

# Conservatism: Empirical or Metaphysical?

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## INTRODUCTION: THE GREAT CONSERVATIVE TRADITION IN OUR TIME

Roger Scruton's *Invitation* does precisely what it sets out to do: it invites us to examine the intellectual roots of *our*—Anglo-American, French and German—conservatism. The invitation is extended to non-conservatives: the curious who may be spurred on by conservatism's stubborn refusal to wither away; the student of the history of ideas interested in the sub-section 'intellectual conservatism'; the politician (p. 155) who, endowed with a practical instinct for the political, may desire an education on political things that is least of all available in political science curricula, and; the "well-meaning [liberal]" (p. 6) who may have noticed that his political enemies are neither troglodytes nor devils. The book is a conservative reading list—a cottage industry of its own for a movement perpetually anxious to demonstrate its intellectual roots—with something for everyone who has an inkling of the broader conservative persuasion; from the higher peaks of philosophical conservatism with Aristotle and Hegel to the enemies of political correctness who may want to beef up on Newspeak references. To my mind it is best read as a companion-piece to Scruton's defense of conservatism in contemporary terms (2014a) and his what-not-to-read list—again from the Anglo-American, French and German currents—of thinkers of the New Left (2015). This trilogy that comprises the intellectual past, present and other of conservatism may be read, I suppose, as Scruton's definite statement on the politics of our time. The picture that emerges is of conservatism as it usually presents itself: a territorial conservatism, that grows out of concern for the homestead and dedicated to the defense of the legal, cultural, and institutional achievements of that culture. And rightly so; conservative resistance cannot begin other than from what is already *there*. This is appropriate on another level too; Scruton is a philosopher *and* a conservative, and if these two have one thing in common, it is the desire to re-establish harmony between themselves and the world (cf. p. 6).

I wonder, however, if that harmony is slightly too quickly established. The contemporary world, after all, is 'out of joint' in a two-fold sense. First, if "we"—the pre-political "first person plural" (p. 4)—and the moral and institutional "constraints" (p. 5) in which this "we" operates, are "social artefacts" (ibid), then the being of "we" today is technologically mediated 'all the way down' (as Heidegger has made clear). Whatever that may mean for our politics, if the primary duty of the conservative is to defend the "we" as the first feature of *Dasein* (pp. 11-12) by beginning *from* it, then the technological constitution of our "we" must form part of that starting point. That suggests, at the surface level, tinkering with Scruton's intellectual history, in order to include, say, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul or Leon Kass, and to engage with others that have suggested ideas to compensate for our technicity, from Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou to Nick Land and others. That engagement, I am sure, would change our understanding of the nature of conservatism by upending its subject (Scruton's "we"), tinkering with its objects, or the things that the "we" uses to maintain itself (Scruton's *patria*, common law, tradition), and with its antagonistic others (his account of the New Left, say, or post-war British dirigisme and religious fundamentalism). This is a perilous enterprise to be sure; it could drive a wedge between conservatism and liberalism with which conservatism is supposed to be in a symbiotic relationship (p. 55) and grapple with post-modernism by virtue of the attempt of post-modern thinkers to take on the technological challenge. This engagement, then, could bring conservatism well out of its comfort zone.

The second disjuncture between Scruton's conservatism and our times is, domestically, what John Rawls called "the fact of pluralism" (Rawls 2001, p. 23). This is a two-level problem specific to conservatism—for liberalism and post-modernism have already sought to grapple with it. It is a problem on the surface, because its assertion as a "fact" disallows its omission by Scruton's "empirical conservatism" (2014a).<sup>1</sup> And it is a problem in depth, because the pre-political "we" which conservatives are constrained to take as

a given, has become problematical or highly political. Here conservatism is forced to face another unseemly competitor—multiculturalism—with which it shares its first assumption that a person’s good is defined by active membership in a community.<sup>2</sup> Although a recent mutation of the great liberal tradition, this encounter brings conservatism in company that it would rather avoid for its illiberal implications (Barry 2000). By beginning from the “we”, the conservative intellectual tradition may have to broaden too—to cover, say, German Romanticism—and, perhaps inexorably, towards the great adversary of the conservative tradition in Scruton’s account, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For the contradictory pulls of conservatism that Scruton begins to lay out are, I think, best embodied in Rousseau’s fundamental stance of submitting the Enlightenment to a radical critique from within the Enlightenment—not as its outside enemy, but as its internal “defector” (Melzer 1990, p. xii).

These observations can be accommodated without touching the core of the *Invitation*. But, always from this situated, historical perspective, the sort of invitation extended by Scruton may be put into question altogether. Scruton says up front that we are well-advised to look into the past of conservatism because the world of yesterday is “[vanishing] into air” (p. 1). He invites the curious to enter the Museum of Conservatism. But that is not what Scruton wants; his is an empirical conservatism of the highest contemporary relevance. Yet, as I have already sought to indicate, our time is not simply characterized by *this* or *that* new quality—the ‘bad’ quality of vanishing institutions, for example, which is balanced by a ‘good’ quality: its openness (*ibid.*)—but by its different, techno-mediated, nature. For example, the plausible argument has been made, that contemporary liberals are not suffering simply from a curable case of hallucination when they profess their belief in “the right of individuals to define their identity for themselves, regardless of existing norms and customs” (p. 8), but that this is immanent to the internal logic of liberalism; a logic that is only intensified by the technical production of socio-human artefacts (e.g. Jardine 2004, Part I).<sup>3</sup> If that is, in some important way, correct, the past cannot shed its light on the present and future *just so*; intellectual probity requires from us to refract the tradition through our historicity; Heidegger’s or Foucault’s refractions come to mind as examples. However that refraction may look like, it does put into question, I think, the conservative nature of Scruton’s history of conservative ideas.

## I. SCRUTON’S EMPIRICAL CONSERVATISM

But, let us row back from this complex question which cannot be settled here and examine the content of the conservative tradition according to Scruton. Conservatism as we know it, Scruton tells us, emerged as a response to the Enlightenment. This philosophical tradition begins with Adam Smith and its representative thinker is Hegel. The tradition, however, also has a pre-history whose representative thinker is Aristotle. Scruton carefully traces its transformations, from a defense of tradition against calls for popular sovereignty, to its defense of religion and high culture, its later alliance with classical liberals against socialism to its contemporary efforts to champion Western civilization against its enemies (p. 127). To each of these correspond a kind of conservatism: pre-historical, Enlightenment, Philosophical and Cultural Conservatism.

Modern conservatism, Scruton tells us, began as a *limit-instituting break*; a necessary counter to the excesses of liberal individualism. And, as the beginning is the god-like “savior of all things” (Plato 1980, 775e), this beginning constituted a principle that unfolds throughout its variegated history. The initial counter-individualism transformed into a counter to materialist doctrines of progress culminating into an attempt to apply the brakes as mightily as possible on the utopias that followed. If, in all its transformations, “something has remained the same, namely the conviction that good things are more easily destroyed than created” (p. 127), conservatism mobilizes in the effort to limit the excesses of the new in order to bring it in harmony with the old. Indeed, even in its broadest sense, insofar as conservatism connects to universal aspects of the human condition (p. 9), these aspects are to serve as sentinels that guard the borders of our political thought against any trespassing (see the list on pp. 11-12; trust and competition, custom and choice, kinship/homeness and free association of rational beings, and, more generally, universality and particularity). If liberal individualism and socialist utopias evidently trespass against one or more of these, conservatism is that sober part of the Western tradition that recalls man back to his senses. Firmly located within the terrain marked out by its *Grenzprinzipien*, conservatism strives to articulate that space by bringing them in harmony with each other.

At its origin, then, conservatism unfolds in the encounter with liberalism. Others—socialists, or religious fundamentalists, for example—are its enemies. The dividing line between liberalism and conservatism, however, is the

one instituted by Rousseau; it runs *within* the Enlightenment order “as a dispute within the broad ideas of popular sovereignty, the liberty of the individual and constitutional rights” (p. 22). This is therefore a family quarrel; as I read Scruton, conservatives disagree with *the beginning* of liberalism in the ideas of absolute or unattached, individual freedom and contract, and, consequently, with some of *the means* of liberalism, e.g. a world-wide political order that corresponds to its beginning from man *as such*, rather than *these men*.<sup>4</sup> But conservatism and liberalism agree on *the end* of our order, say, a “constitution of liberty” (p. 5) or limited government, representative institutions, separation of powers, and a list of basic rights. It follows, I think, that of the two, the conservative is the more complete and mature family member: liberalism stands, as it were, on the single leg of individualism while conservatism nicely supports itself on two legs—individualism and kinship (e.g. p. 14). As Edmund Burke showed, however, the first, purely liberal leg, is dependent on the second (p. 47). Liberalism, therefore, requires conservatism as a correction, while conservatism possesses all the ingredients for a complete modern political order by itself. Add to this its maturity—conservatism plausibly reaches back to the beginnings of political thought with Aristotle while liberal thought is coterminous with its time—and conservatism emerges as the elder brother in all the senses of that word.

I want to make two points on this: firstly, contrary to my conclusion from Scruton’s account that conservatism provides a more complete account of order, in Scruton we get a sense that conservatism cannot stand on its own; that it is *a part*, not *the whole* of order. Certainly, this quality of conservatism is congruent with its self-understanding. “Modern conservatism,” Scruton plausibly tells us, “began life ... as a *qualification* of liberal individualism” (p. 23); it is “a hesitation within liberalism” (p. 33). But then, it is unclear how conservatism can be “about our whole way of being” (p. 6); it is, strictly speaking, not possible *to be* a conservative, for man is a whole, and not a part. In this account, ‘conservative’ is one of the many qualifiers of what a man is; an account made plausible by the well-noted concern among conservatives to make politics only a part—and often not a very important part at that—of their life. In contradistinction to most of his enemies perhaps, the conservative pushes conservative political ideas only prudentially if he even has any inkling of politics at all.

My preliminary conclusion on the completeness of conservatism is further undermined by its re-active, past-gazing, limit-instituting nature. From its beginnings in the

Enlightenment, conservatism has not instituted order; it is meant, rather, either to institute a self-limiting principle to varieties of liberal regimes which, on their own, become “feverish” (Plato 1991, 372e) or to sharpen their self-defense in face of false prophets, e.g. socialism. From a temporal perspective, it constitutes one (past-oriented) of two dimensions of order. Therefore, there can be no conservative regimes but only regimes that have more or less conservative features.

This unpretentious self-understanding of conservatism rubs against the second point which I conclude from the relationship of conservatism to liberalism. The difference between the two, I think, can be re-stated in the following way: conservatism is that sort of liberal order that orders its visible appearances—artifices of human will, e.g. its man-made laws and institutions—in light of the invisible—an instance “independent of human will”, often “extra-human,” e.g. divine law (Freeden 1994, p. 334). Following Scruton, who distinguishes this metaphysical conservatism from empirical conservatism and defends the latter (Scruton 2014a, last chapter), we can call the types of liberal order proper to each *metaphysical* and *empirical liberalism*.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, the two liberalisms *look* the same—they are both committed to the limited government, representative institutions, separation of powers, and a list of basic rights mentioned above. Where they differ, however, is in their *justification*: the one is metaphysically-propped while the other is wholly empirical. Now, although Scruton defends an empirical sort of conservatism, even in the *Invitation* where he does not deal with metaphysical conservatism at all, he designates as the possibly primary contribution of conservatism the insight that “we rational beings need customs and institutions that are founded in something other than reason” (p. 14). The paradigmatic thinker of this conservatism could well be John Locke—rather than a Hume (p. 28) or even a Burke (p. 42)—whose liberalism follows from his theology (e.g. Waldron 2002). Remove God from Locke, and you have something not unlike a Macphersonian justification for capitalist relations of production; a purely empirical, and ultimately inconsistent, liberalism that inevitably degenerates below the most corrupt dreams of any liberal (e.g. Manent 1996, pp. 39-52) as inevitably as the Platonic *kallipolis* (with the caveat, of course, that Plato knows this). As Waldron makes clear, it is our reading of God’s Law—“sufficiently made known to all mankind” (Locke 1997c, p. 304)—that is the condition of possibility of our equality; that denies that we have an absolute freedom even in the state of nature; that enables us to consent to

government and; when government trespasses on that Law, that allows us to overturn it for “The Law of Nature stands as an Eternal Rule to all Men, Legislators as well as others” (Locke 1997a, p. 135). The objective existence of the Law as drawn from its metaphysical source, and the faith of *these* people in it, has assured that the English always came “back again to our old Legislative of King, Lords, and Commons” (Locke 1997a, p. 223). The opposite order of empirical liberalism, which is the order that Scruton shrinks from, may well have its paradigmatic thinker in Thomas Hobbes.<sup>6</sup> Not God, but a “[dictate] of reason” formalistically understood, dictated equality for Hobbes (Hobbes 1988, p. 107). Here men are born free to follow their inclinations and to do whatever is conducive to their preservation; they have no natural obligations because society is derivative. In the former, metaphysical liberalism, men are born in obligation to their idea of God and must act in accordance with His plan; in place of instinctual drives, they have reason—to form an “*idea* of a supreme Being...and the *idea* of our selves, as ... foundations of Our Duty” (Locke 1971, 4.3.18); in place of property to dispose of as they wish, they are His trustees; in place of rights, they have, therefore, first duties and obligations; and, in place of anarchy, they have, always and everywhere, the Law. It seems to me, then, that to the two justifications of liberal order—one empirical and one metaphysical—correspond not two kinds of conservatism, but what we usually understand by liberalism and conservatism simply.

It seems to me that Scruton’s empirical conservatism comes into tension with the sort of metaphysical liberalism that Scruton’s own conservatism wants to support (e.g. Scruton 2014b, p. 176). His account obscures more than reveals the constitutive principle of *this* political order with a meek “something other than reason” (p. 14) or “obligations that are not freely chosen (obligations of piety)” arising out of the home in which we are born. If “this something else” (ibid.), as Scruton puts it, is to do the work, that is, re-institute the self-limiting principle of liberal order, it has to be brought back to the center of gravity of political order as Locke did rather than work negatively as one of the limits of human nature, beyond which the children of Adam—*these* of all beings—ought not to go.

This is not to say that empirical conservatism is practically impossible or undesirable; Scruton’s work, among so many others, testifies to the contrary. But it is to make more of Scruton’s remark that the much-loved institutions of empirical conservatism, like the Anglican Church are in deep trouble. The trick of a healthy, empirical conserva-

tism is like that of the happily married couple that do not examine each other’s flaws too closely, for “[l]ooked at from close to, it is all nonsense, fragments ... about as coherent as the heap of broken crockery that remains after a lifetime of marital quarrels” (Scruton 2014a, p. 179). But, as Scruton well knows, precisely this insistence on looking closely is one of the sins of our times when “institutions, procedures and values ... one by one vanish into air” (p. 1). And, this, not merely in the narrow sense of our own capricious times, but in the larger historical time within which conservatism has unfolded: the era of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, after all, was based on the premise that what the classical tradition held for a cardinal sin—the merger between philosophy and politics, which would mean inevitably the triumph of politics over philosophy—is actually a virtue or, indeed, *the* virtue. In Bartlett’s nice image it undertook to “reconstructing [the Cave of *the Republic* of Plato] such that the sun’s light might penetrate to its every corner” (Bartlett 2001, p. 5). That this proposition has long been recognized to be theoretically erroneous is almost beside the point politically; the merger of philosophizing and politicking has taken place practically and conclusively with the revolutions of the eighteenth century (pp. 58, 72). As their contemporary defense of reason and free inquiry suggests (see chapter 6), empirical conservatives have, however reluctantly, accepted that arrangement.<sup>7</sup> This remaking of the Cave—here by removing its natural ceiling, thereby installing electric lighting, and everywhere by transforming its chains through public education—has made politics primary and architectonic; a complete vision which favors “the advocacy of comprehensive plans” (p. 81). The progressive politics of reason turned out necessarily to be an empirical politics of social engineering without end, swinging widely between self-righteousness and disenchantment; the very opposite of the conservative ‘politics of spirituality’ (p. 121).

But what does this have to do with Scruton’s empirical conservatism? Well, it means for one that now political things must be scrutinized up closely, whether we like it or (like Scruton, e.g. 1993, p. 50) not. Arguments about how things are ‘by nature’ with which this book abounds (ibid.), no longer do the work conservatives want them to. It means that we modern rationalists cannot accept institutions “with no explanation other than [their] own existence” (Scruton 2014a, p. 179); that we are forced to ask that *dreadful* question which separates us from the larger tradition of Western political philosophy: Why should we accept ‘what is,’ simply because it is ‘by nature’? This ques-

tion is necessary in a two-fold sense: (a) in the practical sense that the natural Cave together with its natural prisoners (Scruton's "we"), after all, has already been transformed into a human artifice in the two ways stated at the beginning of this essay, and; (b) in the theoretical sense that the foundations of our order are theoretical and not practical (cf. Manent 1996, p. xv). It is, of course, true, for example, that the idea that political life may be "free from the marks of power and domination, is no more than a delusion" (p. 61). But why should we accept *these* "marks of power and domination" unless their justification is not merely based on kinship and tradition? And why should the authority of English kinship and tradition be acknowledged by those subjects of Her Majesty's Government that have not grown with them, unless they are shown to be just? After all, what is expected of a non-Englishman is a *conversion* from his God to Scruton's; a conversion that surely cannot be carried out through Scruton's God-deprived, cost-benefit calculating, at-arm's-length holding empirical conservatism.

Secondly, it means that the politics of empirical conservatism—a defense of the "collectively inherited good things that we must strive to keep" (Scruton 2014a, p. 6)—is incoherent and untenable. If the conservative knows one thing, it is that virtue cannot be created through ideological exhortation or government fiat. Therefore, a direct, unmediated defense of our—or rather Scruton's—inheritance will do nothing to save it while leaving conservatism unable to grapple with the reasons that those traditions were left behind. And, importantly, the reasons may indeed have been, at times, poor; but together with the reasons go a whole host of feelings, sentiments and experiences that the conservative, by Scruton's own account, cannot simply ignore.

The task that conservatives seem to be facing, then, is not the conservative task of putting a break on the actions of others, but the radical task of instituting a conservative, i.e. metaphysical, liberal order. But clearly, that political task is impossible without monumental intellectual dishonesty after our loss of faith as Scruton notes in the last chapter of *How to be a Conservative*. Has conservatism, then, reached its end-point? Or, how should conservatism appear to us?

## II. CONSERVATISM RE-CONSIDERED

Looking at the conservative trilogy of Roger Scruton, it may be worth asking with Iris Murdoch: "what is he afraid of?" (Murdoch 1985, p. 72). In view of his more political writings, the answer seems clear enough: it is a conservative fear of the disappearance of collectively inherited in-

stitutions. Its causes are also straightforward: the fools, frauds and firebrands of much of contemporary theory, the 68ers, immigration, but also unfettered consumerism, free marketeering and militant globalism. Scruton responds with an empirical, territorial conservatism which directly defends inherited English institutions. Significantly, however, his defense consists of attempting to let them be rather than justifying them. I find this evasiveness appropriate to the task at hand, if in tension with the very empiricism of Scruton's conservatism. I will argue here that the directedness implied by Scruton's empirical conservatism—a defense of *these* institutional achievements, a presentation of *these* conservative ideas—ought to be evaded. My aim is to contribute to an enlarging of the conservative horizon by reconsidering what Scruton's conservatism by virtue of its empiricism tends to obscure: its dependence on far deeper, non-empirical sources (see also Cullen 2016, p. 203).

If Murdoch's question of fear is posed one more time with a view to the entirety of Scruton's work, I tentatively suggest a very Hegelian fear of an unmendable rupture of reality: into subjects and objects, meaning and knowledge, blissful faith and busybody rationalism, where the second of these terms is threatening to overgrow the first. And, if so, this is good. The tensions running through Scruton's thought—his single theory of cognitive dualism, the attack on the empirical perspective on the *Lebenswelt* and the empirical defense of the same, the call to live as if there is a God (O'Hear 2016, p. 51) and the dogged insistence on "honesty" and dispelling "illusions" (e.g. Scruton 2016b, p. 254)—may be thought of as fissures that live in the shadow of that fear. On one side stand the things he can be certain about: science, empirical conservatism and the utility of living as if there is a God. On the other stands his *pharmakon* for that fear; my name for it, perhaps against Scruton, is metaphysics. The remedy is decisive for Scruton himself who does not submit but responds to his fear by philosophizing in the realms of aesthetics, religion etc. Yet, his empirical conservatism, it seems to me, is a submission to this experience of contradiction; a wholly self-contained conservatism of the surface even though the "surface of the world" is what it is by pointing beyond itself (Scruton 2016a, pp. 17-18). But just because we cannot empirically master the depth as Scruton points out, does that mean that we cannot know it? Is there not a whole classic and medieval tradition which affirms the contrary? Is not the task to recover the nature of metaphysics (e.g. Patočka 1989), the rationality of those classic and medieval symbols, and the language—once present, now largely lost—appropriate to

them? And, given the nature of the materials involved, the temporal posture required, and the “unoriginal” nature of the thought it calls forth (Voegelin 1990, p. 122), is this task not simultaneously philosophical and conservative?

It seems to me that although the aim of the *Invitation* is to shed light on the sources of conservatism (p. 2), Scruton’s empirical conservatism resembles liberalism in that both are “constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking” (Taylor 1989, p. 88). The reason is simple: the thing is empirical while its sources are metaphysical. Here is, I think, the ground on which the quarrel between conservatism and liberalism ought to take place. To pursue a thought that is present if not explicit in Scruton, conservatism is precisely that liberalism that is capable of coming clean about its sources. So that we do not think that this is all too highfalutin, from Locke to Tocqueville, from Huxley to Solzhenitsyn, from de Gaulle to Havel and finally to Scruton himself, history is full of figures that have engaged with the sources of their convictions. In this sense, a conservatism that is true to itself dare not be one more *Ideologie der bestehenden Ordnung* (to tweak Meier’s phrase in Meier 2017, p. 7) for the simple reason that the *Ordnung* understands itself as empirical. In the following I will try to sketch something of this larger conservative horizon from an experiential, a historical and finally a political perspective. It seems to me that this project may be more harmonious with the entirety—as opposed to the merely political part—of Scruton’s work. I conclude that conservatism can only engage in an indirect, evasive or qualified defense of political things for they are not the heart of the matter. There is, therefore, a distinction to be drawn between the straightforwardly conservative nature of conservative politics and the radicalism at the heart of conservatism.

Let me begin with the experiential perspective. In his mercifully brief remarks on method, Scruton tells us that ideas are neither self-contained nor by-products of economic forces (p. 9). Instead they arise from “biological, social and political conditions that lie deeper than rational argument” (p. 10). Let me go a step further and suggest, half-tentatively, that they are engendered by experiences of order.<sup>8</sup> And, if it is somewhat true as Scruton, I think, suggests, that conservative ideas are becoming opaque, then we would be well advised to return to their “deeper” engendering source. This is not to say that ideas by themselves are not important, but that they lose their reality unless they arise from and constantly refer back to their engendering experiences.

What, then, is the conservative experience of order? Scruton suggests, quite rightly I think, that it is the experience of *Unverfügbarkeit*.<sup>9</sup> Hard to translate, it refers to the experience of letting what is un-appearing and higher organize and direct what is appearing, multiple and, by itself, chaotic; that the order in which man lives, is not made, but found or gifted; that to live well is to submit to principles higher than man.<sup>10</sup> In other words, that reality has a metaphysical structure. Importantly, Scruton adds that this experience is mediated by appearances alone. Therefore, the job of conservatism—and philosophy and religion too—is to protect these appearances. Hence, his empiricism.

But to protect them as appearances is to illumine how they refer to what is beyond them; to drive a wedge between what they appear to be and what they are: “Surfaces,” says Scruton, “are deep ... the things of the world appear to be objects, but, insofar as they are meaningful, they are not what they appear to be. They are subjects” (Scruton 2014b, p. 113). That requires, I think, speaking about them in some sort of metaphysical vocabulary in order to make present the reality to which they point. As Robert Grant puts it “[s]cience is not hostile to the sacred, merely blind to it, and not out of spiritual tone-deafness, but simply as a precondition of its own particular heuristic” (Grant 2016, p. 61). Therefore, not only is Scruton’s empiricism derivative for the experience itself is the heart of the matter and *it* is of a metaphysical nature, but our talk of the appearances that enable this experience ought not to be merely empirical. The immediate political task of conservatism to defend these appearances is dependent on the broader and deeper task of recovering a metaphysical language appropriate to these experiences of order. Notice, first, that this is a conservative task in the sense that the appropriate languages were once widely available and have now become lost or peripheral. And, secondly, that it is a philosophical task in the sense that what is at stake, in the end, is making sense of our experiences of order.

The conservative experience can be made transparent by religious, philosophical or literary speculation; it is however ubiquitous in those practical experiences of the sacred so beautifully analyzed by Scruton and common to all including, I think, the experience of raising children. As *the* conservative experience of order, it is, as Scruton says of religion, something “to which you are converted, or into which you are born” (Scruton 2014a, p. 174). And since we, children of the Enlightenment, tend to become desensitized to this human experience due to, among other things, our empiricist and contractual language (e.g. Gauthier 1977), it

is one that most of us are converted to, if at all, in our mature age.

This experience is the reason why in practical life conservatives tend to find the sources of order in activities that can be made present or objectified only with difficulty such as “conversation, friendship, sport, poetry and the arts” (pp. 114-15). And it is why in theoretical life they tend to work with resources that are not apparently available within the existing order, e.g. the larger, including pre- or non-Enlightenment, traditions of political philosophy. From the surface of things, of course, this seems to be a deep political disadvantage in an age defined by the attempt, however illusory, to move in the opposite direction. But precisely her experience tells the conservative that the apparent surface is not all there is to the human things.

It is unfortunate, it seems to me, that in Scruton’s world-picture these appearances grow epiphenomenally on the physical world of objects (Scruton 2014b, p. 67); although, to be sure, they are irreducible to it. In this, he is wholly modern; he begins, say, like a Hobbes from the natural reality underlying the world of subjects, rather than a Socrates from the world of opinionated subjects already chock full of transcendentals, or a Heidegger from the meaning of things as they appear to us. And if the empirical is the facts of the matter, it follows that a conservatism that is intellectually honest ought to be empirical. But *the appearance* of conservatism occurs at the moment of recognition that appearances are not simply what they appear to be; that space, time and causality are not what is essential to the world *qua* appearance. Conservatism is an appearance in the world of politics of the experience of the non-apparent nature of that world. *This* is what is of primary and direct concern to it because *this*—rather than the confrontation with some ideology of the moment—is what allows it to be. Conservatism is, therefore, in principle *radical* in its vision, even if, in practice and derivatively, it appears as *conservative* action.

The experience of *Unverfügbarkeit* means that the fundamental stance of conservatism towards reality is one of piety; a virtue well-illustrated in Scruton’s work.<sup>11</sup> This may flip into reactionarism and intransigence, of course, when rival, wholly positivistic interpretations (e.g. socialism) threaten that principle. This intransigence, however, is incidental to conservatism and in contradiction with its ownmost pious nature. For a conservative knows that precisely due to its *Unverfügbarkeit*, policy-making and politicking cannot rationally determine the nature of reality; this, again, is the teaching of the pious Locke (1997b).

From the perspective of its engendering experience, then, conservatism is talk of the sacred—or, of what is other than merely appearing, be it God, Being or *das Unverfügbare*—in the necessarily profane political language of our liberalism. Often that referent is God in which case conservatism is a kind of meta-theology in a political key. That is, from the point of view of appearances it is very much a liberalism dedicated to the ‘constitution of liberty’; an empirical conservatism working to complete really-existing liberalism. From the point of view of its being, however, it is wholly unlike the liberal self-understanding; while liberalism searches for answers to the political problem in institutional arrangements (*there* in the world),<sup>12</sup> conservatism is a “bid for the soul” (p. 121) to which institutional arrangements are only one, very far from perfect means.

This ‘double nature’ of conservatism institutes, firstly, a difference with liberalism and, secondly, a contradiction within conservatism. Regarding the first, if the language of liberalism moves along the plane of the solitary, self-interested individual, owner of one’s body and free to fulfill its inclinations in order to preserve it as comfortably as possible, the language of conservatism moves along the plane of the faithful citizen, bound to God and Fatherland and entrusted by Them to cultivate her heritage in accordance with Their purposes. If the problem of the former is one of rights and particular will, the problem of the latter is one of obligations and general will. If the former thrives on the acquisitive virtues (e.g. hard work and hardnosed self-interest), the latter relies on the generous virtues (e.g. sacrifice and faithfulness) that presuppose the sacred. Finally, if liberalism and socialism, in different ways, merge politics with reason, conservative politics is ‘political spirituality.’ Therefore, their fundamental attitudes vis-à-vis political reality are, wholly opposite to each other, even if, as Scruton points out, the one appears to be a mere ‘correction’ of the other.

Secondly, the two sides of the conservative ‘double nature’ bring conservatism into a two-fold contradiction: in the inner sense, between its (sacred) being and its (profane) language, and in the outer sense with respect to its times. Conservatism is that political movement which, reminiscent of medieval times, can have only a derivative political theory; a great political disadvantage in the age founded by Machiavelli and Hobbes.<sup>13</sup> If its political theory would be primary and architectonic, it would exhaust itself on the surface of things. That is why, perhaps, conservatives often find political language inappropriate to what they want to

say; and they tend to move towards culture, aesthetics, and poetry as Scruton's works show.

The central objects—or, I should say subjects—of Anglo-Saxon conservatism, then, are indeed those that Scruton counts: impartial law, the environment, culture and democratic procedures—“these and many other things” (2014a, p. viii). But these are raised only insofar as they enable *these* peoples better than the alternatives to live what conservatism treasures. Notice that, firstly, once *these* peoples radically change, the objects of conservatism may change as well. And, secondly, that what defines conservatism and distinguishes it from its competitors is not its political stance—that is, its attitude with regard to the objects of order—but its formative relationship through them to what is above, beyond, and ultimately higher than them. When *that* experience goes, the subjects that enabled it wither into objects and are bound to follow.

This raises the question of the second or historical perspective of our conservatism born out of the Enlightenment. To stay with our religious example, if the Enlightenment signaled the prohibition or privatization of faith, conservatism first appeared due to the compulsion of theology to turn to politics: first, in a negative sense, to provide a political defense of the sacred; second, in a positive sense, to restore its formative power in the souls of men; and, third, in a theoretical sense, to provide it with a rational justification. These correspond, roughly, to empirical, religious and philosophical conservatism. If the West as we know it originated when politics called philosophy to account in the trial of Socrates (Meier 2017), it reached its apogee in the Enlightenment when politics called religion before its tribunal. Out of the originary moment political philosophy emerged as a political defense of the philosophical life; out of the culminant moment conservatism emerged as a political defense of the pious life. The two defenses, radically different as they were, had in common a metaphysical view of reality and, consequently, an essentially pious attitude towards the real *tout court*. That is one reason, perhaps, why Plato and Augustine, or Aristotle and Aquinas tend to speak to the conservative in ways that sometimes baffle her adversaries.

Conservatism is, therefore, the achievement of a kind of self-reflexivity by theology in a secular age. It does so by instituting a distance between the theological and the political from which to contemplate and defend the *The Face of God*. And, the other way around, it is a mask that theology can wear when facing the political. That is, even when political struggles between conservatives and liberals or social-

ists intensify to their most extreme, and empirical conservatives engage with their full being in the political, we still do not have conservatism proper. Conservatism achieves its nature in asking the question “Why God?” in the secular context born of the Enlightenment. If conservatism appears (to others) as risk-averse, to be a conservative is to take a double-risk: the personal risk of living the sacred in a secular world, and the political risk of exposing it to profanation. It, therefore, ought to proceed with caution. Conservatism is theology made *politic*.

Accordingly, if the ordering experience of *Unverfügbarkeit* is historically coeval with man—while politics, for example, may be secondary (cf. p. 11)—the conservative experience occurs temporally at a third step, when the claims of the latter profess to exclude the former. Conservatism emerged historically when theology was obliged to defend itself before the tribunal of the political in necessarily political language. Hence, although seemingly not the heart of the matter, the political is historically constitutive of conservatism. But ultimately conservatism cannot allow itself to be defined wholly by one or the other of its two dimensions for then it would no longer be conservatism. That means, it is forced to keep politics open to origins and ends that remain unincorporated in it; and, therefore, to provide it with a positive orientation. In the final analysis, even if conservatism originates temporally in the political turn of theology, conservatism is not theology (first) masquerading as politics (second), but it takes place in the space of the mask; it is, therefore, wholly political.

These considerations bring us to the political perspective of conservatism. To hold true to itself, that is, to be all that it could be, conservatism needs to attend to both—the face and the audience—without *being* either. Conservatism takes place in the interval between the two. Faith, after all, is unworldly; it must address the polis in a language other than that of confession and penitence. Politics, of course, is a worldly art; it does not demand of faith poverty, chastity and ‘purity of heart’. Both religious faith and profane politics understandably see the occupiers of that in-between ground with suspicion as “double-minded” (*dipsychos*, e.g. James 4:8). In other words, political conservatives may form an own group, different from the community of religious believers or secular citizens, which obeys to principles other than those of eternal faith or everyday politics simply.

The task of conservatism, then, is to clear the ground between the two; to wrest that ground from the penumbra—*here* of faith, *there* of politics—and give it a principle of its

own. That task is wholly political for it is dedicated to giving the ground a specific form; a form that depends on the particularities of a place. Hence, political conservatism is not a conservatism that is valid always and everywhere as in the experiential perspective or singular and particular as it emerged in historical time in the Enlightenment. Political conservatism exists in the plural; it is a multiplicity of particular forms that have transpired only in those cases where that *in-between* ground has been successfully wrested. One strategy of ground-clearing may be some sort of refraction of the light of faith into political language under the condition that the new form sublates them both. Something like this may have happened in the case of the American founding. Another may be the “topographical imagination” (Malachuk 2016, p. 8) of concretely imagining the City of God like the American Transcendentalists and especially Thoreau did, at least for a while. A third strategy still may be irony. The strength of irony is its allowance for political indirectness or evasiveness (cf. the irony of Maurice Cowling in p. 134 with Scruton’s honesty in 2016b, p. 254). Irony enables the holding of seemingly incompatible things together because both are necessary and true (Haraway 1991, p. 149). It thus can permit, in principle, the upholding of Scruton’s “obligations of piety” (p. 62), in profane language. To do that, it may address the political with the Socratic irony that does not fully believe what it says to others. But to believe itself, that is, to believe in the very possibility and desirability of the good earthly order as a part of the pious life, it may address itself with the Rortian irony that does not fully believe what it says to itself (Rorty 1989, Part II). And, it must be ironic in the Socratic and Rortian sense simultaneously, about the *topos* of its true interest; a conservative is, of course, both pious and political, but she may not be both at the same time. It is in this fundamental sense that the conservative is a champion of the liberal regime; or, rather, of that kind of liberal regime which intends to protect rather than devalue the sacred by instituting the private/public distinction. Hence the conservative sympathy with the American as opposed to the French Revolution—conservatives may well be revolutionaries, but not of the kind inaugurated on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1789. In the final analysis, our terms do not deceive us: a conservative is not a liberal, but a friend—indeed an ardent friend and ally given the alternatives—of liberalism. His liberal adversaries are therefore right to sense uneasiness; like Hobbes’ seditious individuals who behind the mask of piety “did not challenge the sovereignty in plain terms, and by that name, till they had slain the king” (Hobbes 1969, p. 27), the conserva-

tive is constrained to be a liberal by the historical circumstances; his mind is *elsewhere*.

For Scruton, of course, this *elsewhere* does not exist. Yet his mind is constantly, indeed fundamentally, *there*. This predicament is only partially ameliorated by the fact that we apply transcendental categories “to each other” too and not merely to “items that are not of this world” (Scruton 2016a, p. 27). What an odd name for God who is not an object but a subject, and that kind of oddball subject that is distinct but not separate from us, in us but higher than the things that make us, and yet fully accessible to our reason (Wallace 2016)! The chasm that opens up in Scruton’s dualistic theory cries out for mending. Conservatism properly understood, then, is to engage in the institution of political myths in order to: firstly, *drive a wedge* between the political sphere of objects, literality, and matters of apparent life and death, and the truth; secondly, *convert* its inner opposition into a productive tension; thus, thirdly, allowing for *playfulness* even in matters of seemingly deadly seriousness. In other words, conservatism is constrained to be metaphysical, not empirical.

Of course, public irony may be just one of the devices that allows conservatism not to exhaust itself into combat *on* and *for* the surface—against political correctness, for example—but to hold a footing on what is *other than* surface. Even in Scruton’s account conservatism is allied with philosophy in the theoretical and religion in the practical world if by those terms we understand two activities that deal precisely with what natural science and positivistic political doctrines are blind to. But in this triumvirate, its place is the least certain (while the place of religion as sanctioned talk of the sacred, is the most certain) for, as empirical conservatism, it is constrained to speak about the common things in a language and context that is no longer appropriate to them. Therefore, conservatism may well be lost the moment it puts all its chips on the political table through empirical conservatism.<sup>14</sup> Conservatisms, of course, are bound to endure—witness the ever more farcical recurrence of socialisms in our times. But does conservatism as such have a principled home beyond the accidental “dank and life-infested corner” (p. 138)?

The answer, I think, is a qualified yes. Conservatism can find shelter if it knows how to apply for shared space in the antechamber of philosophy or religion. Having said something about the latter, let me now say a word about the former. The ground that political conservatism seeks to form overlaps with the ground of theory. As already noted, reflexivity is embedded in the originary experience of conser-

vatism. On one hand, if conservatism is to play the mediating role between its two poles, even when it raises properly political questions (e.g. on rights and duties), it is constrained to place these questions in light of the comprehensive questions (e.g. on God, man, world and society). That is, *das Unverfügbare* of this source of conservatism is not the God of the theologians but the Being of the philosophers. Sharply distinguished from objects and goals as they appear in the world of practice, its *topoi* were located from the beginnings of philosophy outside of politics—the ‘political’ is only one of many such historical crystallizations as the mode of organizing those appearances that are related to the *polis* (de Beistegui 1998); the ‘God of the philosophers’ (Scruton 2012a, p. 15) is another. The inner contradiction threatening conservatism disappears here: not only is the object of theoretical speculation wholly *unverfügbar*; but the theorems that it forges in order to understand it are for their own sake, and not for the sake of action (e.g. Oakeshott 2003, p. 33). Therefore, theory can be the (re)discovery of reality as *unverfügbar*; that human beings, contrary to the revolutionary political conclusions of early modern skepticism, are not free to make the order they live in. But, in the final analysis, we ought not to mistake theory for political conservatism; it may be a source, never a kind of conservatism.

It is on these borderlines, between the thing and its sources that the *Invitation* treads. It seems to me, however, that Scruton’s invitation lacks this self-awareness; and this lack transforms the *Great Tradition* from a cue to thinking free from the empiricist straitjacket to a tool in the arsenal of political battle. But the *Tradition* is an unwieldy political tool as its use in the academic culture wars since the sixties demonstrates; its uses lie *elsewhere*. It is the theoretical turn that allows us to see, for example, that the culmination of Aristotle’s moral and *political* philosophy, was not “the mature man” (*spoudaios*)—say, a Scrutonian empirical conservative—but the philosopher of *bios theoretikos* (Aristotle 2004, 10.6-9; 10.7-8)—say, an Oakeshottian of *Experience and its Modes* (1995). He does not, like Scruton’s empirical conservative, seek to know in order to act, but engages in contemplation “for its own sake” (Aristotle 2004, 10.7, 1177b1) wholly free of any (by)products or changes in the external world. There is, therefore, no straight developmental line between the two; a conversion is required to see the superiority of the latter: “[f]or Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, when asked who was happiest said: ‘None of the people you think; he would seem a strange person to you’” (Aristotle 2005, 1.4). This turn of (visible) life towards its (invis-

ible) sources—this *intensification* of life by not submitting to its surface contradictions—with which our *Great Tradition* abounds,<sup>15</sup> goes to the core of conservatism as I see it. Where these reasons drop altogether out of view, a non-contradictory philosophical conservatism is no longer possible.

But, to understand these thinkers in this light is to attempt to understand them as wholes and not as a collection of intellectual weapons in the conservative political arsenal with which the *Invitation* serves us. And it is to take the order to which they were responding as a whole too; that is to say, as *unverfügbar* for, as Scruton makes clear, order has a structure that is simultaneously apparent and inapparent. Together with, say, institutions, ideas belong to its more evident parts. They are *there*, readily available for all to reject and assent; but when uncoupled from the originary experiences that engendered them, theirs is an illusory reality. At the same time, we can point to a myriad of non-apparent constituents of order: the moral sentiments of a David Hume or an Adam Smith (pp. 28, 38), feelings of anxiety, alienation, hopelessness or boisterous enthusiasm of a Rousseau, the movements of the human soul analyzed by a Plato and; the metaphysical symbols (e.g. God, Geist) that lend the inner life its reality and freedom (Wallace 2016). It should be evident that the study of politics cannot be constrained to appearances alone for: first, the two levels may well work against each other, and; secondly and more importantly, the non-apparent dimension is the Aristotelian final cause of order (Scruton 2012a, p. 10). Thus, Scruton’s assertion that ideas “do not arise only from other ideas, and often have roots in biological, social and political conditions that lie deeper than rational argument” (ibid.) goes very deep indeed; far deeper, it seems to me, than he lets on. And it is of central significance, to Scruton’s account (cf. his discussion of Hume and Smith) that the conservative grounds order in its non-apparent dimension.<sup>16</sup>

If conservatism in our time is achieved in a conversion away from the empirical perspective on the world of subjects, then a conservative history of ideas ought to connect them to the deeper reality that engendered them. Afterall, what is at stake for the conservative is not the *outward* relation of ideas to their historical setting (e.g. Skinner 1988), but the changes that occur *in* the human beings that express them. That necessitates taking the ideas not as ideas, but as traces of another reality altogether, that is, as symbols (e.g. Taylor 1989 or Voegelin’s *History of Political Ideas* and subsequent work) And this history—with heroes such

as the ones in the *Invitation* and others—remains to be written.

It may well be that such a history could not function as an *Invitation to the Great Tradition of Conservatism* for it would be, first and foremost, a work of theory. But it would appear to be conservative from the world of practice, which could well satisfy the condition of metaphysical conservatism to have a foot in both camps the better to stay upright.

## NOTES

- 1 This problem is not necessarily a burden for conservatism; as Scruton points out, for example, most conservatives in contemporary Britain have been “immigrant voices” (p. 131).
- 2 It goes without saying that by multiculturalism here is meant something other than the multicultural nature of Enlightenment rationalism (2014a, pp. 79-92).
- 3 But already examined by Rousseau in his imaginative history of civilization as the ever-accelerating, uncontrollable and ultimately unsatisfiable *amour-propre* in the *Second Discourse*.
- 4 See Scruton’s wording on p. 5.
- 5 I use the term “empirical” in order to stay with Scruton’s differentiation between “empirical” and metaphysical conservatism, I think the more appropriate term would be “rationalist” liberalism. But perhaps this use can be partially justified in the foundation of this type of liberalism on the lower goods of the body as opposed to the higher goods of the spirit.
- 6 Only if we accept the conventional, rationalist interpretation of Hobbes. For two non-materialist, non-mechanistic interpretations, see Oakeshott (1991) & Schmitt (1996).
- 7 Recall Michael Oakeshott’s oft-quoted comment on Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*: “A plan to resist all planning maybe better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics” (1991, p. 26). It seems to me that when read independently of Scruton’s larger work, the *Invitation* bears testimony to conservatism’s gradual slide from Oakeshott to Hayek, as one more Enlightenment doctrine derived from abstract principles among others.
- 8 On this point, I rely on Eric Voegelin’s justification for abandoning his standard history of ideas project (e.g. Voegelin 2006, p. 63ff.)
- 9 Scruton suggests “experiences of the sacred.” I prefer the German *Unverfügbarkeit*, because the sacred seems

to imply a specific sub-category (experiences of God, death, art, sex etc.) of *Unverfügbarkeit*. But, importantly, the implication is that they lead us to see reality as a gift. That is, our experience of the whole is of the whole as *unverfügbar*.

- 10 The words are mine, not Scruton’s. But I think they are congruent with his philosophical project “to create the space at the edge of reason, where faith can take root and grow” (Scruton 2014b, p. 192).
- 11 Does this also suggest that Scruton’s *conversio* occurred not in the political moment of May 1968 in Paris as by his own account (Scruton 2005a, p. 3) but, in a philosophical moment, when he ceased being a Kantian with regard to Avicenna and medieval metaphysics (Scruton 2012a, p. 14) or, even more likely, over time as he slowly recovered his faith (Scruton 2005b, p. 221)?
- 12 Contrast Kant’s virtue-free optimism that the political problem “can be solved even by a nation of devils (so long as they possess understanding)” (Kant 1991, p. 112) with Scruton’s virtue-laden, sacral view of human government (Scruton 2014b, p. 176).
- 13 While this may be a political disadvantage, it is not necessarily a philosophical shortcoming. As Eric Voegelin once remarked “[t]he conclusion that the Middle Ages were unpolitical is possible, however, only on the basis of the gratuitous assumption that the ideas of the modern national state hold a monopolistic claim to the term *political*. We might as well turn the tables: we might take the politics of the Middle Ages as the standard and arrive at the conclusion that perhaps our political problems are not quite so important as they seem to us, considering that mankind was able to avoid them for well over a thousand years” (Voegelin 1997, p. 36).
- 14 Recall Hegel’s teaching that religion is safe as long as it refuses to respond to the battle cry of the Enlightenment, for Enlightenment “[fails] to grasp the content of faith” (Hyppolite 1974, p. 431).
- 15 Indeed, if we recall Plato’s parable of the cave (Plato 1991, 514a ff.), it is with such a ‘turning’ that *Great Tradition* began.
- 16 For a better known, though clearly not the only example that explores these suggestions further, see Taylor (1989).

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