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Books in Review

The Philosopher On Dover Beach Essays

Roger's Versions

The Philosopher On Dover Beach Essays. By Roger Scruton. *St. Martin's Press. 350 pp. $24.95.*

Reviewed by Kevin L. Flannery

Unusually for a philosopher trained in the Anglo–American "analytic" tradition, Roger Scruton has read and admired Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and a host of other figures of the "continental" school. He's attracted to the looser continental tradition not least because it would, he believes, afford philosophical respectability to the type of writing he is master of: the short essay on the current state of society as manifested in its art, its politics, sexual mores, etc. He praises Nietzsche, for instance, as a great stylist, even while acknowledging that "No such philosopher could exist in the Anglophone tradition, for the simple reason that, if he did exist, he would not be called a philosopher either by others or by himself. He would be identified as a critic or a social theorist, as an essayist or a reformer."

This constitutes a major recurring theme of this very fine book of essays on topics philosophical, aesthetical, and political. For Scruton wants to be this philosopher who cannot exist in the Anglophone tradition. He wants to write about Picasso, Stoppard, and Shaw and still call himself, and be called, a philosopher. He wants to write about photography, sexuality, and liturgy and be part of the discipline originating with Frege, Wittgenstein, and Russell.

He is a talented and wise writer, with a gift for insights that cut to the marrow of the modern dilemma. He manages, for instance, to put a word to the central inadequacy in so much modern thought and cultural endeavor, maintaining that at the end of the day, they espouse "nothing." He sees, that is, that the incessant clamor in certain journals and other forums about freedom, creativity, equality, etc. blinds us to the fact that none of the proponents of such abstract values has any idea what freedom should be used for, or what it is good to create, or how the sterile notion of equality might be filled out and made desirable. The message has become wholly the *packaging* of the message. As Scruton devastatingly remarks: "A work [of art] can now perform its economic function without being loved or admired; nobody need be enchanted or moved by its deeper meaning. The money pours through it unrestricted, like sewerage through a drain. . . ."

Whether a philosopher or something else, Scruton, standing on Dover Beach, certainly hears "the grating roar/ Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling."

His desire to give substance to ethical values also helps to account for his attraction to Hegel, whom he identifies (quite plausibly) as a conservative. For all his relativizing tendencies, Hegel recognizes at least that values are not invented on the spur of the moment but are found in society, already made. As Scruton puts it when discussing the misconceptions of the French revolutionists, society is not the object, but the product, of consent. This constitutes a second recurring theme in these essays: the ethical life is found not by attending to the reports or preferences of the first person but by joining in social practices.

This essentially conservative emphasis on values as contained in the various institutions and affiliations within a society also accounts for Scruton's interest in Otto Gierke, a late–nineteenth–, early–twentieth–century German political philosopher whose name is rarely mentioned nowadays in academic circles, although he attracted a good deal of attention in Britain in the 1930s (significantly, before the atrocities of the Nazis became known). Scruton espouses Gierke's idea that "corporations" (clubs, churches, firms, etc.) should be regarded as moral persons. His reason for doing this, as far as I can make out, is to ensure that the mores embodied in such organizations be given full weight in social theory and legal practice. If they are persons, they have rights that cannot easily be overridden by arbitrary and momentary consent, or lack thereof.

As commendable as this goal might be, the objection of Sir Ernest Barker, the great expert on ancient political thought, seems decisive: "Moral responsibility falls only on the individual moral agent. But it falls on him in full measure, alike when he is acting with others and when he is acting alone. It is a dangerous doctrine which would avert it from him, and make it fall on any transcendent being" (by which Barker means any nonhuman entity such as a corporation).

Scruton argues against Barker on this point, but his argument is not convincing.

A final word about Scruton's relation to analytic philosophy. He rails against the "narrowness, the fruitless technicality, and the philistinism of analytical philosophy," remarking only partly facetiously that "only the closing of universities could remedy the situation." But one shouldn't place too much weight on such statements. Analytic philosophy is really just the continuation of the scholastic tradition. When in the past writers have wanted to ridicule scholasticism, they didn't pick on Scotus or Suarez–and certainly not St. Thomas–lest they appear ridiculous themselves. They have picked on lesser figures, whose names are now forgotten. This is also what Scruton does, quoting at considerable length some analytical posturing by a virtual unknown.

But Scruton realizes that this is not the whole story, for despite his railings, he never really deserts the analytic (i.e., scholastic) ship. He displays a healthy skepticism regarding the methodology of even the greatest figures of the continental tradition: Hegel, for instance, and Husserl. (I except Kant, whose influence, justly, has been great on both sides of the English Channel.) One finds not a trace of this attitude with regard to Wittgenstein or Frege, each of whom he mentions several times. The remark that best characterizes Scruton's attitude toward analytic philosophy occurs at the end of the essay in which he criticizes our unknown foot–soldier: "Philosophy must repair the rents made by science in the veil of Maya, through which the wind of nihilism now blows coldly over us. And, even with the needle and thread of conceptual analysis, this labor of piety can begin."

What, then, about the question that bothers Scruton so personally: whether or not he is to be called a philosopher–by which he means, if truth be told, an analytic philosopher. Well, he's not a Wittgenstein or a Frege; but then no one alive is. And neither Wittgenstein nor Frege could ever have written light essays of the sort that fill a goodly portion of this volume. But does this matter so much? Scruton occupies a position, as professor of aesthetics and editor of a major popular review, that allows him to span the channel between philosophy proper and the culture from which it arises. His voice injects into the contemporary scene arguments and insights that would not be there did he not have this one foot in analytic territory. As Wittgenstein might have remarked (although much more elegantly, I know), why hanker after a classification for the sake of a classification? Scruton is doing his work well. May he prosper at it.

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