



The Conservative Imagination of Roger Scruton

Консервативное воображение Роджера Скрутона

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Аннотация

В середине 70-х британские консерваторы-интеллектуалы пришли к необходимости обновления консервативной идеологии, что представляло собой реакцию на либерализацию консерватизма и господство левых идей в академической среде. Роджер Скрутон был одним из тех, кто поставил своей задачей формулирование консервативной догматики в противовес пренебрежительному отношению консерваторов к идеологии и традиционному для них отказу от теоретизирования. Главная трудность такого начинания заключается в том, что консерватор вынужден провозглашать идеи, которые широкой публикой считаются давно устаревшими. Поэтому Скрутон не только выдвигает и отстаивает определенный набор идей, но и выступает за установку по отношению к реальности в духе философии «как если бы». Ее суть состоит в том, чтобы представлять себе, каково это – вести определенный образ жизни, который в действительности нам сложно повторить, а также чтобы, возможно, проникаться симпатией к этому образу жизни и связанным с ним традициям. Центральным для такой философии является понятие воображения, которое может считаться одним из ключевых для понимания перспектив современного консерватизма, поскольку позволяет лучше понять ресурсы убеждения, имеющиеся в его арсенале. Апелляция к воображению является одним из элементов риторики Скрутона, позволяющим консервативному убеждению быть высказанным, но не противоречить при этом духу консерватизма, всегда недоверчивому к догматике. Автор утверждает, что с точки зрения Скрутона потенциально вредны не артикулированные убеждения, а фантазия, которую Скрутон отличает от воображения.

Ключевые слова: консерватизм, культурный консерватизм, фантазия, воображение, Роджер Скрутон.

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Summary

In the mid-1970s it became clear for conservative intellectuals in Britain that conservatism is in need of renewal, as its ideological counterparts, namely liberalism and leftism, had already provided for themselves their independent credentials, while conservatism tended to be confused with liberalism and, unlike leftism, had little if no appeal in academia. Roger Scruton was one of those intellectuals who has set out to overcome the conservative distaste to ideology and aversion to theorizing, attempting to reformulate the conservative dogma. The main difficulty for his endeavor is that dogma literary understood would necessarily contain ideas widely regarded as being out of day. So what is needed for conservatism today is not only a set of fixed ideas but first and foremost a kind of attitude toward reality which could awake sympathy in us for ways of life that are not and could not be ours. This view of things involves a version of “as if” philosophy, the mainstay of which is the concept of imagination. This concept is of special importance for those who analyze the limits of conservative persuasion today. The author contends that dealing with these limits Scruton makes use of the distinction between fancy and imagination in a way that makes possible for his unusual “work of dogmatics” to fit into the conservative tradition.

Keywords: conservatism, cultural conservatism, fantasy, imagination, Roger Scruton.

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Introduction: the challenge for modern conservatives

Cultural conservatism (one of its key contemporary exponents is Roger Scruton) arose in the late 1970s in response to the morphing of conservatives into liberals and appropriating libertarians in the vein of Hayek, Nozick and Friedman. Leftists pose equally challenging problem insofar as the dead struggle between left and right had already taken the form of cultural wars and being fought primarily over the curriculum. As Scruton himself put it in his most recent book *Conservatism. An invitation to the great tradition* (2018): “In the classroom, at least, it seems possible to win, on the understanding that ideas are respected there” [Scruton 2018, 102]. But how Scruton mean to convince his audiences?

Proponents of cultural conservatism coalesced behind *The Cambridge Review* under the editorship of John Casey (born 1939) during 1975 and then behind *The Salisbury Review* under the founding editor Roger Scruton. At the outset of his career of public intellectual Scruton was one of the key members of the Conservative Philosophy Group (along with Casey, Hugh Fraser and Jonathan Aitken), founded in 1974, whose members were intellectuals close to the Conservative Party. The Salisbury Group of which *The Salisbury Review* was the organ was founded later in 1976 by the 6th Marquess of Salisbury, Robert Salisbury, and named after the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury who had famously declared that good government consisted in doing as little as possible [“About The Salisbury Review,” n.d.]. The preoccupation of the Salisbury Group was with the articulation of a “tradition of social thinking which was much older than the Thatcher revival of the seventies” and dedicated to the supposedly neglected modes of cultural inheritance and system of values. Scruton had been the editor for the first eighteen years, since 1982. Up to that time he had already written a seminal book *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980) (the point of which he developed

in later books such as *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism* (2006), *How to be a Conservative?* (2014) and others).

In *The Meaning of Conservatism* he wrote, “the illusion has arisen that there is no conservative thought, no set of beliefs or principles, <...> which motivates the conservative to act. His action is mere reaction, his policy procrastination, his belief nostalgia” [Scruton 1980, 11]. Thus, he attempts to re-formulate the dogma: “This is a work of dogmatics: it is an attempt to outline a system of belief, without pausing to argue the abstract questions to which that system provides no answer” [Scruton 1980, 11]. Among these principles are, for example, the defense of natural inequality, the idea of society as a kind of organism and of state as a person. However, one cannot but agree that Scruton’s brand of conservatism seems at odds with the distaste toward ideology peculiar to conservatives and conservative skepticism, so typical for conservatives from Hume and Burke onwards. It is debatable how useful they proved in the course of history of Conservative Party. As I.S. Narski put it: “In the person of Hume, it can be said, the psychology of English businessmen of the next century was anticipated. Prudent skepticism, an eye for maneuver and ability to compromise for personal gain, an aim to rise above the fray of two parties and benefit from the weakening of both: these are the characteristics of this psychological type” [Narski 1973, 140]. Although debatable, but it is a fact that such a stance might be effective. Scruton probably recognizes it too, asking in the title of his article, dedicated to Enoch Powell’s speech “Rivers of Blood”: “Should he have spoken?” [Scruton 2006] However, it seems clear that aversion to theorizing and skepticism is not what you need when fighting cultural uncertainty. Moderate skepticism might prove itself useful for not adopting some destructive set of ideas, but not the “bewildered skepticism” from which student may take a leap of faith, which is “always a leap <...>, into the world of free choice and free opinion, in which nothing has authority and nothing is objectively right or wrong” [Scruton 2015]. But in the 1970s it did not seem to Scruton that conservative *ideas* have any influence in the Party and academic world. In his *Gentle Regrets* Scruton tells an anecdote about Harold Macmillan, who during his address to Conservative Philosophy Group ended the speech somewhat unexpectedly:

“It is important to remember... to remember ...” His hand rose a little, shook, and then fell again.

“To remember ... to remember ... I have forgotten what I wanted to say.”
And he promptly sat down.

“‘I have forgotten what I wanted to say,’ is the true contribution of the Tory Party to the understanding of government in our time, and the full explanation of the Party’s success” [Scruton 2005], Scruton concludes.

The need for a right myth

But how conservative *ideas* set forth, in a way, out of the blue, without firm intellectual support, can have any appeal today? What can make them appealing in secular and democratic societies? Similar question was addressed to the cultural conservatives, and to Scruton in particular, already in 1986 on the pages of *British Journal of Political Science*. One author offered a provocative analysis of cultural conservatism, concluding that: “Confronted by the wreck of a culture, by a jumble of institutions and practices without discernible coherence, by hostility or indifferences to religion and spirituality and by the fragmented life of the ‘individual’ wallowing in self-alienation, the victim of every passing fad and fashion, the result could only be to undermine what little the conservative still values instead of helping to preserve it” [Rayner 1986, 472]. However pessimistic this suggestion was, there is a grain of truth in it. Conscious separation of conservative dogma from its philosophical underpinning has proven itself quite dubious an endeavor. For dogma today is rarely taken as something positive along with prejudice, even in Burkean sense. But was there, after all, some room for a philosophical underpinning? In the preface to *The Meaning of Conservatism*, Scruton wrote that despite the aim to provide a ready to use system of beliefs he drawn on the work of political philosophers. To isolate the influence of each the elaborate analysis is needed. But casting aside his dogmatic aiming and references to the great philosophers, Scruton has quite a moderate philosophy of his own which seems to be at one remove from his dogmatics and endeavor in history of ideas. For example, conservatives for him are “people who are aware of the fact that we inherited something good: a social order, a political system, a culture, a legal tradition and they want to hold on to it” [Scruton 2014]. Institutions and practices, which comprise a common culture, convey truths and meanings which cannot be understood as information. They are endowed with emotional content that cannot be recaptured since institutions are lost. In case they lost, the knowledge of “what to feel,”

and, therefore, complexity of human soul are threatened. In conversation with Terry Eagleton Scruton said, “this is one of the important things that has been happening in our time <...> loss of knowledge is not an easy thing to describe but it does happen <...> in science you can put the knowledge in a book and someone will come and refer to it later, and recapture it, but to recapture, for instance, the emotional content of the Shakespeare plays when traditional performance is lost...” [Scruton 2012b]. These thoughts are definitely not those of “pompous jerk” [Honderich, n.d.]. We see that the battlefield of culture wars lies, in the last analysis, within the individual. Moreover, as Scruton wrote in *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands*: “The fact is that we know the solution, and it is not a political one. We must *change our lives*”:

Overcoming temptation is a spiritual task. No political system, no economic order, no dictatorship from above could possibly replace the moral discipline that we each must undergo if we are to live in a world of abundance without putting everything that is most dear to us – love, morality, beauty, God himself – on sale [Scruton 2015].

Despite apparently moralistic overtones it seems to be philosophical mode of argumentation at work here, especially given the related discussion of the three kinds of knowledge: “knowledge that,” “knowledge how” and “knowledge what,” the last being precisely knowledge what to do and what to feel [Scruton 2007]. However, philosophy and dogma are not so easy to reconcile with each other. In *The Meaning of Conservatism* Scruton represents myth as a *sine qua non* of politics, “fighting myth with myth and dogma with dogma” as Jeremy Rayner succinctly put it. From this standpoint, Marx’s inability to provide the concrete description of “full communism” results precisely from his well-known attitude toward myths. So that, Scruton believes that a conservative “might in all conscience seek to propagate the ideology which sustains the social order, whether or not there is a reality that corresponds to it” [Scruton 1980, 139–140]. Through the example of relativism, Rayner expresses conservative position in this way: “relativism may be true but act as if it were not” [Rayner 1986, 473]. This means the following: “Like Plato, a conservative may have to advocate the ‘Noble Lie’” [Scruton 1980, 139]. The citation have been mentioned several times in reviews on Scruton’s work, as being the last evidence of his obscurantism [Galkin & Rakhshmir 1987, 130–132]. But how Scruton proceeds has hardly been mentioned: “As we shall see, there

is a difference in quality between the myths of leisure, and the myths of idleness, and we shall always have reason to prefer the first to the second” [Scruton 1980, 140].

Imagination matters, not creed as such

Hence, is the dogma in fact a noble lie? To answer this question we must define the faculty that allows us to differentiate two kinds of myths and elaborate on its workings. This task involves first to clarify the very nature of Scruton’s “as if.” Being hardline in his dogmatic attitude and defense of myth in *The Meaning of Conservatism* and in his more recent book *Modern Culture* (1998), Scruton gives his ideas rather mild philosophical backing. They are in keeping with a specific contemplative stance, which deserves our attention in the first place.

Scruton concludes *Modern Culture* with the meditation on Confucius, who, as we today, lived “at the end of things,” “witnessing the collapse of moral order, and a loss of piety among the young.” He, according to Scruton, “loved life, was fond of horses and hunting, and was both a practical and a respectable man, distinguished from his contemporaries largely by his propensity both to utter uncomfortable truths, and to live by them” [Scruton 2012a] (description suspiciously resembles Scruton himself, especially taking into consideration his passion for horses and hunting [Scruton 1998]).

Confucius deplored innovation and honored customs, but his “backward-looking philosophy” was not able to make idea of Philosopher King reality and he died “without hope for the future of civilization.” However, “he showed us how to live *as if* it matters eternally what we do” and his philosophy has not gone unnoticed, having become the “official outlook of the greatest Empire” [Scruton 2012a]. We see that pattern of behavior involved is not that of an ardent advocate and not that of a liar, but, on the contrary, of somebody who invite us to think about moral possibilities and act accordingly.

By the time the *Modern Culture* was published, Scruton, as it seems, does not intend to impose belief of any kind. Moreover, he wrote: “We need the Wagnerian ‘as if’; we need the vision of ourselves as ennobled by our aims and passions <...> But we must free ourselves of those last romantic illusions – including the illusion that love is the answer” [Scruton 2012a]. Thus, for Scruton it is not the ability to cling to the dogma that matters but our ability *to imagine*.

To summarize what has been previously said: the skepticism toward ideology, characteristic of the conservative temperament, has become in the 1970s, in Scruton's view, one of the biggest conservative's challenges. To overcome this challenge Scruton set out to provide a conservative dogma which was supposed to be on a par with the principles of liberalism and left. However, while it is necessary for conservatives to ascertain for what they struggle today, dogma for several reasons does not contain the sources for its emotional and intellectual appeal. It is, perhaps, for that reason that Scruton did not rest content with his *The Meaning of Conservatism* but proceed to develop a philosophical backing for the dogma he revealed. One might find contradictions among them, see them as separated or reveal an insincerity of a kind in their simultaneous existence, but my hypothesis is that in the course of time the dogma from Scruton's earlier book has been becoming more and more a part of a larger "as if" view on politics, which, in the last analysis, has moral meaning.

The philosophy of "as if" is not new, having an important antecedent in the works of Hans Vaihinger. In fact, Scruton interprets its main idea in a way that: "We are able, <...> to look on the world as if a certain thought were true, even while keeping open the possibility of its falsehood – as in a hypothesis – or while not fully believing it – as in many aspects of religion – or while not believing it at all, as in a action" [Scruton 2012a]. However, Scruton does not rely on Vaihinger any further, suggesting in a footnote that *The Philosophy of "As if"* "runs many things together and <...> in consequence somewhat less interesting than its title" [Scruton 2012a]. Hence, it is the imaginative essence of "as if" that seems most appealing to Scruton. And it is that imaginative element which should be of special interest to us if we are to settle the question concerning Scruton's "noble lie." His caution against illusion can raise doubts in someone accusing him of lying. "But does he lie to himself?" one may wonder. Is not his "as if" philosophy is a kind of self-deception? The fact is that answer to this question depends largely on the power and subtlety of imagination conservatives possess. In this vein, it is not Vaihinger but another conservative revivalist to whom Scruton is closer in his accent on imagination, namely Russel Kirk.

The idea of imagination among conservatives

Kirk was at the outset of what one researcher called "imaginative turn" in conservative thinking, when several, primarily American

thinkers, “chose to reject many aspects of the modern world while accepting that something was also lost from the past” [Bartee 2014, 327]. But Kirk was the first among them, heavily stressing the idea of conservative imagination. According to S.J. Bartee, the main achievement of conservative imagination was to “create a conservative genealogy that began with English parliamentarian Edmund Burke” [Bartee 2014, ii]. To understand the importance of this endeavor for American conservative it is necessary to take into account what – only three years before the publishing of Kirk’s seminal book *The Conservative Mind* (1953) – literary critic Lionel Trilling wrote: “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” [Trilling 2008, xv]. What is also remarkable is the title of the book *Liberal Imagination* (1950). In the preface to Trilling’s book there is an appeal to those sympathizing with liberalism to follow Mill in praising Coleridge for his poetic sense of “variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty” [Trilling 2008, xix]. However, there is something restraining in Trilling’s approach to imagination, since he, as a literary critic, appropriates label “liberal imagination” to the province of literary creation. The same thing could be said of Philip Thody, the author of *The Conservative Imagination* (1993). Thody’s approach is selective as he chooses for analysis only a particular scope of works, and of the authors that even may not be considered conservative, such as Camus and Orwell. He contends that the conservative view of things is reactionary but cannot rely today on the idea of “hereditary stratification” and religion, while losing at the same time the hostility against liberalism. As a result, the main output of contemporary conservative thinking is fiction, soon becoming out of date. And in the preface we are warned that “*The Conservative Imagination* endorses none of the arguments used by writers such as Coleridge or T.S. Eliot to support the idea of a hierarchical or organic society” [Thody, 1993]. We see that there is no consensus among researchers and even conservatives themselves concerning what is behind the catchy label “conservative imagination.” It can be understood as an attempt to “create” a tradition, or at least fiction that satisfy some ideological criteria of what it is to be a conservative. However, the essence of conservative imagination, if there is such a thing, remains, it seems to me, underdescribed. Kirk, who repeatedly emphasized the role of imagination, gave us not so much guidance as to what it precisely is. Although his famous *The Conservative Mind* (1953) contains the notion of imagination and men-

tions Disraeli and Newman as conservatives “with imagination,” the book does not explicitly say what imagination is not in terms of result but in terms of how it works. Elsewhere, Kirk discusses several types of imagination and “moral imagination” among them. Here Kirk mentions that the phrase itself comes from Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [Kirk 1989]. It means, according to Kirk, that “we understand what we are as human beings only when we have developed the imagination <...> by the moral imagination we see that we are beings made for eternity, living by moral decree of transcendent power” [Kirk 1989]. Hence, Kirk’s moral imagination and Scruton’s “as if” attitude seem quite the same. And, what is more, we see that the elaborating on the imagination is rather immanent (though latent) than invented feature of conservative consciousness. It is for that reason that contemporary researchers cannot dispense with the analysis of Coleridge’s thoughts on the essence of imagination, the origin of his views in the German romanticism and his disagreement with Burke. Paradoxically though it may seem, conservative intellectuals are more apt to be individualistic than their liberal counterparts. Burke like Coleridge, as much later Oakeshott, are their own men, with bright individuality, although capturing the attention of scholars and literary men mainly, not of passionate disciples. Still, the same business of imagination may be discerned among these gentlemen. In this respect, Kirk and Scruton follow their path.

The danger of pseudo-imagination

But with the business of imagination the problem arises, namely that of delusion. Here we come at last to the key challenge to the “imaginative” brand of conservatism. Historically speaking, there might be at least two kinds of groundings for conservative imagination: that of Coleridgean idealism and Burkean empiricism, and whether they coincide is a separate issue. However, the danger of daydreaming is evident. According to Kirk it becomes reality via the two kinds of imagination – idyllic and diabolic [Kirk 1989], both destined to threaten the moral order, filling the world with delusion and evil. The first mode of imagination was defined by American literary critic Irving Babbitt and means a kind of “unrealistic” philosophy or make-believe theory, the example of which he found in Russoism. The second concept of diabolic imagination was developed by T.S. Eliot in his book *After Strange Gods* and means the imagination of an uprooted individual who rejoice evil in his passion with the obscene – the depiction of violence, for instance.

Thus, the Kirk's method of dealing with the problem of delusion is simply to say that the faculty of imagination is threefold and the solution depends on how the three modes are combined within the individual. The same approach we can find in Scruton's late writings, and in *Culture Counts* in particular. But Scruton's approach seems, however, to be more in earnest with the historical tradition of conservative thinking as he draws heavily on S.T. Coleridge's distinction between fancy and imagination. The meaning endowed in this distinction touches not only the realm of morality but epistemology, providing some guidance as to *how* proper imagination should work. The Scruton's interpretation of Coleridge is, in a way, self-describing: "Both fantasy and imagination concern unrealities; but while the unrealities of fantasy penetrate and pollute the world, those of the imagination exist in a world of their own, in which we wander freely and in full knowledge of the really real" [Scruton, 2012].

To know what is really the real means, consequently, to ascertain at least what is presumably not. Thus, Scruton radicalize the rhetoric of conservative imagination, for whom it becomes not only a mean of considering moral possibilities but of understanding the limits of reality. Here is the source of Scruton's criticism toward Kirk:

I would say that his political philosophy, although it does encapsulate some of the most important ideals of conservatism is in the end unrealistic. It does not actually face up to the reality of the modern world, and you cannot base a political philosophy simply upon the rejection of the world around you. <...> I would put much more emphasis on law <...>, and less on the transcendental and religious and metaphysical background. <...> It is only American who could look at England in quite that way because he is looking to England to give an ideal of political and social order with against which to measure the American reality. For an Englishman England cannot be an ideal. It is reality, and so we should be much more realistic, much less nostalgic, much less "golden aged," so to speak, in our approach to England [Scruton 2016].

Hence, if we are to be more realistic, what we need is an "as if" attitude to conservative dogma, encapsulated in a world of its own. It is precisely in such a condition it would be cut loose from emotions and feelings such as nostalgia that makes up conservative romanticism. For no matter how old-fashioned are the ideals Scruton defends; the idea is not for somebody to embrace them at all costs but to conduct an experiment of a kind:

The imagination can show us what it is like to believe some doctrine, and what it is like to follow customs and rituals that may be strange to us and alien; and in doing so it can awaken sympathy for emotions, beliefs and ways of life that are not and could not be ours. But it does not impart these things or impose them as a moral norm [Scruton 2012].

Conclusion

Thus, according to Scruton, there are two forces: one of them – fantasy – is in the end destructive, the other – imagination – is creative. As we know what they are, it is supposed, we are automatically able to discern between utopias, such as communism and conservative romanticism, from the one side, and the true, i.e. conservative, morality – from the other. Thus, we are to fight “myth with myth.” Politically speaking, the rhetoric seems cogent. The difficulty, however, is that it was Coleridge himself, who tended to think that fantasy and imagination are the two forces of *one power* (for further analysis see: [Barfield 2014]).

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