

POLITICAL THEORY

A Critique of Roger Scruton's 'Green Philosophy': Conservationist conservatism or contradictory conservatism?

GRAHAM DUNN

In this article, the theories developed by conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, set out in his 2012 publication 'Green Philosophy', are critically assessed. Scruton promotes a belief in the power of human love of home, labelled 'oikophilia', to overcome environmental problems by leading humans to internalise the costs of their activity. In response, criticisms of Scruton's position are explored, which object to his faith in human motivations, his idealistic thinking and the inconsistencies between his concept of 'oikophilia' and the policies he promotes. These criticisms prove to uncover weaknesses in Scruton's argument and result in a suggestion that due to the gravity of the environmental problems we now face the issues have moved beyond ideological claim.

Introduction

In philosopher Roger Scruton, environmental conservatism has found its most eloquent, intelligent and passionate advo-

cate (Baggini 2011).

High praise has been lavished on Scruton, a champion of traditional conservative values for over three decades now, in light of his recent publication; *Green Philosophy*. Motivated by Edmund Burke's concept of trusteeship, that broadens Rousseau's social contract to encompass the dead and unborn, Scruton holds that our responsibility to past and future generations, combined with a love of home, offers a natural incentive to preserve our local habitat (2012: 74). Scruton distinguishes 'oikophilia', the love of home, as the human motivation from which solutions to pressing environmental problems can be sought, placing it at the centre of his philosophy. He is scathing in his attack on the political left and current environmental movements for their failure to recognise the need to identify or evoke a common motive possessed by ordinary people that can mobilise them to protect their local environment; and is extremely critical of top-down, radical and state-led environmental solutions implemented under socialism (2012: 35-37). Instead, he seeks to show the potential benefits of conservative led solutions to the ecological crisis faced by mankind.

However, despite providing a fluent and at times compelling case for the relationship between environmentalism and conservatism, Scruton's philosophy has met substantial criticism. This criticism primarily focuses on the undeviating faith Scruton places in human motivations, doubts surrounding the alleged overly idealistic nature of his proposed solutions and what appear to be grave inconsistencies between his core concepts and his policies for bringing about environmental protection and reversing current trends. Whilst his philosophy is admirably ambitious and optimistic, with many creditable ideas, the flaws which he openly admits to leave it vulnerable to significant challenge. This has the potential to undermine Scruton's position by casting doubt over the potential of his ideas. Particular scepticism surrounds the power of his concept

of oikophilia, and conservatism more broadly, to bring about either the scale or speed of the change required to address environmental concerns.

Scruton's Green Philosophy

Before investigating the challenges to Scruton's position it is important to explore his core philosophy in more detail. His aim is to argue the case for an environmental solution in which local affections, inspired by a love of home, are made central to policy and in which homeostasis and resilience are the primary outcomes. Scruton identifies the primary cause of environmental degradation as the disposition of humans to externalise the costs of their activities, for example, to claim the profits of their enterprise but pass on the costs to others. The ease by which we can externalise our costs to those distant to us in space or time leads to the creation of environmental problems. Therefore, he asserts that identifying a motive that will lead ordinary people to internalise the costs of their actions and protect their local environment is the basis by which environmental problems can be solved. This optimism is, however, not widely shared. Scruton highlights the writings of ecologist Garrett Hardin, the author of the acclaimed article 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (2012: 18). Hardin questioned whether such a force exists within the realms of human motivation. Hardin argued that the casual remoteness of our actions on the environment meant that motivating humans to internalise their costs would prove to be difficult (Machan 2001: 33-38).

Scruton disagrees and believes that the motive he has identified, 'oikophilia' - the "love of country, love of territory and love of that territory as home" - is a natural motive that can act as a catalyst in reversing environmental degradation (2009: 143). He holds that only at local level will people find a genuinely motivating force to preserve what they identify as theirs, unlike the apocalyptic visions of left-wing environmentalism. He appeals to historian E.P. Thompson's idea of a "moral econo-

my” that exists whereby standards of acceptable behaviour are espoused by ordinary citizens living together within communities (in Rée 2012). Scruton also appeals to the localised and limited affections that arise amongst people by virtue of their historical loyalties, local identities and long-term commitments (2012: 154). His belief is that small scale initiatives, motivated by oikophilia and rooted in practical reasoning, can be emulated on a wider scale. These local successes can be the foundations for tackling major environmental issues, with oikophilia as the motivation and the cornerstone of all environmental solutions.

Critical Response

Despite the romantic attractiveness of Scruton's 'oikophilia' there are difficulties with his theory that his critics have been quick to scrutinise. Most significant of these is Scruton's unwavering faith in the volunteering and self-sacrificing spirit of individuals in the protection of their local environment, and the potential for this spirit to be the catalyst for worldwide solutions. Even the most public admirers of Scruton's style and basic ideas, such as commentator Julian Baggini, accuse him of misplaced confidence in human motivations. Baggini argues that on occasion Scruton's oikophilia is more a case of 'oikomania'. He claims that Scruton's 'oikomania' leads him to be over optimistic in the ability of people's love of home to provide local solutions to global environmental problems. Baggini extends this 'oikomania' to criticise Scruton's yearning for belonging and tradition, arguing that he demonstrates an immature reluctance to accept that things do not endure and that all things will pass (2011).

Green politician and writer Caroline Lucas is critical of what she deems to be Scruton's "little village utopia" (Lucas 2012). She observes how in Scruton's idealistic thinking there is little consideration of the practical concerns of ordinary people, such as earning a living or heating one's home. This is despite the fact he seeks to recruit ordinary people to lead

bottom-up solutions. Thus, Lucas dubs oikophilia a desirable concept but doubts its practicality, and argues that the idea that a volunteering spirit emanating from a love of home will solve global environmental issues is pure fantasy (2012). Scruton's idea of creating incentives for people to solve environmental problems for themselves is appealing; however taking into consideration the criticism levelled against his thinking by those such as Baggini and Lucas, Scruton's belief in human motivations and the power of oikophilia appears to be overly hopeful and unrealistic.

Role of Centralised State

In addition to questions concerning his ever-green optimism in human motivations, Scruton also faces accusations that he contradicts his own theory and beliefs, arising from some glaring inconsistencies in his philosophy. He strongly argues that centralised government and transnational action cannot provide the incentives that ordinary people require to protect their environment, based on the belief that the centralised state and the grand schemes it employs interfere with individuals' natural attachment to place. He is particularly condemning of international organisations like the European Union (EU), claiming that "the laws and regulations [imposed by the EU] proliferate without control and without any assessment of the costs" (2012: 316). Scruton's animosity towards state and central power stems from conservatism's broad suspicion of top-down and big government and its associated disposition to ignore unintended consequences or undesirable side-effects of its decision making-processes. It leads him to favour the de-centralisation of powers, with environmental degradation tackled from the bottom-up through community groups, local organisations and civic associations. One such civil association he provides as an example is the Women's Institute, which he suggests "has no other purpose than to encourage its members to gather around socially beneficial projects" (2012: 32-33).

Scruton's Solutions and Inconsistencies

Although expressing clear dislike and distrust of the centralised state, Scruton goes on to advocate the introduction of regulatory initiatives, such as, a flat rate carbon tax, restricting carbon emission levels and issuing tradable carbon permits. This would mean assigning a key role to the state and it would also need significant international co-operation to be effective in their aims (2012: 387-391). This is what leads to allegations of inconsistency in his thinking. According to American economist Martin Feldstein, multi-country consensus on environmental regulations such as those listed is a necessity as single countries, irrespective of their size, have little effect on over-all climate change (Feldstein 2009). This is exactly the international consensus, in the form of international organisations and treaties, for which Scruton expresses disdain.

Scruton's promotion of the introduction of a flat rate carbon tax is based on the premise that the more carbon a person or entity emits the more they will pay. He argues that the tax revenue streams created could be used to fund environmental research and the system would provide a way of internalising the costs of climate change (2012: 389). Additionally, Scruton is in favour of setting limits to permitted levels of carbon emissions and issuing tradable permits. He cites carbon trading schemes introduced by the Kyoto Protocol 1997 and the European Union's Emission's Treaty Scheme 2005, the specific types of treaties he goes to great lengths to criticise, as successful examples of such policy (2012: 388). Scruton attempts to justify these policies by claiming they would have the intuitive support of the people, would encourage energy economisation and would give an acceptable role to the state as he believes people have been educated to accept this role. He promotes these regulatory initiatives despite the fact that he cites in *Green Philosophy* the seminal reports produced by Samuel Peltzman in the early 1970s, concerning drug and car safety, as evidence of how regulations can destroy the incentive that people otherwise would have had to produce good results

by their own initiative (2012: 133). He also continually raises concerns throughout his discourse in relation to the dangers of the unintended and unknown consequences of government regulation. Therefore, in promoting carbon regulations Scruton contradicts his own philosophy and stance on state-led solutions and international co-operation.

What is more, as well as an endorsement of carbon regulations, he also appears to juxtapose his own philosophy by supporting calls for international co-operation and investment in relation to geo-engineering. This is in spite of the severe attack he launches on the left and its backing of universal action at the expense of the local. Scruton is an ardent critic of the way in which the left presents the ecological problems of the age as a drastic, irreversible and insoluble crisis, requiring a Salvationist style politics with radical reform of policies and large scale international projects. He argues that socialism attempts to create the perception of a crisis in order to justify forced collectivisation, re-organisation of society and grand multi-national schemes (2006: 32).

Moreover, he warns of the decline in accountability that he says comes with every expansion beyond the frontiers of the nation state. He believes that contemporary left-wing environmentalism and its doomsday approach fails to see that people do not naturally have collective goals and mistakenly focuses on the bigger picture, failing to recognise that environmental problems are generated by ordinary people and hence can be resolved by ordinary people. This alarmist strategy alienates rather than recruits these ordinary people as it encourages a defeatist mindset that individual action is pointless and ineffective.

Despite this aversion to "uncorrectable, state-controlled projects" with large-scale, impersonal and goal-directed solutions that he claims offer no solutions to environmental problems, Scruton nonetheless again pro-

ceeds to recognise the role and potential benefits these solutions have to play (in Dooley 2009: 140-143). He admits that transcendental problems such as climate change internationalise the environmental question and to an extent neutralise the argument he presents, as it is seen as a calamity so great that no bottom-up solution can be adapted to cope with it. He recognises that not all top-down initiatives are counter-productive and some problems require international action.

One such initiative that Scruton supports is the concept of geo-engineering, particularly the practise of carbon capture. He highlights evidence of its cost effectiveness and the importance of its immediate effects, rather than taking years or decades to have an impact, by which time he says the “impending catastrophe” being warned of might be realised (2012: 63). However, in doing so, he is effectively falling victim to the alarmist strategy of left-wing environmentalism that he is so critical of. His support for geo-engineering, which would require major international co-operation at top government level, also appears to abandon his loyalty to the local.

It can be claimed that Scruton's recognition of the benefits of large-scale, trans-national schemes like geo-engineering is an admission that oikophilia alone is not a powerful enough tool to fight global issues like climate change. He tries to disguise this admission by claiming that all large projects must originate at a particular place with oikophilia as the motivation. However his advocacy for schemes like geo-engineering which require direction and implementation from senior government level, whilst very creditable, deviates from his philosophy and appears to conflict with some of his basic principles.

Conclusion

Taken at face value Scruton's philosophy presents environmentalism and conservatism as a match made in heaven, centred on his eternal optimism

in the nature of ordinary people to love and cherish their home place. Yet, a deeper consideration of Scruton's romantic home-loving ideas uncovers fundamental weaknesses in his position. His philosophy is subject to a heavy reliance and trust in very specific and self-sacrificing human motivations focused on individual's love of their home, which is especially demanding given ever increasing globalisation. Further to this his philosophy is plagued by major inconsistencies arising from his critique of left-wing environmentalism and its top-down, all-conquering environmental solutions. His support for carbon regulations, carbon taxation and geo-engineering (which importantly require no commitment to oikophilia and render the concept unnecessary) are evidence of how he directly contradicts his criticism of the political left. His attempt to disguise these inconsistencies under the umbrella of oikophilia by claiming that all solutions, big or small, begin with a love of home and with responsible stewardship fails as it becomes difficult for even his most staunch supporters to argue that he remains entirely loyal to his own philosophy.

Despite this, it is important to recognise the stylish and sophisticated manner in which Scruton has attempted to uncover an all-encompassing motive that will lead humans to internalise the costs of their activity and lead to the creation of a solution to the mounting environmental crisis. He has gone to great lengths to argue the potential of fundamental conservative principles to act as a catalyst in creating such a solution. However, philosopher and columnist Christopher Belshaw claims that as Scruton's theory is ideologically driven it is not a manual about thinking seriously (2012). This article echoes Belshaw's criticism: Scruton's commitment to conservatism and his ideological purity curtail his green thinking. This suggests that a stage has been reached whereby the environmental problem now transcends traditional political divides and is beyond ideological claim. Only when Scruton attempts to deviate from his ideological commitment, albeit he would reject this claim, does he make

real and credible proposals concerning the action required to tackle environmental problems, ultimately rendering the concept of oikophilia unnecessary.

Bibliography

Baggini, J. (2011) 'Shades of green: A case for conservative conservationism overstates the link between the two' *Financial Times*. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/85ab3694-2a56-11e1-b7f2-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2C3M-dwDqx> (Accessed: 29 October 2012).

Barry, J. (2007) *Environment and Social Theory*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Belshaw, C. (2012) 'Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet' *The Times Higher Education*. Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=418699> (Accessed 7 November 2012).

Dawkins, R. (2009) *The Selfish Gene*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dooley, M. (2009) *Roger Scruton: The Philosopher on Dover Beach*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Eyres, H. (2012) 'Conservation and conservatism' *Financial Times*. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/cf805d98-fc16-11e1-af33-00144feabdc0.html#axzz-2B56C19on> (Accessed: 29 October 2012).

Feldstein, M. (2009) 'The Exploding Carbon Tax' *American Enterprise Institute*. Available at: <http://www.aei.org/article/energy-and-the-environment/the-exploding-carbon-tax/> (Accessed 4 November 2012).

Hardin, G. J. (1968) 'The Tragedy of the Commons' *Science*. Vol. 162.

Huber, P.W. (1999) *Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists: a Conservative Manifesto*. New York: Basic Books.

Lucas, C. (2012) 'Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet, By Roger Scruton' *The Independent*. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/green-philosophy-how-to-think-seriously-about-the-planet-by-roger-scruton-6288591.html> (Accessed: 7 November 2012).

Machan, R. T. (2001) *The Commons: Its Tragedy and other Follies*. Stanford:

Hoover Press.

Manning, R. E. (2007) *Parks and Carrying Capacity: Commons Without Tragedy*. Washington: Island Press.

Pigou, A. C. (1920) *The Economics of Welfare*. London: MacMillan.

Rée, J. (2012) 'Green Philosophy by Roger Scruton – review' *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/28/green-philosophy-roger-scruton-review> (Accessed: 5 November 2012).

Scruton, R. (2006) *Arguments for Conservatism*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Scruton, R. (2009) *Beauty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scruton, R. (2012) *Green Philosophy How to Think Seriously About the Planet*. London: Atlantic Books.

Scruton, R. (1999) *The Philosopher on Dover Beach*. Oxford: St Augustine's Press.