problems demands a top-down approach: "Either the changes that are to come will be manageable or they will not. And if they are manageable it is because our inherent social motives can embrace them, and not because the state has some power that we don't have, to manage them on our behalf."

The author's native England is home to some thirty organizations concerned with environmental protection and preservation, including: the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society (founded 1865), the Selborne Society (which operates a nature preserve; 1885), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (1889), the National Trust (1895), the Women's Institute (1915), the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (1925), the Game Conservancy Association (1931), and the Soil Association (1946).

Let us look at just one of these in detail, the Women's Institute (WI), founded originally to provide support to British women in the countryside during the difficult years of the First World War:

[It] now has 205,000 members in Britain, organized in local branches throughout the country, and has been imitated across the English-speaking world. The WI has no purpose other than to encourage its members to gather around socially beneficial projects, and to form mutually supportive local clubs. It responds to suggestions from below, is accountable for its funds to those who provide them, and steers clear of politics.

Yet I have no doubt that the WI has done an immense amount of good, not only for its members, but for their shared habitat. It has played an active role in promoting the local food movement, not through campaigns, but through the opportunities that it provides to farmers and their families. Its members are the first to get together to support environmental initiatives in their neighborhood, and its whole emphasis, despite its nationwide organization, is on things 'close to home'.

Civic associations like the WI should be contrasted with campaigning NGOs like Greenpeace. These are unable even to discuss their own goals (since they are defined in terms of them), are responsible to no one but their own leadership, and frequently offer their members nothing besides requests for money.

America possesses eighty-four non-profit civic associations like this, organized nationally for the study, protection, and enjoyment of the environment. Yet France has only three, Germany just one (under government control), and Russia none at all. Outside the English speaking world, Scandinavia and Switzerland, private initiative seems to be lacking to produce such organizations. In the worst situation of all, of course, are countries such as Russia and China where a formerly strong popular sentiment of attachment has been warred upon for decades by an oikophobic dictatorship.

Civic associations do not wage all-or-nothing campaigns against polluters perceived as "enemies." Instead, they favor a weighing of various problems by a group of actual stakeholders; the author calls this a "first person plural" approach. Nor do they attempt a final solution to one particular problem while disregarding its consequences to other aspects of the environment. No civic association, for example, could possibly have cre-

ated this mess in California's San Joaquin Valley:

Environmental groups argue that the pumping of water for irrigation purposes threatens the autumn spawning grounds of the endangered delta smelt (a tiny fish of little use to anything save itself). Litigation is forcing the local authorities to curtail the supply of water to the farms. In 2008, California was forced to let 26 million cubic feet of fresh-water supplies run away into the ocean — enough to supply the entire Silicon Valley for two years. Revenue losses to San Joaquin Valley farmers were in the order of \$500 million in 2008, and could reach \$3 billion if litigation is successful.

This is only one example of a disproportionate benefit conferred on one component of the environment — the delta smelt — by the top-down approach to protecting it. The result is a policy that is counter-productive because it is absolute, in circumstances where only a compromise could serve the environmental cause.

The late economist Elinor Ostrom has shown how even the problem of the commons can be handled fairly by small associations of the persons directly concerned:

The sharing of water among farmers in arid regions of Spain has been managed over centuries by locally constituted rules and courts established under local jurisdiction. Likewise the Alpine meadows of Switzerland are allocated by farmers under co-operative principles that promote both fair shares and the renewal of the resource.

In general, 'common pool resources' can be managed as a stable asset, provided that: 1) they are managed by a local community; 2) those with a right to them are clearly identified and others clearly excluded; 3) there is a system of sanctions in place to punish misappropriation and abuse; 4) there is a collective decision-making process with easily accessible procedures for resolving conflict; and 5) the rights of the community are recognized by higher-level authorities.

Ostrom's second condition for managing the commons deserves emphasis in this age of mass immigration; distinguishing those who belong from those who do not belong is a necessary precondition for successfully managing a common asset such as the natural environment. In Scruton's words:

Ordinary people are less liable to accept sacrifices for the sake of their environment when the attachment to locality is being replaced by competition between self-identifying tribes, families and religions.... A conservative environmental policy that did not set limits to immigration [therefore] would have no chance of success.

Finally, we should note that the author's championship of private associations does not mean that the law has no role to play in protecting the environment. On the contrary, it is the English common law of associations which allows clubs to appear as collective litigants in a court of law, with no permission from the state. A case in point: the reason most of the rivers of England are today clean and stocked with fish is that in 1948 a barrister and angler named John Eastwood founded the Anglers' Conservation Association, which offers financial backing to those in a position to initiate legal proceedings against riparian polluters. In the landmark "Pride of Derby" case of 1952, three defendants — a private company, a nationalized industry, and a local government — were compelled to cease from polluting the River Derwent. This case shows how the law itself can serve as a homeostatic system to prevent encroachment by the government currently in power.

Even government regulation can have a place in a sound environmental policy, Scruton believes, as long as it limits itself to returning the costs of pollution to polluters, i.e., forbidding economic actors to externalize their costs.

How to Think Seriously about the Planet is a tour de force which brings the best of modern philosophical thought to bear on matters of the greatest practical and theoretical importance. To whatever frivolity academic philosophy departments may descend, true philosophical insight will remain with us as long as we have Roger Scruton. ■