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Roger Scruton *The Soul of the World*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). Pp. 216. \$27.95 (Hbk). ISBN: 978 0 691 16157 0.

Roger Scruton's philosophy has always been religious in nature. I mean by this that his work has been fundamentally concerned with 'religious' themes such as the place of the sacred in human life and the need to overcome alienation – within the self, with others, and with nature – through discovering and creating a sense of home in the world. Whereas in the past these themes have been explored through writings on aesthetics, political philosophy, and ethics, in recent years Scruton's work has taken something of a religious turn as he has been addressing these themes in a more direct and sustained manner through books devoted to the topic of religion, such as *The Face of God* (2012) and *Our Church* (2012). His most recent instalment is *The Soul of the World*. What is most impressive about this book is that it is a work of synoptic philosophy, which is extremely rare in contemporary philosophy. In other words, Scruton seeks to articulate and defend an overall vision of the world and the place of human beings within it. In doing so he addresses debates in philosophy of mind, epistemology, metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy of religion. This is certainly an ambitious undertaking, and it is only possible for someone of Scruton's erudition.

In the first chapter Scruton articulates his view of the nature of religion, which draws on the work of Durkheim and Girard. More specifically, he seeks to defend a religious world-view that connects a sense of the sacred with self-sacrifice, where the core of religious experience is 'the experience of myself as a *member* of something, called upon to renounce my interests for the sake of the group and to celebrate my membership [in] the group in acts of devotion' (2). He is especially concerned to overcome reductive explanations of religion, such as those we find among evolutionary psychologists who suggest that religious beliefs and practices are merely adaptations that are beneficial for survival and reproduction. Scruton argues that a religious world-view has its own intentionality and internal meanings – in relation to a sense of the sacred and the sacrificial demand – which cannot be explained away. Crucial to this argument is his defence of 'cognitive dualism', which he takes up in the next two chapters.

Cognitive dualism is the view that 'the world can be understood in two incommensurable ways, the way of science, and the way of interpersonal understanding', where we operate in the 'space of reasons' (34). Thus, human beings can be viewed both as *organisms* to be explained by the physical sciences and as *persons* who – as subjects and not mere objects – have first-person awareness (i.e. self-consciousness) and relate to other persons in 'I-You' encounters where there is mutual accountability and exchange of reasons (69). Scruton's key claim is that the

emergence of persons makes possible a 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*) that is irreducible because we 'understand and relate to it using concepts of agency and accountability that have no place in the physical sciences' and we would fail to understand much of human life without these concepts that pertain to the space of reasons and human meanings (36). For Scruton, to live in light of the space of reasons and human meanings is to live 'on the surface', and, following Oscar Wilde, he says that 'it is only a very shallow person who does not judge by appearances' (65, 114).

In the rest of the book Scruton explores various aspects of our human *Lebenswelt*. In chapter 4, he discusses how the I-You encounter is shaped by contractual as well as non-contractual obligations. In chapter 5, he explores the phenomenology of the human face, where subjectivity is revealed. In chapter 6, he explores human settlement, focusing on the significance of architecture and the need to make a dwelling for God. In chapter 7, he argues for an understanding of music and its importance in human life as a source of the sacred. Finally, in the last chapter he takes up the following key question: 'is the sacred merely a human invention, or does it come to us also from God?' (176). While each chapter here is rich in content, I want to comment on Scruton's apparent answer to this question.

Although he does not want to close off the possibility of God's existence, much of what Scruton says seems to imply a projectivist view of God and thus to affirm that the sacred is merely a human invention that emerges out of our human *Lebenswelt*. For Scruton, the sense of the sacred is connected to our interpersonal awareness, to a sense of the 'real presence' in the world, i.e. 'the presence of a subject, a first-person singular who can be addressed, implored, reasoned with, and loved' (13; cf. 24, 134). Moreover, he suggests that our sense of God - 'the soul of the world' - may be a product of the 'overreaching intentionality of our interpersonal attitudes' (74-5; cf. chs 1, 5-6, 8). All this fits with his avowed Durkheimian view of religion as a 'social phenomenon' where the sacred is understood as that which binds a community together, demands self-sacrifice for the sake of the group, and allows for proper settlement in the world (14; cf. 192-196). Indeed, one of Scruton's main concerns about the process of secularization is that people will increasingly lose a sense of the sacred and strong communal bonds will be eroded such that individuals will be left existentially homeless (94-95; cf. 176). The result of the process of secularization seems to be that we now live in a largely post-Durkheimian society, where religious life and society-at-large (i.e. the social life of the nation-state) have been uncoupled.

Religion of course can still have a strong communal element (e.g. within a particular parish community, and even more broadly within the universal church), but it won't be the glue that holds the nation-state together. It is noteworthy that secularization also allows for more individualistic modes of spiritual seeking in the vein of those who say they are 'spiritual but not religious'. Scruton provides compelling reasons for thinking that such individualist modes of spirituality will not be entirely existentially satisfying, as one becomes a kind of spiritual vagabond. The spiritual impulse at its best does seem to lead to 'organized' or 'institutionalized' religious practice with others,

both because of a desire for spiritual growth (where one seeks out the time-tested practices and inherited wisdom of a particular religious community) and because of a desire to be at home in the world with others in a communal life centred on a shared sense of the sacred. However, there is also a danger – which I think is present in Scruton’s work – of reducing the sacred too much to its possible function in binding society together.

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor has argued (convincingly to my mind) that the process of secularization and the move towards a largely if not entirely post-Durkheimian society is the historical working out of the ‘Axial revolution’ in religious and philosophical understanding. Whereas ‘early religion’ was embedded in society such that one relates to God (or the gods or whatever spiritual force was thought to exist) primarily through society and its collective religious rituals, the Axial revolution brought about a ‘great disembedding’ of the spiritual life. We see this in the great Axial exemplars: Confucius in China, the Buddha in India, Socrates and Plato in Greece, and the Prophets in Israel (see Robert Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011) for an extensive treatment of these cases). Taylor writes:

[Perhaps] the most fundamental novelty of all is the revisionary stance towards the human good in Axial religions. More or less radically, they all call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable understandings of human flourishing, and hence inevitably also the structures of society . . . The highest human goal can no longer just be to flourish, as it was before. Either a new goal is posited, of a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing. Or else Heaven, or the Good, lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence to alter the mundane order of things down here. This may, indeed usually does involve flourishing on a wider scale, but our own flourishing (as individual, family, clan or tribe) can no longer be our highest goal. And of course, this may be expressed by a redefinition of what ‘flourishing’ consists in. (*A Secular Age*, 152–153)

The Axial shift towards a universal and more demanding conception of the human good has brought about numerous positive developments with regard to personal and social improvement. However, the move towards disembedding and hence towards a largely if not entirely post-Durkheimian mode of life can also serve to bring about the socially and existentially homeless individual. Scruton is thus right to draw our attention to the importance of discovering and creating a sense of home in the world with others, but this can no longer be in the traditional Durkheimian mode (where religion is embedded in the whole of society) and so it becomes a much more challenging and urgent task.

I don’t think that we are helped in this task if we regard our sense of the sacred that is connected to our interpersonal awareness – I don’t think it must be limited to this – as merely a human invention arising out of our human *Lebenswelt*. If what we see as sacred is just a human invention and if it becomes acknowledged as such, then it is difficult to see how we can sustain a sense of the sacred, where we experience something or someone as making normative demands upon us ‘which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them’ (to

adopt a phrase from John McDowell). It does not seem sufficient *merely* to live 'on the surface' with the 'appearance' or phenomenology of the sacred, even though this may naturally arise for us within our human *Lebenswelt*. What we need – as reflective, meaning-seeking beings – is an ontology that can make sense of the phenomenology, where the phenomenology is judged to be a *fitting* response to the way the world is (viz. its sacred or reverence-worthy character). I believe this is what theism provides with its view of the universe in general and human life in particular as shaped by divine teleology. Of course, whether we are able to embrace theism is in large part a matter of faith and it is going to depend upon the character of our spiritual journey, which will shape how we regard the considerations both for and against a theistic world-view.

However, if the universe is ultimately just the by-product of 'blind', mechanistic causes, then I think it would be difficult to sustain a strongly normative sense of the sacred. Scruton does acknowledge the importance of addressing the 'why?' question of the world as a whole, and he also shows some attraction to Thomas Nagel's non-theistic cosmic teleological view, though he ultimately rejects it (7, 25, 57, 184–187). We are thus left to wonder how exactly our sense of the sacred is to be sustained in light of a reflective stance towards it. In short, it seems that – to echo Bernard Williams – we need a way to ensure that reflection does not destroy this crucial aspect of our ethical and spiritual experience that naturally arises for us within our human *Lebenswelt*.

Whatever one makes of Scruton's own position on these matters – which it must be said is not always clear, perhaps intentionally so as he says at one point: 'faith asks that we learn to live with mysteries, and not wipe them away – for in wiping them away we may wipe away the face of the world' (186) – I think the chief importance of this book lies in the illuminating way that it raises and explores the issue of the significance of the sacred in human life. Scruton also provides us with an impressive synoptic vision with which we would do well to engage seriously. Indeed, *The Soul of the World* is precisely the sort of humane philosophical work that is needed if we are to come to terms with the human condition as it is presently lived.

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