Dystopian Impulse in Social Criticism: Scruton's Optimistic Pessimism[1] (Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism and the Danger of False Hope*, London: Atlantic Books, 2010, 232 pp.)

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Roger Scruton is referred to as the leading conservative thinker of our century. He could have been labelled a philosopher but his concerns overreach the traditional borders and classification of the studies of philosophy. Not only has he published books on aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of politics, for instance, but also on the cultural history of England. Since the publication of *England: An Elegy* (2000), his very British and quite poetic work, where he introduced such *topi* of British culture as the nostalgia for the English countryside, the importance of patriotism in the arts and the originally individualistic attitude of the British, he has displayed his versatile interests in different writings (e.g. on hunting, settling, and wine-drinking). From 2001 to 2009, he regularly penned wine reviews in *The New Statesman*, then published his philosophical wine guide entitled *I Drink, Therefore I Am.* In *News from Somewhere* (2004) he brings forth the records of his life in the countryside (he moved to rural Wiltshire in the early 1990s) and, though the title obviously alludes to William Morris' pastoral socialist utopia, *News from Nowhere* (1890), the philosopher's efforts made at his 20th century settling are not idealistic at all.

Scruton's way of thinking is characterised by traditional values, his worldview is somewhat anti-utopian, while his style is highly critical and satirical. It is especially true of his book, *The Uses of Pessimism and the Danger of False Hope* (2010), in which he lists the most dangerous fallacies intellectuals of our age are likely to fall into. These misconceptions, all based on the hope of "unscrupulous and wicked optimism" (1), overlap one another and the main ideas are repeated throughout. In "The First-Person Future" Scruton harshly criticises the posthuman desire for (virtual) immortality; especially, Ray Kurzweil's idea of "singularity" with the belief that man will be able to live in cyber-space as a transcended species, as a transhuman cyborg (12). The author undermines the immortality-delusion of the future optimists with references to famed literary works: to Huxley's dystopian *Brave New World*, Mary Shelley's

[1] The title of my review alludes to Keith M. Booker's noted study of dystopias: *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature—Fiction as Social Criticism* (Westport, Connecticut – London: Greenwood Press, 1994).

Frankenstein and Karel Čapek's writings. Right here he argues for the 'we' attitude, and against the 'I' attitude, as the latter "seeks change and improvement, overcoming the challenges presented by nature", while the former "seeks stasis and accommodation, in which we are at one with each other and with the world" (16).

The unscrupulous optimist "does not count the cost of failure or imagine the worst case scenario" (22)—he believes in the *best case fallacy*, and if bankruptcy should occur, he will find someone to be blamed. The unscrupulous optimist is like a manic gambler, similar to that typified by, Dostoevsky, and not entirely unlike the victims of the present credit crunch. Credit belongs to the world of futurism and illusions, where "the unreal [is] to trump the actual" (25). Opposed to it, the scrupulous optimists are more careful, and due to their dose of pessimism, they know:

> that they can far more easily adjust *themselves* than the constraints under which they live, and that they should work on this continuously, not only for the sake of their own happiness and of those they love and who depend on them, but also for the sake of the 'we' attitude that respects the constants on which our values depend, and which does its best to preserve them. (34, italics in the original)

Thus, such conservative optimists consider small changes with respect to the happiness of the community members living close to them. In contrast with the 'I' attitude of the unscrupulous, hurray optimists, such people are guided by "public spirit, local patriotism and the core impulses of *agape* or neighbour-love," that is "the true first-person plural" (36 and 40).

Studying "the born free fallacy," Scruton claims individual freedom can only be achieved through obedience and the respectful acceptance of laws (50). In a pleasant diversion, the author condemns the liberal pedagogical reforms aiming at the relaxed educating of the child with the teacher's acting as "an adviser, play-mate and friend" (52). Scruton is likely to react violently to the postmodern and poststructuralist approaches, mainly deconstruction, but he also severely attacks liberal democracy. In his biography, there is a famous episode when, upon witnessing the events of '68 in Paris, he realises he has become conservative, recalling the father of British conservatism, Edmund Burke's turn from the ideas of the French Revolution (54–57).

In the present book two human attitudes clash: the dystopian, scrupulous optimists and the utopian, unscrupulous optimists, who believe not only in the "born free" and "the best case" fallacies but they are also marked by the "utopian" falsehood. Scruton quotes the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai, who says that the utopian mind is featured by a specific need to accept "the absurdities not *in spite of* their absurdity, but *because* of it" (63, italics in the original). In the future-visions of the perfect utopias, communities live together in harmony without any conflicts; however, as we know from Sir Thomas More,

such a world cannot be realised. Scruton recalls the utopian efforts of the French Revolution, Marx's scientific socialism, the 'thousand-year Reich' of the Nazis, and Sartre's late communist folly. The idea of utopia is attractive and is based on the negation of the actual as the actual is replaced by the ideal in it (72). However, the utopian unscrupulous optimists are likely to get rid of the scrupulous ones: sacrificial victims are needed in the totalitarian regimes. Utopias tend to turn totalitarian, where the machine of the state becomes self-functioning—as if it were "on automatic pilot," Scruton remarks (78).

After the ideological fallacies, the author is speaking of the financial misconceptions: "the zero sum fallacy" and "the planning fallacy". In the case of the first, it is harmful to think that someone's gain entails and clearly leads to the other's loss, and it is more harmful when this proto-socialist view is transmitted from the market economy to other fields. Scruton's favourite example is the scholarship system that was used successfully for several hundred years in the UK to benefit talented students, coming from the lower layers of society; this system has been successfully destroyed in the name of "social justice" (97)—it is rather a naïve notion that one student's educational success should be paid for by another's failure. In the chapter, *The Planning Fallacy*, in effective satirical outbursts, he analyses the madly institutionalised and standardised system and regulations of the European Union. Opposed to the centrally unified, overall planning of the top-down method, the desirable one should be subsidiarity, where society is organised from the bottom up, which "places an absolute brake upon centralizing powers by permitting their involvement only when requested" (105). English common law, similarly, was constructed from the bottom through precedents (that is what Hayek calls "catallactic" 108). Scruton shows us that the English are naturally against the automatic acceptance of the regulations of Brussels, as there is no way of correcting or mechanisms for proper feedback. It is also useless if citizens of the Member States can laugh heartily at the comically bureaucratic measures; for example, Scruton mentions the 24-page, 10 language instruction booklet for Wellington boots. Quoting his poetic summary of the malfunctioning system: "A cavernous void lies at the heart of the European process, a void into which questions are constantly called out by the people, and from which no answer ever returns" (112).

"The moving spirit fallacy" is presented as a philosophical sophism (typically Hegelian), in which the notions of the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) and the idea of periodisation go together with the belief in progress. Scruton claims paradoxically that "[they] tak[e] a retrospective view of something that has not yet happened, [which] became the integral part of progressive thinking not only in politics but also in the arts" (136). In his aesthetical detour, the author criticises not only the modernist artists—for example, Manet, Schoenberg or Picasso—due to their radically innovative ways of expression, but also the egotistic impulses of modern, new architecture. Moreover, in his argumentation, modern architecture is associated with alienation and, while in the past "culture and morality had stood in the way" on the strong 'we' attitude of the old

communities, in the 20th century old cities with their communal places were demolished to give enough space for progressive buildings of the *Zeitgeist* (150).

Scruton goes even further, showing that the destruction of the symbolic twin-towers of the World Trade Center can be explained with the Muslims' aversion to modern architecture (see the terrorist Mohamed Atta's dissertation on traditional Muslim architecture). In the next chapter, "the aggregation fallacy," being another typical liberal error, is presented through not only historical examples but also the present crisis of multiculturalism. According to Scruton, in the past, traditionally "monocultural" British education used to be more effective for students, from different cultures, as it helped them to get accustomed to, and feel welcome in, their new home. The old curriculum, having been based on "public culture of good behaviour and shared national loyalty", was open to the variety of proper and personal differences and it proved that "acculturation is valuable as the precursor to the 'we' attitude—the thing that makes it possible to look on yourself as one among many, with a destiny that is shared" (164).

To the arguments of the conservatively scrupulous optimists, the unscrupulous optimists in their deceit, react with such defence schemes as the inventing of "false expertise", the strategy of "transferred blame, hermeticism and scape-goating" (169). At this point in my review, it has become obvious that the book is full of repetitions and the author's style is not free of some name-calling. One of his hobby-horses is the flagellation of the experimental and dilettante educators, while his idea about the fathers' parental superiority in child-care is simply revolting (171–175). Scruton also loves attacking deconstruction, which is displayed in the practice of concealing one's position and argument with "a fortified citadel of nonsense", that is, with the illusory though subversive "junk thought", "emptiness", or, "gibberish" of postmodern discourse (181–186).

Approaching the concluding chapter, "Our Human Future," the author provides a superficial overview of history, mainly focusing on the questions of settling down versus wandering. In his historical survey, Scruton outlines the stages of development, starting with the wandering tribes of hunter-gatherers, through the farming settled communities to the establishment of villages and cities. The functioning of the new communities should be founded on collective rationality, which is "not the 'I'-rationality of a leader and his plans, but the 'we'-rationality of a consensual community" (210). The scrupulous optimist, relying on and referring to this 'we'-rationality, tries to nullify the false hopes. The life of the settled communities entails compromises and not all the individuals, arriving from different cultures, are able to join such bigger units, able to be citizens of a civil society (the Islamic terrorist, for instance, is unable to, as he insists on belonging to his religious community).[2]

[2] In *Green Philosophy*, where Scruton claims that environmental politics is a conservative idea, and conservatism will save the world, he differentiates between two groups of people: the *oikophobes* and the *oikophiles*. The first type is unable to settle, they are the wanderers, who

If we accept the fact that human nature is changing—both the utopian transhumanists and the dystopian pessimists agree that it is—then things should even have a good turn. "The world is, in fact, a much better place than the optimists allow: and that is why pessimism is needed"—as Scruton says (204). In his final warning, he calls our attention to the idea that now is the time for serious *scrutiny* of our beliefs:

> Rather than lose ourselves in these unreal hopes, therefore, we should reflect again on our nature as settled, negotiating creatures, and return to the task in hand, which is to look with *irony* and *detachment* on our actual condition, and to study how to live at peace with what we find. (232, italics are mine)

Irony for Scruton is quite positive and affirmative; it is not a gesture of refusal (and not sarcastic): it makes us able to acknowledge "the otherness of everything, including oneself" (219). Irony is a community-forming force that, with the acceptance of the other, gives space for "collective rationality" (220).

In conclusion, we can say that Scruton's optimistically pessimist handbook on the recognition of fallacies and of the possible avoidance of these fallacies is an instructive reading, though not in the same way the author thinks it to be. In the British liberal *Guardian,* Jonathan Rée in his article refers to the old joke, namely, there are basically two types of people in the world: the ones who believe there are only two kinds and the ones who do not.[3] Well, reading and reviewing his book, our British philosopher seems to belong to the first group. However, if we twist the previously quoted joke, we can claim that there are people who do not even think in terms of types of humans and try to learn from each individual's ideas in order to enrich the understanding of humanity and, in the long run, make it profitable for all of us.

tend to idolise strange, foreign ideas, while the other longs for the warm safety of home, and generally feel at home in their own cultural community (247–254). See Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy (How to Think Seriously about the Planet)*, London, Atlantic Books, 2013.

[3] See Jonathan Rée's review on Roger Scruton's *Green Philosopy* in *The Guardian*, Wednesday 28 December 2011.
(http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/28/green-philosophy-roger-scruton-review)