In the excitement (and disappointment) of the politics of hope and change, surely a conservative’s responsibility must be to remind us that change is not the substance of things hoped for, and that reasonable hopes for those concrete goods really within human grasp are best fulfilled by preservation or repair—and by the small-scale, face-to-face work of everyday life. In other words, the role of conservatives is to be the wet-blanket. To those whom Roger Scruton calls “unscrupulous optimists,” this attitude appears unhappy. It is with some surprise, then, that we find a certain cheerfulness throughout Scruton’s newest book, *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope*. The book is about knowing ourselves as other than what we might want to be, coming to terms with the human condition, and living within our limits with equanimity. There is a truism that a pessimist sees the glass half empty when the optimist sees it half full. The only problem here is that this truism isn’t true. Knowing that an empty glass is possible, and inevitable if we drink without refilling our reserves, the pessimist can be grateful for whatever the glass does hold. Having a memory that appreciates the past and not just an imagination that dreams up a future, he can also point the way back to the cow.

The question at issue is both personal, for each one of us, and political, for our lives together: how hopeful should we human beings be, and in what should we invest our hopes? Scruton focuses, chapter by chapter, on various fallacies that aid and abet ideological optimism—ways of thinking that encourage gross overestimates of the good we can expect from political action. It is always difficult while reading about fallacies to imagine that anyone is dim enough to commit them, but the fallacies Scruton names are repeated patterns woven into modern political thought and current partisan debate. They influence many minds implicitly, even inevitably, like magnets for the political imagination. Scruton illustrates his Best Case, Utopian, Planning, Zero Sum, Born Free, Aggregation, and Moving Spirit Fallacies with historical details and contemporary controversies. This makes the book a pleasant concoction: one part op-ed on current events and one part reflection on ideology and the human condition. To help explain how the fallacies can do their work so well, Scruton dedicates another chapter to several truth-defeating strategies, such as transferred blame, hermeticism, scape-
goating, and the invention of false expertise (all of theology belongs here, by Scruton’s lights).

Some of these fallacies are directly optimistic. When under the power of the Best Case Fallacy, a person puts out of mind the worse possible outcomes of his plans, and is enthusiastically moved by the vision of inevitable success. Though this fallacy is thought stereotypical of gamblers, Scruton emphasizes that such optimists have no sense of the risk of betting: they do not weigh the worst-case scenario against the best, for they can scarcely imagine any outcome but the best. The Aggregation Fallacy is also directly optimistic. It ignores how various human goods are mutually limiting. Political optimists under the spell of this fallacy think of themselves as maximizing several goods, without realizing that these goods, when immoderately pursued, undermine each other: as with liberty and equality, safety and excitement, helping hands and individual initiative.

Other fallacies are merely supportive of optimism. The Born Free Fallacy conceives of human liberty as our primordial state, to be re-won by the overthrow of legal and traditional barriers. This fallacy enables optimism—especially in conjunction with the Moving Spirit Fallacy, which imagines history to be a determined progress of ages—because it gives us a formula for improvement. We need only identify and eliminate another splint by which civilization cramps the growth of some natural human desire. It is never considered that our nature might itself be crooked, and thus in need of a splint to grow into its best shape. Likewise, the Zero Sum Fallacy helps the optimist make ever new excuses and strategies. It identifies the villains spoiling our plans as whoever is prospering when other people are not. The Utopian Fallacy allows us, without fear of refutation, to reassert our optimistic dreams. The impossibility of my visionary, better future—which is obvious, but stated only by the irreverent and boorish—protects me from having to take responsibility for my failures to achieve it, or its failure to live up to what I prophesied.

The Planning Fallacy presumes that all goods enjoyed by people living together can be achieved through planned action. It fails to see that much of what we need and love arises not by planned cooperation but by a type of unplanned coordination arising from shared place, habits, and laws. The activist stance of the Planning Fallacy is blind to how our common goods often come about as by-products, not goals, the unplanned result of many unorganized persons acting according to their own plans. This fallacy is dangerous because many of the schemes hatched in the minds of would-be central planners undermine the goods secured only by persons running their own lives in their own smaller places.

The Planning Fallacy gets to the heart of an important but underdeveloped theme of the book. Scruton emphasizes that freedom and a good human life are always achieved by a person, an “I,” but that the “I” can do this only with the help of others, a community, a “we.” He laments what he calls an “I” attitude in contrast to a “we” attitude. For Scruton, “I” need the formation of the community to develop and exercise my freedom. The Born Free Fallacy refuses to see this, but human freedom exists only from the matrix of a community that forms my character and in the context of a community of free persons with whom I interact, and this “we” maintains itself only with customs and laws. The Zero Sum Fallacy refuses to see that the common good is not diminished by sharing; it records any person’s good as a social debit. The “I” attitude asserts itself—its freedom and its
goods—over against others. In the “we” attitude, I discover myself as one among many whose goods often rebound to me and for whose goods I should also be concerned when I act.

But of course many of Scruton’s fallacies involve unscrupulous optimists taking on a “we” attitude that threatens precisely what Scruton wishes to protect. The politics of hope often blames normal people—non-busybodies—for being selfish, for not realizing how “we” must take care of all, rather than each taking care of his own. Scruton therefore contrasts the genuine “we” attitude with a “collective ‘I’” attitude that conceives of society as something like an oversized deliberative agent, a great big “I.” The unscrupulous optimist often presumptuously takes on the point of view of the community as a whole, absorbing the community into his own “I” attitude as something to be pushed toward his goals and rearranged according to his blueprint. Key to appreciating Scruton’s praise of the “we” attitude is contrasting it with this presumptuous, unforgiving, irony-free collectivism. This connects with another theme of the book, which the reader must wish Scruton had developed more, that irony and forgiveness—forces strong in the West due to Greek and Judeo-Christian influences—are key to maintaining a genuine human community.

The genuine “we” attitude requires irony: my urgency for my own concerns is softened by the awareness of the personal gaze of others. In the genuine “we” attitude, I gain a view of myself unavailable when purely self-driven. I can see myself as just another person to other people, and I can see others as genuine persons in their own right and with their own rights and goals, as others whose perspectives put my “I” perspective into perspective.

I find Scruton’s reflections here illuminating and deep, but incomplete—or, rather, inviting. His comments on the “I” and “we” attitudes are scattered and often vague. Moreover, he ultimately defends a liberal form of law and custom. For him, society’s constraints create human freedom, but they are still just constraints while the goals are all our own. His “genuine community”—for post-hunter-gatherer humans—is a “community of strangers.” We live well today in the “city” of side-by-side settlement, not in a tribe, and the fallacies of optimism are vestiges of “our tribal past,” according to Scruton.

So there are several ironies running through Scruton’s book: A moderate pessimism is our best hope. Unscrupulous optimists are hopeless. Futurists are the real reactionaries. Conservatism is needed to defend rather modern conceptions of law, community, individual, and the good life. A little reason shows us human beings that human beings are not all that reasonable. Fences make good neighbors. A better world comes mostly by each tending his own garden. Pessimists are and should be cheerful, at least about what matters most in their lives.

Overall, the book is pleasant and worth pondering. The current mood of the West seems to be a moment of sudden realization that things do not always automatically get better. Even the enthusiasts of the politics of hope and change are deflated, recognizing now that making things better is not easy. Many might be open to the book’s defense of moderate pessimism and scrupulous optimism.

But Scruton’s book also leaves, for conservative readers, a few weeds to be pulled out and a few patches to be further cultivated. First, as that moderate pessimist Aristotle emphasizes, citizenship must be a form of friendship, of love, aimed at a common good. And the city arises and prospers through acts of reason and statesmanship, not just through proximate
settlement. Second, as long as the hope of humanity is focused on *homo sapiens* we should remain pessimists and savor the ironic and forgiving attitudes that allow us to live together decently. But in revelation there is glimpsed a perspective on us that would put human life within an even more radical context of irony and forgiveness than Scruton and his “we” attitude suggest.

Scruton occasionally discusses religion (especially, Islam), but too quickly dismisses serious theological reflection as false show. There is no human expert on this ultimate context, of course, but we also cannot afford to relegate it to the unknowable. Doing so surrenders the field to those who misuse it, who cannot face the imperfect human order in equanimity. The divine is a context that unscrupulous optimists deny and that Scruton, here at least, doesn’t develop. We hope for more than we can possibly ever accomplish or deserve. Though we must face our limitations cheerfully, we can surely hope that our deepest hopes are more than an vestigial organ of a subrational hunter-gatherer past.

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