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**Book Review of Roger Scruton's *On Human Nature*
(Princeton University Press, 2017)**

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Roger Scruton writes that, in moments of tragedy, ecstasy, and sublimity, 'we stand at the threshold of the transcendental reaching out to what cannot be attained or known' - to the mysterious unknown that gives the supreme blessing of forgiveness, purification, and redemption (142). This 'threshold of the transcendental' marks the liminal boundary - like 'a window that cannot be opened' - between the empirical real and the imagined ideal. His newest book, *On Human Nature*, suggests such a possibility of developing a new account of human nature. It is the result of three lectures, delivered at Princeton University in the autumn of 2013, in which he announced his intention to challenge the naturalistic reduction of human nature to human bodies. Scruton argues that our understanding of human nature is irreducible to that of human bodies. He writes: 'we understand the person as an emergent entity, rooted in the human being but belonging to another order of explanation than can be explored by biology' (30). Human nature cannot, he insists, be reduced to the human bodies studied by biology without surrendering the rich complexity of our human condition to the unfeeling facts of natural science. Scruton endeavours, instead, to provide an alternative account of the transcendental in order to argue against this naturalistic reduction of human nature to human bodies; of mind to matter; and of higher culture to 'respectable cynicism', by illustrating how human nature can be conceived as a grand work of art. Scruton conducts the reader towards such a transcendental explanation of human nature, but because he

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neglects to show how it could ever be verified, he can, at the last, only look through, but never open up, this window beyond the world.

Scruton seeks to preserve the dignity of the human person by elevating the moral, religious, and aesthetic wealth of human nature. He tries, through a succession of artful allusions, to discredit any naturalistic reduction by illustrating its utter inadequacy to account for our higher awareness of morality, religion, and art. Art is held up as the sublime standard that alone adjudicates between the competing claims of the philosophers. Philosophy can, he concludes, be 'of no great significance' beneath the brilliance of art (144). *On Human Nature* is, accordingly, not merely a work of philosophy, but a careful work of art. Scruton has not attempted to define human nature. Nor does he define the nature of the person. The book instead paints a portrait of human nature. It aims to subsume a philosophical anthropology into an aesthetic anthropology. He persuades more adeptly by way of allusions than through arguments. An ensemble of aesthetic intuitions, drawn from everything from the Good Samaritan to Wagner's *Parsifal*, resound within the rhythm of his prose, with which Scruton seeks to suspend the brute facticity of biology; to sublimate the empirical real into the transcendental ideal; and, ultimately, to celebrate the true dignity of human nature.

Scruton opens the first chapter by stating that humans are animals governed by the laws of nature, but more richly endowed with the 'evolutionarily superfluous' powers of art, music, and religion (I, 4, 14, 19). Our awareness of human nature emerges out of a deep grammar of self-reference in the reflexive pronoun of the 'I', where, in the midst of our interpersonal relations, we recognize 'another world', a 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*), which can never be adequately described by any of the accounts of evolutionary biology (34-37). The person thus appears as an emergent feature of the body that is shown in the face (28-32). It appears as irreducible as a painting to its pigments (40-41). And it is a phenomenon, like the pattern of a face, that, he says, cannot be adequately explained away by any account of empirical science (43-45). Today's fashionable reduction of the higher human to the lower animal kind threatens to reduce our higher to our lower nature; abolish all kindness and compassion; and even annihilate the human person in a celebration of cynicism (49).

Scruton insists, in the second chapter, that the demand for accountability, the language of feeling, and the belief in freedom, cannot be so simply discarded without dismantling human nature. Human nature is not something that simply resides in us, but is, instead, something that

we make among ourselves. The 'I-You' relation of the self to another is, he suggests, the 'social product' of both Wittgenstein's dialogic mastery of public language and Hegel's dialectical recognition of free self-consciousness (51-54). Scruton writes: 'I am I to myself because, and to the extent that, I am you to another.' (56). We can only be certain of ourselves in and through the recognition that we receive from another. Such a shared awareness of ourselves cannot, however, be experimentally observed by any empirical science. It can, perhaps, best be experienced in the 'giving and taking' of an 'escalating mutuality of desire' (73). And it can afterwards be recollected in the recognition of our innermost guilt and shame (60-64). We can, accordingly, hold each other responsible as though our will originated in an intentional action. This responsibility requires an account of our actions within the sphere of our shared subjectivity (67). We can never truly live without these interpersonal responses, even if they can find no firm place in the science of behaviour, where personhood seems to vanish like a painting into its pigments (78).

Scruton states in the third chapter that his 'fundamental intuition' is that morality exists in part because it enables us to live on negotiated terms with others, in the shared recognition of our mutual responsibilities (98). Persons are not merely animals but also moral beings, who are aware of right, of wrong, and of their moral freedom (79). The essence of the human person, the 'deep individuality' of the 'I', resides in this shared acknowledgement of our mutual moral responsibilities (82). The arid formalism of modern consequentialist ethics has, however, reduced morality to little more than a moral arithmetic of consequence-counting, which threatens to vaporize all genuine moral sentiments in a 'spectral morality' of an equally 'spectral arithmetic' (93-95). Morality must, Scruton insists, be considered to govern all of our personal encounters, within this tightly-woven social context where humans find fulfillment in the self-giving and self-development of their virtues, habits, and morals (98, 103-104, III-III2).

Scruton concludes, in the fourth chapter, by presenting two criticisms of the liberal social contract. The first criticism is that the social contract forever fails to situate society in human nature. We are not simply disembodied parties to some primordial agreement, but complex embodied beings encumbered by, among others, erotic desires and familial duties (116). The second criticism is that no such contractual arrangement can ever be reduced to any aggregate of formal procedures abstracted away from previously-existing social relations. We are, instead, born into a whole field of unchosen obligations, within an arena of

agreement, not only of the social contract, but also of sacred obligations (116). Our moral life is always already embodied among these unchosen obligations, which are founded upon a rich preexisting network of interpersonal relations and filial obligations (117). The main task of political conservatism should be to preserve this sense of the sacred (126). Such sacred things, he hints, belong to a transcendental order beyond that of our ordinary empirical world (132-133). Today's fashionable reduction of the transcendental order to the empirical order threatens to profane the sacred in a Mephistophelean 'antispirit' of eternally-repeated negation, which can de-humanize the human just as it can de-personalize the person (134-138). This threatened reduction of human nature to human bodies can, Scruton concludes, only be suspended by a speculative flight, where we may receive the 'gift of a transcendental person', which 'cleanses those who pray', as pilgrims journeying together on the 'path of reconciliation' towards our 'destiny as dying things' (143).

Roger Scruton has here often alluded to an alternative transcendental order of explanation to those of naturalistic biology that threaten to reduce the true dignity of human nature to the brute facticity of the human body. He has, however, neglected to elaborate any viable transcendental explanation, much less to offer a compelling argument with which to answer his critics. The tightest thread of argumentation seems to be submerged in an eclectic ensemble of artful allusions to the transcendental idealism of Kant and the dialectical logic of Hegel. He tends to talk of Kant's transcendental idealism as though it were an altogether unexplored alternative to empirical science that no one had ever seriously dared to develop, much less to challenge. He has also wrenched Hegel's moments of the mutual recognition and the dialectical leap from quantity to quality outside of the structure of his system. And he has done so without the slightest concession to his dialectical logic, aesthetics, or any systematic supersession of art into philosophy (101-103, 109-110, 124-127). Scruton thus suggests, against both the admonitions of Kant who instrumentalized it and Hegel who absolutized it, that there remains a possibility of deploying dialectic to supersede the empirical account of reductive naturalism into an irreducibly transcendental account of human nature.

Scruton often alludes to the possibility of such a transcendental explanation of human nature. Briefly, for the non-philosophers, a transcendental explanation is an abductive argument from the hypothetical *a priori* conditions for the possibility of any experience to

the *a posteriori* facts of experience. An abductive argument is an argument from a hypothetical first premise. And *a priori* conditions are logical conditions that are prior to any experience of space and time, while *a posteriori* facts are facts that are found in our ordinary experience. Immanuel Kant introduced transcendental logic, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to deduce the *a priori* tables, categories, and schematism of the pure concepts of all understanding for the purpose of constructing synthetic *a priori* judgments. Synthetic *a priori* judgments can, through the reflective judgments of artistic taste, thereafter be constructed to constitute the pure ideas of God, the world, and, most importantly for Scruton, of a transcendental account of human nature centred upon the self-conscious soul. Scruton seems to suggest such a transcendental account of human nature. Since, however, such *a priori* conditions can, at best, only be hypothesized, but never known to be true, all such transcendental explanations must be admitted to be hypothetical and indemonstrative. Scruton seems here to have suspended the reduction of human nature to human bodies, but, because he has neglected to demonstrate how such hypotheses could ever be verified, his suggestion of a transcendental explanation may end as it evaporates into the clouds of empty conjecture.

Scruton's transcendental account of human nature is, in all fairness, certainly not limited to the bounds of bare reason alone. It is, instead, intended to be illustrated through his adaptation of romantic aesthetics. Human nature seems, here, to be less like a 'soul' and more like a 'self': it is not something that lies hidden within, but only something that we may make – like a work of art – in order to show our nature to ourselves. And it seems, less like Kant and more like Schiller, to be not simply the art of a single isolated subject but the artistry of a continuous community that can collectively objectify the spirit of its genius as the art of its religion. Religion is then, for Scruton as for Schiller, no longer chiefly the pious devotion towards a transcendent God, but – in a much more revolutionary and romantic spirit – the inspired aesthetic that seeks to unveil the face of God in the artistry of the human person. It seems, for Scruton, to serve like a mirror of the subject in the object, where an artist may see beyond himself, as his own artwork is reflected from the outer world, through the window of the mind, into his inner constitution. Scruton seeks to preserve this sense of the sacred. Since, however, the sacred is little more than the cultural production of art, and any artwork can always be remade as it is reduced to a science of human bodies, Scruton cannot portray religion as the art that preserves this sacred sense.

Roger Scruton's *On Human Nature* begins and ends in an admirable wonder for the sacred sense of human nature. It sounds, from the first to the last page, less like a protest and more like a prayer. He has here drawn open a window beyond the bounds of transcendental idealism without allowing himself to enter into it. He stands before the source of all transcendental hypotheses, but seems unwilling to take the final step. He neither steps forwards nor backwards beyond the bounds of the transcendental aesthetic. All of his allusions, instead, remain bound by his immanent intuitions of space and time. He thus appears to have chosen to mix a medley of sometimes conflicting intellectual influences into a poetic-philosophical cornucopia that remains caught in a curious transcendental two-step: he can only escape from the empirical real by hypothesizing the transcendental ideal; but because this transcendental ideal only aims at but never achieves its transcendent truth, every such escape into the ideal must ultimately be re-cycled back into the real. His transcendental account of human nature can, accordingly, only be confirmed by returning to rest in the real. It may, no doubt, be made in the image of our highest moral, religious, and artistic ideals, but can, for this reason, also collapse into transcendental hypotheses, which must, if they are to carry any credibility, be verified by the experimental metrics of empirical science. Scruton has struggled to secure something of this transcendent truth to preserve the highest ideals of human nature, but, because he has offered only transcendental arguments, and, he must admit, nothing transcendental is truly transcendent, he can, at best, aim at, but never reach, beyond the threshold of the transcendental.