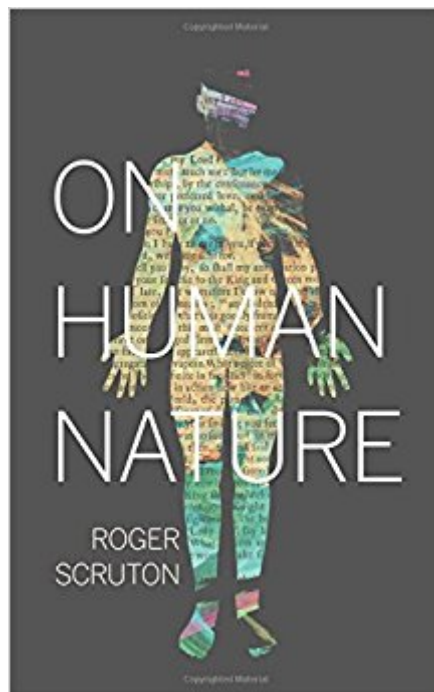


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On Human Nature



Synopsis

A brief, radical defense of human uniqueness from acclaimed philosopher Roger Scruton. In this short book, acclaimed writer and philosopher Roger Scruton presents an original and radical defense of human uniqueness. Confronting the views of evolutionary psychologists, utilitarian moralists, and philosophical materialists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, Scruton argues that human beings cannot be understood simply as biological objects. We are not only human animals; we are also persons, in essential relation with other persons, and bound to them by obligations and rights. Our world is a shared world, exhibiting freedom, value, and accountability, and to understand it we must address other people face to face and I to I. Scruton develops and defends his account of human nature by ranging widely across intellectual history, from Plato and Averroës to Darwin and Wittgenstein. The book begins with Kant's suggestion that we are distinguished by our ability to say "I" — by our sense of ourselves as the centers of self-conscious reflection. This fact is manifested in our emotions, interests, and relations. It is the foundation of the moral sense, as well as of the aesthetic and religious conceptions through which we shape the human world and endow it with meaning. And it lies outside the scope of modern materialist philosophy, even though it is a natural and not a supernatural fact. Ultimately, Scruton offers a new way of understanding how self-consciousness affects the question of how we should live. The result is a rich view of human nature that challenges some of today's most fashionable ideas about our species.

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"[F]inely written, compactly argued."--James Ryerson, New York Times Book Review
"A luminous sketch of what we are, or might be, that will inspire some readers and infuriate others."--Kieran Setiya, Times Literary Supplement
"Roger Scruton's *On Human Nature* . . . gives a brief, poetic account of a way of thinking about ourselves that many of us, especially with a background in the humanities, will find congenial."--Adam Zeman, Standpoint
"On Human Nature is a tour de force of a rare kind. In clear, elegant prose it makes large claims in metaphysics, morals and, by implication, politics."--The Economist
"On Human Nature is a fine performance."--Richard King, The Australian

"I admire Roger Scruton's stance and I admire his writing. In this short book, he raises and discusses deeply important issues about the human world."--Simon Blackburn, author of *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*
"A tour de force, this book presents an original and important view of human nature."--Anthony O'Hear, University of Buckingham

wonderful copy and book

Good.

Deep - and a struggle for one who is not schooled in philosophy. But with a dictionary (or Google) and a little effort, time and thought - easily stimulates the mind to consider what it (the mind) is.

This little book by Roger Scruton is a revised version of the Test memorial lectures delivered at Princeton in 2013. Since postmodernism regularly disputes the very existence of *human nature* and since common sense testifies to its existence universally, this is an important subject. Some have come at it by compiling long lists of common traits and behaviors shared by humans. Scruton notes the tendency to identify singular activities that characterize human beings, e.g. the use of language (Chomsky, Bennett), freedom (Kant, Sartre), self-consciousness (Kant, Fichte, Hegel), the capacity for cultural learning (Tomasello), and so on (p. 44). Scruton himself is at pains to counter the arguments of reductionist Darwinism (Dennett, Dawkins) or consequentialism (Singer, et al.). While acknowledging that we are biological animals, he argues that we are much more than that. We are *incarnate persons* who are defined in part by a set of duties and obligations which bind us one to the other. His position is *deontic*, as the philosophers say and it finds its roots in Aristotle and Kant and its metaphoric representation in

Buber's *I and thou*. The argument is generally lucid as we travel from Plato to Wittgenstein, but he notes that some of the issues mentioned in passing deserve entire books for their full exposition. In other words, he feels the pressures of the lecture format. Since he is unfailingly interesting the book is well worth reading, though he himself notes that some of the material with which he is concerned has been explored in other full-length volumes, volumes which would supplement the argument here (e.g. his *SHORT HISTORY OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY*, *SEXUAL DESIRE*, and *THE SOUL OF THE WORLD*). He is also not afraid to include articles of religious faith, though he is characteristically reticent to impose his own beliefs on his readers. The bottom line is that this is a solid digest of Scrutonian thinking on an important subject, an alternative to contemporary materialist thought that is anchored in vast erudition which is carried lightly and utilized lucidly.

Roger Scruton's books seem to get shorter as Scruton himself gets older. His latest, "On Human Nature," is barely 150 pages long, with wide margins and plenty of space between the lines. Based on lectures delivered at Princeton, the book explores familiar Scrutonian themes -- personhood, intentionality, ethics, sexuality, piety, conservative politics, scientism, etc.-- and argues that human beings unavoidably conceive of themselves in personal terms that can't be reduced to scientific terms. I'm sympathetic to Scruton's position but I do wonder what audience he and his publisher had in mind for this book. Professional philosophers will be put off by the superficiality and occasional cheap shots (no, utilitarianism doesn't lead to Hitler and Stalin); they would get more out of Scruton's "The Soul of the World." Likewise, ordinary readers unfamiliar with modern philosophy probably won't fully appreciate Scruton's reference-heavy analysis; they would be better off reading his excellent "An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy." Bottom line: I'm not unhappy I purchased and read "On Human Nature" but I wished I had waited for the paperback.

A very challenging book whose basic premise is that you must first assess completely human nature before you can identify a polity that will satisfy it, and that contemporary theorists have not done this assessment or their work is incomplete.

This is an interesting book, including some very valid points but also wrong on critical matters. Widely accepted in evolution theory and life sciences is the theory of the selfish gene, the kind to which we belong is that of human animals, and humans are by nature complicated by-products of their DNA (emphasis in original, p. 17). But the author rightly responds that

“We are animals certainly; but we are also incarnate persons, with cognitive capacities that are not shared by other animals and which endow us with an entirely distinctive emotional life” one dependent on the self-conscious thought processes that are unique to our kind (pp. 29-30). He further explains “I would suggest that we understand the person as an emergent entity, rooted in the human being but belonging to another order of explanation than that explored by biology” (p. 30). Therefore, it is appropriate to use the term “person” instead of “human being” (p. 28). I agree with this very important view and will take care to use the term “person” in my future writings. Thank you, philosopher Scruton! But I disagree with a lot. Leaving aside minor matters, such as the postulate that persons will get tired of “experience machines” (p. 62) and regarding Czarist Russia as a “great society” (pp. 97-98), let me focus on three radical disagreements. Consequentialism cannot be reduced to simplistic “life boats” and “trolley” examples and quasi-quantitative calculus, as rightly criticized in the book (pp. 94-95). But as an overall philosophy of action and justification it is basic to human endeavor to change the world for the better. To turn around an argument of the author, he says condemningly “we might find ourselves foundering under impossible burdens, in the vain attempt to know what is the best way to use our energies and powers in the cause of ‘doing good’ and then to devote our lives to doing so” (p. 106). But this is exactly part of the uniqueness of human beings as persons and a prime task of political leaders, acting as agents of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Intellectual virtues have to be added to the classical virtues so as to cope better with tragic choices in the face of deep uncertainty (which also require philosophy of action and reasoning innovations). But taking into account consequences should as such be a main virtue “thus combining deontological values with consequentialism. Concerns the nature of evil, the author does not understand the ideology of Nazism, as clearly presented, for instance, by Alfred Rosenberg in his *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Nazi death camps did not make Jews into non-humans; instead the camps are a result of Jews, Gypsies and others being regarded as sub-humans. Scruton ignores the relative culture-based nature of evil. What he and I regard as absolute evil is regarded by some true believers as a highly moral virtue and often as a sacred command of a God. Self-righteous mass-killers are enemies of humanity, not self-conscious “evil” persons as signified in the book by Goethe’s Mephistopheles. This being me to my last major disagreement, namely the author’s trust in a kind of deontological morality (p. 107), based on “fixed points” in a “society in which consensual relations are the norm,” including “fundamental ideas as freedom, justice” based on theory of the person, with

differences of opinion that can be to a great measure resolved once we understand the root of the concept of the person in the I-You encounter, a common pursuit of reason that will be valid for all of us and the recognition that the other's voice has just as much authority as mine when we understand things rightly. (pp. 107-112). This reminds me of Jürgen Habermas and his belief in a public sphere where shared discourse will result in agreement. This was true in Palmyra as imagined in Aldous Huxley's utopia Island as long as it survived, and is partly the case in more or less culturally homogenous groups which share basic values and goals. However Democracy is based on second-order agreement how to decide peacefully on disagreements, which is a great achievement but quite different from general agreement arrived at by discourse based on reason. The image of Scruton of discourse-based agreement founded on mutual recognition as persons and I-You understanding does not fit large parts of the real human world as it is and has been since the emergence of Homo sapiens sapiens. (Neither is democracy as based on secondary agreement universal and necessarily the end of history). Similarly, the author is right in viewing a humanistic, or romantic version of love as based on mutual I-You recognition as equal persons and on shared mutual understanding. But, again, this is not true for humanity as a whole. Human cultures differ a lot on whom to consider as a person worthy of I-You relations, as well as in different versions of love. The book accuses some philosophers as deskbound (p. 95). But it is largely based on one type of Lebenswelt out of many, some of which are radically different. Let the author try and apply his hopes for a shared moral sentiment to the mutually killing and torturing groups in Syria. His basis thesis regrettably fails reality tests. Professor Yehezkel Dror The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Thoughtful and wide ranging in scope.

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