

Peter Augustine Lawler

Liberal Conservatism, Not Conservative Liberalism

The Meaning of Conservatism, Revised 3rd edition
by Roger Scruton
St. Augustine's Press, 2002.

In the end, we must face the fact that it is impossible to be a pure conservative, just as it is impossible to be a pure liberal. In explaining the “meaning of conservatism,” Roger Scruton does not try to claim that any human being can be *only* a conservative. Instead, he shows that the clash between liberals and conservatives is really one between perspectives. The liberal perspective is “first person,” and the conservative perspective is “third person,” and all modern human beings look at the world from both points of view. The problem, according to Scruton, is that we selfish modern individuals refuse to give the third-person view its due, despite the fact that it is perfectly natural, and just, for us to do so.

I am a liberal insofar as I view everything from the standpoint of my desires as a free individual. I approach everything in the world as if it exists for *mysake*. All social and political institutions—not to mention other human beings—I judge according to how they help me maximize my autonomy and secure the unlimited satisfaction of my desires. This first-person perspective lies at the foundation of Milton Friedman’s libertarian vision of the spontaneous order arising in market exchanges; it lies at the foun-

dition of Karl Marx’s vision of the unlimited personal choice that human beings will enjoy under communism. Such a liberal view dominates everywhere in our political and intellectual worlds today: government and every other human institution—even the family—is understood as resulting from the free choice (the social contract) of autonomous individuals. And for Scruton, this liberalism is above all an *American* myth, because America is the Lockean society *par excellence*.

It is fashionable today to say that liberalism has been discredited or is now exhausted, but Scruton helps us see that this is far from true. The Lockean progress that aims to reconstruct all of human life in accordance with libertarian principles continues to accelerate. In advanced, post-industrial societies today, the average man—and especially the average intellectual—spends more of his life in the first-person perspective than ever. (Though it is important to add, as a gentle corrective to Scruton’s English chauvinism, that the church-going

Peter Augustine Lawler is Dana Professor of Government at Berry College in Georgia and author, most recently, of *Aliens in America: The Strange Truth about Our Souls* (ISI Books, 2002).

and baby-begetting Americans spend considerably less time in such solipsism than do typical Europeans. The American myth, truth to tell, has gone global, while Locke, not to mention John Stuart Mill, were, after all, Englishmen.)

Responsible liberals today may join with Scruton in acknowledging that extreme libertarianism is self-destructive, because the free individual, despite his shameful ingratitude, nonetheless depends upon social institutions that cannot really be understood to exist *for* him. The recent experience of Europe shows us that people who begin to fall exclusively into the first-person perspective stop procreating. Their selfish individualism—which is oriented, first of all, to self-preservation—turns against the requirements of self-preservation. Their unnatural lack of concern for family, community, country, and species will turn out, in the long run, to be contrary to their own self-interest: Who will support the current young and perpetually adolescent Europeans in their old age? Who will defend them against their enemies?

So in America today, responsible liberals—who are usually called neoconservatives—see that liberalism depends on human beings who are somewhat child-centered, patriotic, and religious. These responsible liberals praise these non-individualistic human propensities in an effort to shore up liberalism. One of their slogans is “conservative sociology with liberal politics.” The neoconservatives recognize that the politics of free and rational individuals depends upon a pre-political social world that is far from free and rational as a whole. In their prudence, responsible liberals often think of themselves as Aristotelians. They want to limit Lockean first-personalization, and they usually contend that they have on their side not only the social capital of tradition but human nature itself.

But as Scruton shows, the problem re-

mains that these responsible liberals are themselves, in the end, first-person thinkers. In our sophisticated or very self-conscious world, even an Aristotelian approach presents a problem. True, Aristotle was “pro-family”—but he subordinated unselfconscious and necessity-driven family life to the free political life of friends and citizens. In the world of the *polis*, such an understanding might produce a virtuous ethic of noble self-sacrifice, but that is not our world. In our world, citizenship entails devotion to an essentially Lockean or individualistic political regime. The Aristotelian assertion that man is a political animal too readily comes to mean merely that our political principles reign in splendid sovereignty over all social, familial, and religious attachments. Our “national greatness” too easily becomes our relentless capacity to Lockeanize the world.

In their resistance to what is unnatural or disoriented in modern individualism, neoconservatives tend to rely too much on sociology and sociobiology—rather than relying on what is distinctive in human nature. They lack a genuinely conservative *political* science, as well as a genuinely conservative theology and metaphysics. Neoconservatives are really *conservative liberals*, and we have to wonder how tenable their position is over the long run.

Part of the problem the neoconservatives face is that they hope to defend what appears to be a contradiction verging on an oxymoron. As the French political philosopher Pierre Manent has observed, modern human beings really want to be “human individuals.” We want the benefits of free individuality, but we also want to be embedded beings living in a world rich in humanly satisfying “moral contents.” We want Lockean freedom—including Lockean technology and prosperity—but we want this freedom without being restless and lonely workaholics for whom God is dead.

Conservative liberals do not seem to offer a way of sustaining this tension against creeping libertarianism, even in the short run.

So we turn to Scruton, because he would seem to be something else than a conservative liberal: a *liberal conservative*. He holds that any true conception of human liberty depends on the primacy of our devotion to society or government in the broad sense. Consequently, human social institutions cannot properly be viewed as merely ministerial to individual ends, even to individual liberty. For Scruton, the individual never completely transcends his civilized formation by his community, and his individuality always depends on his grateful devotion to that community. Scruton shows that the first-person vice of ingratitude is, most of all, a *lie* about the origin and extent of one's own liberty.

In the name of the truth, Scruton therefore attempts to restore the third-person perspective in its integrity. The properly third-person view is detached, but not completely detached. It is that of a "participant-observer," an anthropologist "concerned about the welfare of the tribe (albeit a tribe which is his own)." Because my very being depends on my tribe's flourishing, I must put my tribe or country before myself. Without it, I am not, and "insofar as people love life, they will love what gives them life."

What at first may seem to be a matter of self-interest—concern with one's own being—is more properly or naturally expressed in terms of *love of one's own*. And love of, not to mention pride in, one's own is far from reducible to the self-interest of the individual. So the conservative anthropologist can enjoy the "popular self-re-

spect" that good citizens have "for the order of which they form a part, and for themselves as part of that order." That love—that natural instinct of gratitude—generates patriotism, respect for law, loyalty to leaders, and a willing deference to privilege that "need not be craven or submissive."

In Scruton's view, the individual self-consciousness that opposes itself to our natural social instinct has emerged slowly over time. He believes it used to be the case that "social continuity ensured that those who rose to self-consciousness nevertheless departed only in the smallest items of belief from the happier mortals who were fated never to question what they knew." He notes also that individuality as we experience it is hardly natural; it is "an artifact, an achievement which depends on the social life of people."

The first-person understanding of oneself is "a recent venture of the human spirit," and only recently has that "monstrous entity, modern man" emerged, "the person for whom all connection with an order greater than himself has to be won through an effort of his own."

In Scruton's account, modern man must use his mind to recover a truth that people used to possess instinctually: "The condition of mankind requires" that individuals can act effectively as individuals "only because they can first identify themselves with something greater," with some human society "which they recognize instinctively as home." It is true that "individuals have become sophisticated beings, anxious for a sphere of privacy" that "seclude[s] their eccentricities." But such privacy must be protected by the state, a social institution. Scruton adds a more psychological obser-



Roger Scruton, *Liberal Conservative*

vation: "What is eccentricity without the norm against which to measure it? Nothing." So there is no abstract or universal right to privacy, but only "Anglo-Saxon privacy," which can be enjoyed only by people who have internalized a particular form of "public order."

The monstrously deracinated modern individual occupies his time busily running away from substantive goods in pursuit of a liberation that lacks all content and any real promise of happiness. Yet only those who can find some good in what they have been given can enjoy those "practices and institutions in which we are at rest, and in which we view ourselves not as means but as ends." If government, the most comprehensive human institution, is understood only in terms of calculation and consent, then that selfish and joyless view infects every other human institution.

So one reason Scruton urges us to *love* the established government is instrumental—to protect the family, which is the origin of the self-respect and virtue that are at the foundation of all decent and minimally intrusive government. Government exists, finally, for the sake of the family—as well as for all those human institutions in which we experience the human loves and goods we share in common. Scruton seems trapped with the paradox that we cannot view government instrumentally if we expect it to perform its key instrumental function, and the same must also be said of the family. Liberal conservatives know that the first- and third-person perspectives are so entwined that they elude even complete analytical separation.

Only a well-established government creates the stable environment in which most of human life can be given over to the leisure enjoyed in relatively autonomous human institutions, such as sports and education. It is through participation in such institutions, along with the family, Scruton ob-

serves, that social virtue is really learned. The conservative, far more than the liberal, believes that diverse but not necessarily conflicting institutions embodying various human goods "can exist in relative independence without threat to the social order." Ironically, conservatism is much less personally intrusive than liberal ideology.

We learn in leisured, non-instrumental institutions the limits of both the first- and third-person perspectives. In educational institutions at their best, for example, we learn that individual fulfillment in the pursuit of the truth is not really compatible with autonomy or the unlimited satisfaction of our desires. The pursuit of the truth "is essentially a 'common pursuit,'" Scruton notes, and "to desire it is to desire that community." In this common endeavor "the grip of alienation is loosened, and fellowship is born." The conflict that the self-conscious individual perceives between his own good and the common good fades away, as do the extremes of merely instinctual gratitude for, and self-conscious negation of, what we have been given. We are grateful for our self-consciousness, for our openness to truth, for what connects us truly—and not just instrumentally or even historically—to our fellow human beings. The misery of alienation is, at the deepest level, still the result of the self-deceptive vice of ingratitude.

Yet surely Scruton goes too far in denying the naturalness of human alienation. Socrates, for example, in his intense self-consciousness, was certainly alienated from his political community—though he, and the ancient philosophers who followed him, were also more aware than we modern individuals are of their necessary dependence on the political community. And according to Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine, human beings are aliens and pilgrims in the City of Man. A pagan

might say that Augustine ungratefully underestimated his dependence on Rome. Perhaps Scruton shares that criticism of this “instrumental” tendency in Christian political thought.

But even with this criticism in mind, the Christians are still right to say that alienated individuality is not nearly as new a phenomenon as Scruton says. And this error has consequences in Scruton’s account of conservatism. For Scruton does not place *religion* among the intrinsically fulfilling human institutions that unite the first- and third-person. He views the church, instead, simply from a third-person view as an established political institution for the English. American conservatives cannot help but notice that Scruton’s view of religion is far too domesticated, too Anglican. The truth is that even ordinary human beings transcend the confines of their political community, and their gratitude for their very being is not directed so much to their community, but above all to a personal God. Their connection to all other human beings through their common Creator limits their attachment to—partially alienates them from—any particular political community. Whereas the community that is the

City of God includes us all, and not just those who devote their leisure to the highest forms of education.

Some recognition of these truths about the human soul is necessary for conservatives to avoid the mistake of trying to engineer a world in which human beings can be completely at home. Scruton himself certainly rejects any project of constructing Arcadia, but he still sometimes falls victim to the romantic view that self-consciousness itself is an *historical* error that opposes itself to our natural or instinctual goodness. The truth is that self-consciousness is natural to human beings; it is the source of both the greatness and the misery of sinful man, of that perverse being open to the truth about Being and given quite particular moral responsibilities.

In the end, Scruton only points us toward, but does not provide, the metaphysics and theology that liberal conservatives need today. But this subtle, brilliantly detailed, and profoundly original book deserves to be ranked among the classics of contemporary political thought. Scruton challenges Americans to show that we too can think intelligently and without nostalgia outside the “Locke box.”