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Daniel P. Maher  
Assumption College, [dmaher@assumption.edu](mailto:dmaher@assumption.edu)

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Roger Scruton's *On Human Nature* and the Starting Point of Science

Daniel P. Maher

**Abstract** This essay examines Roger Scruton's *On Human Nature* in relation to the tension between modern science and the ordinary experience science aims to explain. Scruton regards the person as emerging from biological realities and tries to defend the integrity of common sense notions of human distinctiveness against reductive interpretations of evolutionary biology.

**Keywords** Human Nature · Person · Science · Evolution · Morality · Sacred · Roger Scruton

Roger Scruton. *On Human Nature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. pp. 160. \$22.95. ISBN: 978-0691168753

This engaging little book contains revised versions of three Charles E. Test lectures Roger Scruton delivered at Princeton University in 2013. To these three (“Human Kind,” “Human Relations,” and “The Moral Life”) he has added a fourth, entitled “Sacred Obligations.” The addition addresses “some of the difficulties that will occur to the attentive reader” of the first three chapters, which, he says, at best summarize his views. Scruton advises anyone with an appetite to consider some more of the difficulties to turn to his *The Soul of the World* (Princeton, 2014), which is based on his Stanton Lectures at Cambridge and challenges contemporary, dismissive atheism by considering the intelligibility of the sacred in human experience or of divinity that transcends experience. And what of the remaining difficulties? He invites us to await his future publications or to accompany him to the grave.

The one-page preface in which Scruton stakes out this position intimates what is best in this book. That would be Scruton's attentiveness to the complexity of the problems and questions he addresses, his admission that this book does not aim to close discussion but to sketch an intelligent, minority opinion in opposition to views that are more widespread and more “respectable” among intellectuals, and, finally, his *personal* touch, by which I mean his ability to think at a high level on the topic of human nature without losing sight of what might be called

real life, that is, the ways and the concerns of mortal persons who live always in relation and in tension with one another. The preface does not advertise what is also very good in this book, namely, Scruton's extraordinary intellectual range. Prominent interlocutors include (among many others) Daniel Dennett, Kant, Wittgenstein, René Girard, and Derek Parfit, but he also appeals along the way to the likes of al-Fārābī, Jacob Burckhardt, and Pope John Paul II. This mix yields neither plodding scholarliness nor disjointed superficiality but rather an enjoyably thought-provoking discourse.

Scruton's book asserts an account of human nature that preserves us as the personal agents we know ourselves to be from direct experience. He resists various scientifically informed views that would reduce us to nothing but complex animals or to illusions of an outsized brain that happen to yield a survival advantage. In this argument, Scruton is the underdog. Modern natural science dominates the intellectual landscape and pervades all our thinking so thoroughly that even those wholly innocent of scientific training speak and think under science's spell. People who cannot name even two nucleotides *know* they have genes and think they want children so as to pass on those genes. It might be enough to bring a tear of joy to Francis Bacon's eye.

Or would it? Four hundred years ago, as he was putting together his *Great Instauration*, Bacon fought the uphill battle, in which he endeavored to overcome the inherent tendency of our minds, which he called *idols of the tribe*, to distort nature in reference to or in proportion to our own nature. He pictured the human mind as an uneven mirror in need of correction by a science proportioned to the universe as it is independent of any reference to the specifically human mode of knowledge. The heirs of the Baconian project are legion, and one finds them writing books and essays in which they proudly declare that the soul or self or mind does not exist but only the

brain and its electrochemical processes. As Scruton puts it, the human person “is in principle unobservable to science, not because it exists in another realm but because it is not part of the empirical world.” What science had to work to forget to see, it has at last forgotten entirely. For some time now, this view has been seeping into the public consciousness (or into many brains), and it finds expression in ordinary opinion with greater frequency. And this Bacon might lament. For he also cautioned against “the idols of the theatre,” which are “the *illusions* which have made their homes in men’s minds from the various dogmas of different philosophies.” He explained that this applied not only to ancient thought, but also to “many principles and axioms of the sciences which have grown strong from tradition, belief and inertia” (*New Organon*, I.xliv). Bacon anticipated that even true science could become dully accepted orthodoxy. Is that not where we stand today, when members of the media inquisitorially ask presidential candidates to confess their belief in evolution or climate change? Anyone admitting what must be true for all of them and, indeed, for nearly all of us—that he or she does not in any substantive sense *know* the truth in these matters and hardly stands qualified to hold an opinion—would be branded a skeptic or a fool and a threat to the body politic. That the partisans of science have come to regard *skeptics* as enemies shows how science, now “grown strong from tradition, belief and inertia,” has become the home of orthodoxy and the tool of choice for today’s authoritarian dogmatists.

Consequently, at least two groups of people need books like Scruton’s *On Human Nature*, which takes science seriously while taking issue with the scientistic popularizers who overstate their case. First, the non-scientific public should welcome this clearly argued and thoughtful response to efforts to subvert common sense about human distinctiveness and moral agency.

Ordinary people are in the unfortunate position of believing things that are true but which they cannot defend by any rational argument that will withstand the force of scientific reasoning, however flawed that reasoning may be. Hence, by targeting ordinary beliefs . . . scientists score easy points and conceal the weakness of their case.

The named targets of this sort of accusation are Richard Dawkins and E. O. Wilson, and let it be noted that Scruton carefully distinguishes science from the popularized presentations of what science allegedly means. Second, anyone interested in genuinely understanding what it means to be human needs books like this in order to raise that question in dialogue with contemporary science-based claims that explain us away into a neurochemical substrate or into our subhuman evolutionary past.

The key to such books, as Bacon knew, is the starting point. For we must first take seriously the human phenomena of our direct, non-scientific experience as that which requires explanation if we are ever to recognize the verdicts of science as adequate explanations of those phenomena. Science has not explained what it peremptorily eliminates as unreal. To insist on the importance of the phenomena is not to deny that the earth moves because we cannot sense it, but to require that the scientific explanation that it does move also account for the appearance of immobility. This requirement seems to have been fairly met in the case of the earth's motion, but when we turn to the understanding of human nature, as Scruton shows, science has a long way to go, and the scientists and their apologists should admit as much.

The first chapter ("The Human Kind") addresses human distinctiveness by asking to what kind we belong. According to evolutionary biology, our kind is the human animal, and we are to be explained as any other species. Like all animals, the human animal is produced by the combination of nonhuman parts, combinations random in origination but preserved by the necessity of natural selection. When Dawkins invents the meme to explain away the enormous fact of human customs and social life, he exempts scientists from the rest of human species: only

scientists are capable of discriminating truth and falsity. The rest of us are ruled by memes that have invaded our brains like viruses. Scruton is unimpressed. “The concept of the meme belongs with other subversive concepts . . . in being aimed at discrediting common prejudice. . . . [I]t is a spell, with which the scientific mind seeks to conjure away the things that pose a threat to it.”

In Scruton’s analysis all biological explanations that find excessive continuity between human beings and animals similarly fail to explain.

They fall short of the target, for the very reason that what we are is not the thing they assume us to be. We are animals certainly; but we are also incarnate persons, with cognitive capacities that are not shared by the other animals and which endow us with an entirely distinctive emotional life.

According to Scruton, then, our kind is the person, and he, like Kant, asserts that we should be prepared to recognize that we may be more essentially like God or angels or any other rational species than we are like animals. He does not attempt to give a complete account of our kind, but he illustrates human specificity by appeal to familiar elements of the phenomena of laughter and blame. We laugh at some things and we assign blame to persons for some actions and not for others with reason and not simply because our bodies make us do so or in order to amplify our genetic success. As Scruton has it, noting we avoid practices that are dysfunctional is trivial, and evolutionary biologists presuppose but do not prove that our observable traits exist because of their survival functions.

The weakest part of this account appears when Scruton attempts to say how our personal being is related to our bodies, which he grants have resulted through evolution from a nonhuman origin. “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.” He describes this as “something like” the way an image or picture emerges from the materials of

canvas and paint. On this view, the person is “not something over and above the life and behavior in which we observe it but not reducible to them either.” He explicitly declines to account for the nature of the emergent entity; his concern is to defend the integrity of the phenomena. Nevertheless, “the kind to which we belong [person] is defined through a concept that does not feature in the science of human biology.” Our personal relations can only be understood on the surface, and the phenomena of personal life must not be eliminated by the science purporting to explain them.

One difficulty with this approach is that Scruton himself does not articulate the phenomenology of pictures adequately. A picture depends not only on the placement of the paint on the canvas. A picture comes to actuality only in the presence of someone capable of taking it as a picture, and so the picture is not simply the effect of suitably ordered material. The picture can *emerge* from the placement of the paint only because a person is already there to let the picture be. Two portraits facing each other on the gallery walls do not come to mutual self-awareness. A person cannot simply be the effect of suitably arranged matter, and, although many kinds of things may be taken as pictures, a person cannot be produced simply by taking biological material a certain way. For, even granting that other persons are essential to the full development of our individual personalities, it remains true that there is something already in the baby that is not in the puppy before anyone regards the baby as a person. (Those interested in a deeper consideration of these matters and, in fact, many other themes explored in Scruton’s book, should consider the work of Robert Sokolowski, especially his *The Phenomenology of the Human Person*.) Scruton appears to concede too much to the materialism of his opponents, and he seems to need to hold the door open to a richer ontological basis for the phenomena of personal relations, on whose priority he rightly insists.

In the second chapter, “Human Relations,” Scruton develops Steven Darwall’s notion of the *second-person standpoint* as “the standpoint of someone whose reasons and conduct are essentially addressed to others.” Relation to others is “built into the very idea of the human person,” and therefore, “‘I’ requires ‘you,’ and the two meet in the world of objects.” The Hegelian overtones of this argument are hard to miss. We recognize ourselves and others as different from things, even though it remains true that persons are also organisms that can be understood partially through science. Nevertheless, persons ultimately elude the grasp of science because the subject cannot be conceived as an object. “The subject is a point of view *upon* the world of objects and not an item *within* it.” Persons relate to one another through “overreaching intentionality.” “Hence the word *you* does not, as a rule, *describe* the other person; it summons him or her into your presence, and this summons is paid for by a reciprocal response.” We encounter one another as agents who think and act with reasons and not merely as compounds of inert bodies caught in the push and pull of causal interaction.

Giving each other reasons, holding each other to account, praising, blaming and negotiating, and working for the other’s acceptance and being in turn influenced to accept—these are all the moments in an ongoing dialogue in which each of us aims attention not to the body of the other but to the first-person perspective that shines within it.

In the third chapter, “The Moral Life,” Scruton emphasizes our personal particularity by distinguishing us from other material things. Water or gold is mere *stuff*, and a ring or a wooden table is stuff manipulated accidentally to form a *thing*. At a higher level, an *essential whole*, like a horse, constitutes a single being that can be named and irrevocably destroyed. Beyond this, a person exhibits “deep individuality” by identifying himself as an individual over time and asserting himself as the author of his own actions in the world. Deep individuality must not be mistaken for individualism; it is rather a universally human “social condition” we share with



others in which we severally take responsibility for the past and make commitments extending to the future. Understanding our moral lives requires us to attend to the human phenomena of offense and conflict coupled with the communal effort to avoid violence by making complex distinctions associated with assigning blame, making excuses, showing repentance, and seeking and offering forgiveness, and so on. Whatever similarities there may be with animal behavior related to conflict and aggression, Scruton argues that the reasoning involved in our moral emotions like guilt, sorrow, and regret shows that human actions cannot be understood merely as adaptations. The distinction between deliberate acts and indeliberate offenses or harms in which we are causally but blamelessly involved requires attention to the interior structure of our agency. Scruton turns from these observations to a compelling consideration of moral pollution, both as we find it in Greek tragedies (where Jocasta and Oedipus are less willing to excuse themselves than contemporary readers generally find appropriate) and as we find it in acts of rape and incest. To see these as mere physical harms and not as violations is not to see them at all in their moral reality. This chapter concludes with a defense of a sort of deontological conception of moral judgment (syncretizing Kant and Aristotle) against a consequentialist understanding attributed to the likes of Peter Singer and Derek Parfit. The key to the moral life, in Scruton's eyes, is the concept of the person, which, he says, must occupy the center of our lives and our motivations as we give account of ourselves to one another. It is worth noting that he centers the moral life on the person and not on the good or on happiness, understood as that which transcends and completes us as persons.

In the final chapter, "Sacred Obligations," Scruton displays the affinity between his own conception of moral reasoning and widely accepted contractarian views, according to which individual autonomy and respect for rights provide the basis for a shared political order among

people who nevertheless disagree on ultimate moral, metaphysical, or theological issues. He identifies and addresses two objections that may be raised against himself and the contractarians. First, we are bodily organisms rather than noumenal, autonomous selves, and consequently our physical being and its dependencies, attachments, and vulnerabilities are central to the manner in which we relate morally. Second, we are morally bound by ties we have never chosen because our obligations precede and are more fundamental than our free choices. We have freedom only within a context established by the presence of other moral agents, and we are bound to them morally whether we consent to it or not. In response, Scruton uses the chapter to try to flesh out, so to speak, how bodily relations can be acknowledged in moral thinking and how our unchosen obligations can be “shaped and justified.”

His reply begins with an appeal to Aurel Kolnai’s account of sexual morality because it shows how violations like rape and incest involve pollution and desecration, which helps us see that something essential is lost when we analyze sexual conduct solely in terms of genetics and health or consent and pleasure. He turns also to piety, as the appropriate response (ignored by mainstream contemporary political thinking) to the unchosen sources of one’s life and upbringing, for “most of what we are and owe has been acquired without our own consent to it.” Here, too, he concentrates on crimes against piety to manifest the reality of the sacred, and ultimately he gives consideration to the phenomenon of what might be called *personal evil*, which originates from and targets persons. Iago does not merely wrong Othello; he seeks to destroy him. “The [Nazi] camps did not exist to produce suffering only; they were designed to eradicate the humanity of their victims. They were ways of using the body to destroy the embodied subject.” Evil of this kind occurs on a different plane from the damage produced by natural disasters or plagues and goes well beyond the bad things we all do to one another through

ordinary selfishness, lack of consideration, or even malice. Scruton uses evil's uncanniness to reinforce our grasp of the person: "The concept of evil, like that of the sacred, describes forces that seem to impinge on our lives from elsewhere. Our understanding of these forces has the same kind of overreaching intentionality that I ascribe to interpersonal relations."

Scruton's treatment of these objections reveals that he regards his own account of the person as problematically or unclearly related to the human body. This was somewhat surprising because he clearly and consistently holds that the person is not "some cryptic entity" beyond the body. Rather,

At a certain level of complexity, a way of seeing others and ourselves becomes available to us and through this way of seeing we are confronted with another world than that described by evolutionary biology.

For the last chapter to make sense, we seem to need to stress the difference between these two worlds and no longer speak of persons encountering one another in the world of objects (as in chapter 2). It sounds more like we should understand the relation between these two worlds to be rather like that between Eddington's two tables, the table of ordinary experience and the scientific table of atomic forces. The issue of priority between the two worlds becomes crucial, just as it did in Eddington's account. Scruton speaks of the person as emerging from pre-personal biological conditions. It is on this score that I want to lodge one significant objection or question, which is all the more puzzling because it seems that it would not arise if Scruton held consistently to what he sometimes writes. To call the person an emergent dimension of the body implies a genealogy and seems vulnerable to the criticism he suggests holds for all "genealogical accounts—either they begin from a state in which the concept is already applied, or they do not succeed in showing how we can come to apply it." The first paragraph of Scruton's book begins with these words:

We human beings are animals, governed by the laws of biology. Our life and death are biological processes, of a kind that we witness in other animals too. We have biological needs and are influenced and constrained by genes with their own reproductive imperative.

In the second paragraph, he turns to the poetic and philosophical effort to write about erotic love.

These stories have *endowed* the object of love with a value, a mystery, and a metaphysical distinction that *seem* to place it outside the natural order. And in these stories, biology *seems* hardly to figure. . . . (italics added for emphasis)

To treat the scientific account of nonhuman matter and of our pre-personal ancestry as more certain than our awareness of ourselves is to substitute an imaginary construction for the reality we know directly. Science never can be first for us. Even when it corrects illusions in our perception, science remains essentially derivative from ordinary experience as the starting point from which scientific validity can be reached. Scruton knows this. In *Modern Philosophy* (Penguin, 1995), he wrote, “This public realm [in which we share language with others] is no fiction of the demon, but the fundamental reality” (54). And more recently in an online essay entitled “The Unobservable Mind” (parts of which are included in this book), he stated:

“Consciousness is more familiar to us than any other feature of our world, since it is the route by which anything at all becomes familiar.” Because this is so, the scientific effort to account for the emergence of mind from non-conscious matter requires the scientists to construct in thought an imagined world where there is no consciousness. What guarantee is there that we can accurately *conceive* matter while subtracting from it human consciousness? Even if that can be done, do we know that science’s current interpretation of matter is adequate to the nature of matter? The mysteries of quantum physics ought to be enough to give us pause. Should we not be willing to reconsider our understanding of matter so that we can avoid finding it necessary to conclude that consciousness and choice and persons do not exist? Instead, Bacon’s disciples commonly trust in the scientific construction as real and treat the world of ordinary experience as

the product of human imagination. Their consequent willingness to dismiss themselves from existence as cognitive persons is a nonviolent form of Scruton's evil. Whatever science's problems may be, the more essential question I raise is how we should understand Scruton's readiness to concede so much to the priority of the scientific account of our biological origins.

This question, which nagged at me throughout the book, is part of what makes it such engaging reading. Even when one disagrees with Scruton or wishes he had done something differently, his writing remains unremittingly *interesting*. He reads widely across the disciplinary boundaries by which most authors circumscribe their relevance, and he does not shy away from making "an argument that has opened onto a wide intellectual landscape." His book aims to remind us of the "metaphysical mystery around which our lives are built," a mystery that some advise us to regard as definitively solved by one doctrine or another and others advise us to ignore because it does not give way to formulaic solution. In this gracefully written book, Scruton, instead, invites us and stimulates us to think, and for that we should thank him before he gets to the grave.

### **Further Reading**

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Daniel Maher is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. His research focuses on ancient and early modern philosophy as well as medical ethics. He has published in *Society*, *Review of Metaphysics*, *Logos*, *Interpretation*, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, and *Perspectives on Political Science*.

[dmaher@assumption.edu](mailto:dmaher@assumption.edu)

Daniel P. Maher, Ph.D.  
Department of Philosophy  
Assumption College  
500 Salisbury Street  
Worcester, MA 01609