
Paul Adams  
*University of Hawai'i*

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Book Reviews

The Uses of Pessimism: A Review Essay


Roger Scruton is an eloquent proponent of local tradition and culture, empowerment of families and communities, curbing the tendency of bureaucratic-professional agencies to undermine and substitute for natural helping systems—the capacity of families and communities to care for and control their own members. Put like this, his position seems not dissimilar to that associated with restorative justice, family group conferencing, community-centered social work on the British patch model, McKnight’s (1996) critique of the bureaucratic-professional “careless society,” and other approaches to empowerment or partnership practice.

Scruton, however, is Britain’s leading conservative intellectual, author of more than thirty books, on subjects ranging from technical and introductory philosophy, fox-hunting (a spirited defense) and animal rights, music, wine, and autobiography, to cultural critique and defense of English tradition and country life. His very achievements are not ones likely to endear him to most readers of this journal, I suspect, but I want to suggest that his work merits serious consideration by those involved in social welfare.

Unscrupulous Optimism

In his recent meditation on the uses of pessimism, Scruton’s concern is with the dangers of false hope (his subtitle) and the particular fallacies that make such “unscrupulous optimism” so powerful and impervious to reason. Among the fallacies he considers are the Best Case (i.e., failure to consider worst-case scenarios), Planning, Utopian, and Zero-Sum (I fail because
you succeed) Fallacies.

In the abstract, these are useful cautions that no one sensibly could dismiss out of hand. But Scruton aims to show how these fallacies are endemic to a larger social and political vision that has been ascendant since the Enlightenment and especially the deadly triumph of “Reason” in the French Revolution. That vision of Reason rests on an unscrupulous optimism that sweeps away the collective problem-solving of generations codified through customs, traditions, and laws built from the bottom up, like English and American common law or Swiss political arrangements. It replaces that common, inherited wisdom with the will of the radical and enlightened few. The utopian or planning elites sweep aside all previous traditions and practices, along with the wishes of ordinary people, who have to be led to a higher level of wisdom by the progressive, forward-looking vanguard.

The force of Scruton’s argument lies in the detail and concreteness with which he specifies these dangers in every aspect of life, not only in totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, but also as destructive forces in the democratic West. He points to the violence and destructiveness of French and Russian revolutionaries, to how the first act of such revolutionary elites is to destroy all the institutions of the old society and especially the rule of law that might hold them accountable.

But he also describes the bizarre grip of the EU bureaucracy today on the once democratic and sovereign nations within its orbit. He shows how hundreds of thousands of regulations are issued at an accelerating rate by an unaccountable bureaucracy whose many mistakes cannot be rectified through democratic processes. Once adopted, those measures cannot be repealed by the nations involved. Scruton shows how brutally the bureaucrats sweep away the customs and traditions of centuries, in the process destroying, for example, family farming and the countryside of Romania. He describes how a European directive requiring the presence of a qualified veterinarian at every abattoir led to the closing of most local abattoirs in England, requiring that cattle be taken much greater distances to be slaughtered, so that when disease did break out it spread across the country instead of being localized.
Another twist to Scruton’s anti-utopian argument is that the self-image of the progressive elite as more advanced than the masses whose lives they want to manage, is itself illusory. An important aspect of the book is the effort to explain these fallacies’ resistance to reason or evidence. They are, he argues, residues of an earlier stage of human development, one that still holds value in emergencies, but is destructive at other times. There is an implied analogy here to the fight-flight response—once essential for daily survival, but now dysfunctional as a pattern of intensified arousal in conditions that do not require it.

Scruton appeals, in contrast to the kinds of thought-experiments of Rawls or Locke on which social contract theory is built, to the nature of tribes or hunter-gatherer bands as they actually existed. This was the long prehistory before conditions existed for the emergence of societies of unrelated strangers who found ways to live side by side through negotiation and compromise in consensual communities... or cities. In a band of hunters and gatherers that was in constant danger, pursuing and holding on to territory in the face of human and other threats from the outside, survival depends on the collective ‘I’—submission of all to the goals and strategy of a leader. There is no place for worst case scenarios or competing approaches when the band must unite behind its leader or die. The same is true in wartime—which is perhaps why utopias like Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward or Plato’s Republic are deeply undemocratic and organized top down along more or less military lines.

The tabula rasa vision of the human being—found in notions of constructing a new “socialist man” or a new human type or, in its weirdest manifestation yet, in a trans-human type that is seen as replacing humans with cyborgs or a new genetically engineered post-human species—casts aside those compromises and constraints that previously shaped us. Such indeed was the spirit of the Sixties, with concepts of freedom that wrecked—at least for the poor—the institutions of marriage and fatherhood, social patterns of sexual restraint and responsibility, and many other institutions and traditions that reflected the collective wisdom of generations.

In Scruton’s view, then, the fallacies he describes are rooted
in the material needs of hunter-gatherer bands, where everything depends on the will of the chieftain—the leader’s collective ‘I’ is at the same time the ‘we’ of the community. One reason that the fallacies are so impervious to refutation is that they are “not new additions to the repertoire of human madness but the residues of our forefathers’ honest attempts to get things right ... thought processes that were selected in the life and death struggles from which settled societies eventually emerged” (p. 203). Liberal, optimistic, progressive thinking is not, from this perspective, an advance on the ways and customs of the unenlightened masses, but a regression to more primitive ways of thinking. Scruton’s purpose is to defend the world of compromise and half measures, love, friendship, irony, and forgiveness from the Pleistocene mindset of the enlightened that would sweep them all away.

**Empowerment in the Bureaucratic-Professional State**

Some of Scruton’s most effective rhetorical shafts are aimed at experts and professionals who, basing themselves on a stock of knowledge and expertise that is largely bogus, usurp the role of families and communities and undermine their capacity to resolve their own problems. In this respect his critique is congruent with that of other critics of the bureaucratic and professionalized social services. For example, in *The Careless Society*, McKnight (1996) shows how competent communities have been invaded and colonized by professionalized services—often with devastating results.

In this area, Scruton has a brief and provocative, though less than nuanced, discussion of a typical child protection scandal in the U.K. known as the Baby P. case, where a child died who was already known to the authorities. The inquiry that followed called for retraining social workers, more expertise, and more funding of services.

For Scruton the area of child welfare is one where the claimed expertise of the professionals is phony. Citing Baskerville’s (2007) critique, *Taken Into Custody*, he says: “Examine their expertise, however, and whence it derives, and you will discover a mish-mash of amateur sociology, left-wing dogma and routinized anti-family rhetoric” (p. 174). The inquiry’s recommendations reflect the diversionary tactic of shifting the blame
to whatever can be readily blamed, to whatever responds to blame. (He explains much anti-Americanism, within and outside the United States, on this convenient displacement strategy of transferred blame.)

His argument is that this kind of inquiry and recommendation ignores the real forces that created the modern problem of child abuse. It is much easier to retrain social workers or change their practices than to restore the institution of the family. So what is needed, the experts averred, was "more of us, more planning, more supervision, more ways of preventing this society-wide disorder through the intervention of a benevolent state" (p. 173).

Citing figures from research in the U.K. to the effect that children are vastly more likely to be abused fatally in the homes of mothers with a live-in boyfriend or stepfather than in an intact family, Scruton says, "Actually what Baby P. needed was a father, and the smallest dose of pessimism would have pointed this out" (p. 173). To think in this way, however, is to run up against "one of the fundamental prejudices of the time: the prejudice that the new forms of domestic life brought about by easy divorce and the sexual revolution are unalterable and unquestionable. Child abuse is not a universal social disorder, for which the state bureaucracy and its experts are the cure. It is the direct result of the delegitimization of the family, often carried out by those very experts. Meanwhile, the state has connived in the dissolution of the marriage tie, and has routinely subsidized, through the welfare system, the arrangements (including live-in boyfriends) that expose children to danger" (pp. 173-174).

But what is the point?

Scruton's prose is witty, clear, and eloquent, always a pleasure to read even when one disagrees with him. His curmudgeonly tone comes from the bitter experience of a brilliant scholar whose academic career in England was blighted for most of its span because his colleagues found his views—those of a Burkean conservative—unacceptable and too far beyond the liberal-radical consensus of the academy (outside the sciences, anyway). The fury with which progressive thinkers respond when the fallacies in their thinking are pointed out
has been visited on Scruton’s head in print and in the harshest tones.

It is natural in these circumstances that he would conclude that “the argument of this book is entirely futile. You may enjoy it and agree with it, but it will have no influence whatsoever on those whom it calls to account” (p. 3). How could he conclude otherwise after a lifetime of collegial abuse? (This is not to deny the compelling case Scruton makes that the fallacies he examines are indeed resistant to correction, without regard to the author’s personal experience.)

That perception of futility, however, as well as the large scope of the argument compared with the modest size of the book, creates its own limitations. Scholarly rigor, careful documentation of the examples and fair consideration of objections and alternative arguments must seem hardly worth the trouble since, in any case, those who comprehensively disagree with the author will not themselves be open to argument.

So Scruton’s dismissal of multiculturalism, progressive education, postmodern gobbledygook, and the like are witty and a delight to read but do not seriously engage the advocates of those follies. His account of how utopian notions of “education for equality” in the U.K. succeeded only in destroying opportunity for gifted working-class children and ensuring as nearly as possible that students did not learn anything, is fun to read. His view of education experts with their “agenda that was uniformly egalitarian, child-centered and knowledge-averse” (p. 172) and their disastrous effects on education is scathing and witty, but probably not compelling to an educationist.

Most seriously, Scruton pays little or no attention to the most obvious questions his critique raises. Are tradition and custom so benign? What about slavery or female genital mutilation or suttee? These are the standard questions raised about multiculturalism and a cultural/moral relativism that regards all cultures as equal (or equally deserving of respect). Since Scruton has no time for such postmodern or politically correct tendencies, it is surprising that he does not take greater care to explain how his valuing of tradition addresses such questions. It is not that they cannot be addressed. English conservatives like Burke or Samuel Johnson supported the American Revolution and opposed slavery without difficulty or inconsistency. But Scruton does not take the trouble to anticipate such
objections or explain his position to skeptical readers.

But the curmudgeon stance makes it too easy for critics to dismiss the book as a partisan rant. That is a shame. Scruton is a brilliant author—philosopher of ethics and aesthetics, critic of music, art, and architecture, commentator and polemicist—of extraordinary depth and range. His work challenges received wisdom in the social sciences and humanities. His critiques, even when lacking the full apparatus of German scholarship, are serious attempts to offer a coherent and comprehensive alternative to the dominant thinking in the academy, arts, and media.

References


Paul Adams is at the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work, University of Hawai‘i. Adams is a former book review editor of this journal and blogs at (http://ethicsculture.blogspot.com).


This book is a timely and important addition to the field of social work. Edited by James Midgley (one of the great minds in the field) and Amy Conley, the book offers a distinctive approach to the professional social work which is informed by an interdisciplinary perspective—developmental social work. Like many scholars in the field, Midgley and Conley acknowledge the complexity of the paradigm and lack of a global definition. The book argues for the relevance of the paradigm in social work practice. The central idea presented is that developmental social work has positive implications for the profession of social work and the clients it’s mandated to serve. The