Rationality and Tradition in Roger Scruton’s Thought

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Abstract

Having been brought up in the analytical tradition of philosophy, Roger Scruton was anxious to delineate the philosophical-conceptual foundations of conservatism. This chapter will focus on Scruton’s criticism of enlightened reason as one of the main pillars of a conservative edifice of modern politics.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. First, it recollects a formative episode in Scruton’s life, which led him to distance himself from enlightened rationality. He happened to witness the street violence of May 1968 in Paris, in the heyday of the progressivist ideological breakthrough. Apparently, it was this shocking experience which predestined his turn towards conservatism. For Scruton, this change in his thinking was a rather complex intellectual development, however. Drawing on Burke’s critique of the French revolution, Scruton’s British version of conservatism argues that in the socio-political realm, individual rationality should often yield to manners, custom and traditional institutions. An analysis of Rousseau’s concept of rationality prepares the ground for a discussion of two terms which Scruton frequently uses in his positive account of conservatism. One of these is social knowledge, based on practical wisdom. The other one is his concept of *oikophilia*. The chapter gives a brief account of both of these concepts, the products of his criticism of enlightened rationality. The conclusion consists of two complementary claims. The first is that Scruton was a modernist, who accepted much of the Enlightenment’s teaching. The second is that he was simultaneously an enlightened critic of the Enlightenment, like Burke. Burke, too, thought that enlightened rationality needs a counterpoise, which he found in Burkean traditionalism, in the notion of an inherited stock of social knowledge, and in his defence of *oikophilia* and local patriotism.

Scruton’s disillusionment with Enlightened rationality in 1968

Scruton gives a detailed account of how he turned towards conservatism, in May 1968, in Paris, in an article written for The New Criterion, and published in February 2003, which was republished with minor revisions in his book-length autobiographical recollections, *Gentle Regrets. Thought from a Life.*[[1]](#endnote-1) He was only 24 at the time, and was visiting Paris to learn the ways of the world. What he saw in the Latin Quarter in those days was enough to make him to reconsider his basic political convictions. As a Cambridge-educated intellectual, he was supposed to identify himself with the cause of the left. Yet the vandalism perpetrated by the students of Paris left more than a merely disconcerting impression on him. It revealed a view of the world, dramatized by the improvisations of the demonstrators, which was subversive, inconsistent and aggressive. What he saw was the victory of the revolutionaries: ʻpolicemen injured, cars set alight, slogans chanted, graffiti daubed. The bourgeoisie were on the run…’[[2]](#endnote-2)

To make sense of his personal experiences of street brutality, he was able to draw indirectly on an analysis of the events by Antonin Artaud, the author of the ʻtheatre of cruelty’, whose message was mediated by two personal acquaintances. The proposal of the theatre director was to look at the events as ʻthe artistic transfiguration of…bourgeois life.’[[3]](#endnote-3) His other major source was the famous philosopher of the intellectual opposition, Michel Foucault. His book *Les mots et les choses* was regarded by the revolutionaries as their Bible. [[4]](#endnote-4) Scruton characterised this cult book as ‘an artful book, composed with a satanic mendacity’.[[5]](#endnote-5) He criticised its message as simple rhetoric, with a direct conclusion: ‘Where there is power there is oppression. And where there is oppression there is the right to destroy.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Scruton was not alone in viewing the actions in the streets of Paris as a direct translation of Foucault’s message into action.

However, Scruton still needed to find an appropriate response to Foucault’s subversive message. The primary question he addressed was that of how to distinguish oppression from the use of power. In these years Scruton started to study for the Bar, in order to be able to pursue ‘a career in which realities enjoyed an advantage over utopias’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Although he finished his studies, he did not change career to become a lawyer. An unintended side-effect of those studies was that he found a suitable response to Foucault’s celebrated message. This was the common law of England. ‘The common law of England is proof that… power can exist without oppression…English law, I discovered, is the answer to Foucault.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

It is remarkable that Scruton was indeed able to answer the theoretical question of Foucault, with the help of the living reality of English Common Law, or more exactly, by the implicit logic of it. In the common law of England, neither laws nor particular judgements are based on *a priori* principles. Instead, they are based on principles originating in immemorial customs. What is remarkable about this system is that the unplanned nature of legal evolution ensures that the substance of the law reflects the actual logic of human symbiosis (a term used by Johannes Althusius) in the context of the European engagement with the rule of law. In the Common Law tradition Scruton found the inner logic of a coherent system, which was not built on a kind of premeditated legislation, and which was, therefore, the direct opposite of social engineering. He was also aware of the difference between the framework of the common law and that of the modern Continental legal systems. Both the legal theory of the French Code Napoleon and the principles of the Enlightened Prussian law books were based on what Max Weber calls a rational-legal ethos. The English Common Law, on the other hand, preserved its traditional nature, and with it a legal mindset which is able to uphold social peace and a settled way of life without initiating radical social transformations in the name of progress and Enlightenment.

Once Scruton had found the conservative ideal in the spirit of the common law, his next step was to seek thinkers who shared a view of politics approximating the Common Law model. He soon found one such hero in the person of Edmund Burke, the first and perhaps most characteristically British critic of the French Revolution. Burke famously represented an alternative rationality, in direct contrast with the voluntarist Enlightened social rationality of the French republican tradition, which Scruton had witnessed in the ideology of the revolutionaries of Paris in 1968.

Burke’s criticism of Enlightened rationality

Scruton’s account of Burke is not black and white. It could not be, because Burke’s position itself was not always clear, as his general philosophy largely depended on his current political stance, as his reactions to the changing landscape of contemporary politics demanded reformulations and refinements – or, for that matter, even more radical transformations. Scruton’s attitude to Burke is revealed in two of his descriptions of the conservative thinker, focusing on Burke’s criticism of Enlightened rationalism.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The first of these reconstructions comes from the chapter on Paris in 1968 in Gentle Regrets that was mentioned earlier. Here, Scruton’s sympathy with Burke derives from a shared intellectual interest: that both of them focused not only on political thought but also on the philosophy of art. It is obvious from this that Scruton’s turn towards a conservative political philosophical position had an aesthetic starting point: his dissatisfaction with the recent trends of modernist architecture, including its background intentions of ‘denial of the past, its vandalization of the landscape and townscape, and its attempt to purge the world of history’.[[10]](#endnote-10) He came to realise that, like Burke, he is facing a reality which destroys people’s sense of ‘community, home and settlement’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

It was from Burke’s account of the causes of the French Revolution that Scruton learnt that there is a specific type of rationality behind the subversive ideology of the revolutionaries: ‘he persuaded me that the utopian promises of socialism go hand in hand with a wholly abstract vision of the human mind’.[[12]](#endnote-12) The political application of the French Enlightenment was in fact an exaggerated form of rationality, a ‘rational pursuit of liberty, equality, fraternity’ which turned the social order upside-down for no purpose, rapidly drifting towards a ‘militant irrationality’.[[13]](#endnote-13) This is because this rationality claimed to have collective validity, and the only form of collective rationality which can be executed is in fact war. The twentieth century has indeed proved the risks of warring ideologies, and Paris in ‘68 saw the re-emergence of similar threats as the 1989 outbreak of collective violence.

According to Scruton, Burke’s response to this form of militant rationality was a ‘subtle defence of tradition, prejudice and custom against the enlightened plans of the reformers.’[[14]](#endnote-14) Scruton’s own approach to the notion of political preservation was once again via art and in particular, via literature. He refers to Eliot’s famous essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, which is especially significant for him as a devoted admirer of Eliot’s own modern art. For Scruton, Eliot’s essay is about adaptation in order to preserve; an idea which is important for Scruton both in art – where much of his interest lies in the classics – and in politics. As he understands it, conservative politics is concerned with adaptation to the moment, in order to preserve the best of the past. As Eliot’s brand of poetic modernism was not a denial of the past, but rather a continuum with it, updating the classical idiom to fit a new environment. The survival of tradition depends on the authority of prejudices and the exercise of customs – all of which seemed irrational to the Enlightened thinkers, who threw them out from their conceptual repertoire. Instead, the ‘abstract rational systems of the philosophers’ were forced on society, causing tremendous calamities and political cataclysms.

The reference to Eliot’s essay also shows that Scruton is not a traditionalist in the strong sense of the word. He is fully engaged with the contemporary world and does not deny the real advantages it offers. Moreover, his reading of Burke does not present the Irish author as a simple nostalgic thinker who could not accommodate himself to the modern conditions of politics. In the third essay of his book on Modern Culture, which deals with the Enlightenment, and which takes its motto from a poem by British poet Philip Larkin, *Church going*, he returns to a description of Burke.[[15]](#endnote-15) Here, too, Scruton presents Burke’s argument as ‘a sustained defence of “prejudice”’ against the ‘reason’ of Enlightenment thinking.[[16]](#endnote-16) Yet he is also clear that there is a modern component in Burke’s thought. In Scruton’s interpretation, the Irish critic of French revolutionary manners turns out to be an enlightened person himself: ‘Only an enlightened person could think as Burke did’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Scruton’s point is that both prejudice and tradition are subject to a paradox: once you recognise either of them as part of your own package, you are not part of them. And that is exactly what Burke did, and what makes him a conservative. There is no conservatism in the context of a living, and therefore unreflected practice of prejudice and tradition. Scruton lists Burke among the internal adversaries of the Enlightenment – he is one of the enlightened critics of Enlightenment rationality. In this respect he is comparable with, and has indeed been compared to the mostly German critics of the mostly French Enlightenment, who were fully aware of the losses which would result from the triumph of the Enlightenment over ‘inherited attachments’.[[18]](#endnote-18) The comparison of Burke with Herder is not obviously true nor convincing as a general claim. The comparison holds, however, according to Scruton, as far as their views in defence of local customs were concerned.

Interestingly, he finds that this internal schism in his relationship to the Enlightenment actually strengthens Burke’s position, and defends his notion of rationality against the instrumental rationality of the universalist trend within the Enlightenment. While Scruton was not against Kantian rationalism, and described the Enlightenment as identifiable by ‘a respect for reason’, he joined Herder in lamenting the loss of those values which seem to be ‘most precious in the human soul – namely, the local, the loyal and the rooted.’[[19]](#endnote-19)

In short, Scruton’s elaborate view of Burke and the Enlightenment is rather a complex one. It is based on his critical stance about the potential of the sciences to make sense of the human condition. As he saw it, the Enlightenment identified itself with the rise of modern science, as exemplified by the oeuvre of Kant. The progress of science made it possible to focus on individual liberty, but the social and political program initiated by that negative concept of freedom led to the destruction of established authority and a growing scepticism about divine command. Eighteenth century German culture produced an alternative to the Enlightenment as established in France and embodied by the thought of Kant – this is what Scruton calls Herder’s advocacy of ‘culture’ against ‘civilisation’. This challenge offered a different perspective on human nature. For Kant, who was the epitome of the enlightened trust of modern science, the distinctive feature of the human being was reflexivity or rationality: the capacity to produce a verified account of the external world, and of the place of the human being in it. However, the human condition is more than the result of causally necessary external events. In his moral philosophy, Kant stressed that human beings are also agents with a free will, who are capable of sustaining their own realm of subjectivity. To produce a full description of the human agent, one also needs to be able to hint at the internal dimension of human consciousness. Scruton reconstructs the genealogy, or intellectual history, of the subjective aspect of human consciousness. This originated from Vico, the Italian professor of rhetoric, and led through Schleiermacher, the romantic theologian, to Wilhelm Dilthey, a thinker on scientific method and historical understanding. Vico’s New Science had hinted at a separate, specific form of understanding, concerned with the humanities and poetry, in contrast with the Cartesian account of rationality. Schleiermacher pushed forward this idea, arguing for a specific way of understanding, called hermeneutics, a way of thought adapted to the nature of human actions and human reflection. Finally, Dilthey elaborated a whole theory of the specific way of understanding characteristic of human societies, which he called ‘*Verstehen*’ (understanding, interpretation), a term he used as a counterpart of ‘*Erklären*’ (explanation), the particular form of knowledge which results from the investigation of science. While science focused on the individual being, both the hermeneutic approach and Dilthey’s *Verstehen* give an account of the human being in constant interaction with others. This is why this kind of understanding can paint a more reliable picture of the role played in our life by ‘institutions, customs, laws and culture’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Applying Dilthey’s understanding, a conservative approach to the social world seems to be more promising than the revolutionary fervour inspired by Kantian and French enlightened rationality.

This hermeneutic approach to the human phenomenon, initiated by Schleiermacher, may be seen as a reaction to the exaggerated hopes of enlightened reason. Yet Scruton is careful to distinguish the sort of criticism formulated in the German philosophical tradition from the Marxist criticism of an acclaimed bourgeois ideology, which is claimed to bear the mask of culture, but which is much more about the use of power against the masses. Scruton is ready to admit, in fact proudly claims, that the Enlightenment is part of our own self-consciousness, today, in the West. However, its achievements, of which a focus on the liberty of the individual is certainly crucial, clearly also have disadvantageous consequences. In order to reveal the unalienable rights of the individual, the Enlightenment succeeded in cutting some of the major links which connect the individual to society. It was on this basis that the Enlightenment was from the very beginning criticised from the inside of the movement. Vico is just one such critic, while Rousseau voiced similar concerns. Burke, too, in a similar vein to the German thinkers from Schleiermacher to Dilthey, was inspired by this very enlightened criticism of what came to be known as methodological individualism, which was characteristic of the liberal heritage of enlightened thought. This criticism emphasized the social-political relevance of the community in human life. Communities cannot be sustained on the principles of the social contract and on the assumptions of instrumental rationalism. The hero of enlightened individualism is lost in loneliness, ‘a stranger among strangers’.[[21]](#endnote-21) The cause of this isolation is that the tradition of the community has been eroded by the power of individual rationality. ‘Communities depend upon the force which Burke called prejudice; they are essentially local, bound to a place, a history, a language and a common culture.’[[22]](#endnote-22) As such, they need protection from the challenge of the universal appeal of enlightened rationalism.

Scruton’s criticism of Rousseau and liberalism

In one of his most important articles, Scruton focuses on the relationship between the rationally defined individual and the community he has abandoned, as embodied by Rousseau. Scruton explores the foundation of liberalism in this article in the context of a philosophical criticism of the social ideas of the French enlightened thinker.[[23]](#endnote-23) Scruton’s biting criticism identified the subversive theories of Rousseau as part of the Enlightenment’s overall attack on society. This war against society was waged in the name of “nature”. Of course, it is possible to frame nature and society as polar opposites. Yet this is only possible if society is viewed with the eye of the social constructivist, who is proud enough to suppose that he (usually they were males) is able to rearrange society so as to better fit our concept of nature. Holding society up to the standards of our *a priori*, or science-based concept of nature in this way is analogous with social constructivism. This is of course, a later term, but it more or less covers the mindset of Rousseau and the active practice of the French revolutionaries. Both the philosopher and the revolutionary felt authorised to encroach on the affairs of society, in order to achieve a better harmony between it and their own concept of nature. This happened because French intellectuals found their societies lacked certain features which they deemed to be essential. Certainly, those societies had serious flaws, and just as surely the intellectuals advanced strong arguments against those flaws. Moreover, they were subjected to political persecution for their unorthodox views – indeed, Rousseau, was also a target of Versailles. The Enlightenment created the modern republic of letters as a rebellion against the then accepted opinion, in the name of reason. Rousseau was at the centre of this newly conceived circle of French intellectuals, and he was even more radical than most of the others. He could not tolerate the intolerance of the regime that he lived under. His criticism came close to a direct attack on society, or at least on ‘the inherited forms of social knowledge’.[[24]](#endnote-24) As a philosopher, he mobilised his creative rational genius to destroy the forms of traditional institutionalised knowledge within his urban (Genevan) and national (French) community.

Scruton, on the other hand, wanted to preserve the ‘inherited forms of social knowledge’ in his society. Both common law and British parliamentary procedures were, of course, part of the traditional political and legal culture of his home country, Britain. Studying the existing discourse of law were to be crucial for him. Later he added to that background knowledge a systematic investigation of British parliamentary procedures. The two together represent the foundations of British liberty: ‘I remain convinced that the core of our political inheritance, which is the common law and the culture of compromise that grows from it, retains its ancient sovereignty over both the government and the feelings of the English-speaking people…’.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Clearly, the British system was different from the French one – yet Scruton seems to share Burke’s conviction that the subversion of the inherited institutions and procedures was also counter-productive and irrational in France. Burke was not able to convince Rousseau about this, partly because the French thinker died too early for that.[[26]](#endnote-26) But partly, also, because Rousseau proved to be the paradigm of the progressive public intellectual, who is much better at criticising than at defending existing values. Scruton points out that Rousseau’s refined sense of paradox made him ideally suited for questioning existing states of affairs, and that as a philosopher he did not appreciate prejudice, which is a prerequisite for protecting existing things.[[27]](#endnote-27) He makes use of the two concepts as catchwords for two different ways of thinking, or in fact two different forms of rationality: ‘Paradox is the mark of *a priori* thinking—thinking from first principles in a situation where human nature has been encrusted by custom and habit.’ On the other hand, accepting prejudice is the prerequisite of conservatism. Instead of preserving the existing social frameworks, Rousseau preferred to measure them against *a priori* standards. While he had no opportunity to test his own theories against the standards of peaceful social coexistence, Burke and Scruton both saw how Robespierre and his comrades translated the bright logical paradoxes of the philosophers into bloody deeds of social unrest, massacre and bloodshed.

In his interpretation of the outbreak of the French Revolution, Burke was applying the defining early-modern British experience of civil war and bloodshed, caused by religious zeal and an uncontrolled outburst of religious enthusiasm.. He was not alone in suspecting that Rousseau’s radical thought lay behind the acts of the revolutionaries. Scruton calls the fervour of the avant-garde of the revolution a ‘quasi-religious quest’, a search for the perfect social arrangement, ‘a God’s-eye view of all our brief arrangements’.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Hume wrote that the Enlightenment struggled against the dual enemies of superstition and enthusiasm.[[29]](#endnote-29) Similarly, Scruton describes ‘a holy war waged against superstition in the name of God’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Interestingly, Hume certainly did not become a devoted believer in a fight against superstition, and he did not want to get rid of customs and habits at any cost. Instead, Hume adopted a sceptical position towards the search for perfection in politics. Scruton, too, always remained sceptical about political redemption. He started out from the assumption of the fallen nature of humanity, and in particular, of the human individual. He also rejected the idea of a social contract, which played such a major role in the work of Rousseau. Burke shared Hume’s doubts about the possibility of a social contract, as did Scruton himself. His basic conservative assumption was that human beings remain inherently fallible, and modernity is no exception to this rule. This is what justifies all efforts to fight superstition, while for him custom itself should not be seen as part and parcel of the package of enthusiasm and superstition to be overcome. Instead, custom is, in fact, the remedy against misguided actions. It is through custom that individuals can partake of the wisdom of their community. Such scepticism can take different forms, however. Hume’s scepticism determines his more detached attitude towards political matters – which made him an unbiased critic of the follies of Whig and Tory alike. Hume’s scepticism also distances him from religious phenomenon: he finds religious piety too close to superstition and enthusiasm. Scruton, on the other hand, seems to draw a different lesson from his scepticism. Recognising human frailty can shed light on why a pious attitude to the world and God might be well-founded. ‘Piety is not confined to the temple and the altar. It is an attitude to life, based in a recognition of our frailty and a respect for the dead.’[[31]](#endnote-31) Scruton is especially keen to show that piety, the key virtue in a sense of religion, leads the individual not only closer to God, but also closer to his community. It is the Roman concept of *pietas* which recurs in his claim that through piety we can reconfirm our respect for the dead. In this respect he refers back to Cicero’s idea of *pietas*: ‘religion is the term applied to the fear (*metus*) and worship (*caerimonia*) of the gods. *Pietas* warns us to keep our obligations to our country or parents or other kin.’[[32]](#endnote-32) He also, of course, cites Burke’s famous account of an extended social contract, or rather a covenant among the different generations of our community: ‘Society, Burke pointed out, is an open-ended partnership (he even said “contract”) between generations. The dead and the unborn are as much members of society as the living.’[[33]](#endnote-33) Scruton recalls Burke’s legal notion of trusteeship as an explanatory vehicle to show how societies can survive so long: you can rely on the achievements of the preceding generations, but you also have an obligation to take care of this heritage and preserve it for the next generations which come after you.

Piety as respect for the dead and vigilance about preserving those customs which are crucial for one’s community are two of the most crucial concepts for explaining the long-term success of communities, according to the lessons Scruton draws from a criticism of Rousseau and an appreciation of Burke. Mainstream liberalism cannot stand the test of these two concepts – since the root assumption of that ideology is that ‘we can jettison all institutions, traditions, and conventions and decide how to make them anew’.[[34]](#endnote-34) Such blind trust in individual, instrumental human rationality reaches a kind of hubris according to Scruton, and misunderstands the mechanism of society, in which individual habits add up to social customs, which are much harder to change than enlightened intellectuals might have expected. Moreover, the destruction of institutions can lead to the malfunctioning of the political sphere, endangering the everyday life of the masses, as happened in the French revolution after 1789, and in the Paris revolts of 1968.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that when Scruton explains the mechanism of the indirect knowledge which characterises the market or the law, his references are to classical liberals, or liberal-conservatives. He refers to the Austrian economists, e.g. Ludwig von Mises, and their criticism of the centralised economic model of socialism, to Oakeshott’s attack on rationalism in politics, and to von Hayek’s discussion of the social knowledge embedded in the theory and practice of the law. He draws on a tradition of old-school liberalism, which is quite easy to reconcile with social conservatism, and the logic of the rule of law and a market economy plays a crucial role in that tradition.

Embodied Social Knowledge

It is from this tradition of Austro-British liberal conservatism that Scruton drew on when he developed his own notion of social knowledge. This section will attempt to demonstrate that Scruton advanced a powerful positive argument about the form of knowledge that he associates with conservatism, which goes well beyond a criticism of socialist *dirigisme*, or the individualism of liberal thinking.

Scruton defines the term social knowledge as follows: ‘By social knowledge, I mean the kind of knowledge embodied in the common law, in parliamentary procedures, in manners, costume, social convention, and, also, in morality.’[[35]](#endnote-35) He thus regards social knowledge as embodied knowledge – a term which is used frequently in recent trends of epistemology.[[36]](#endnote-36) Scruton is aware of the French phenomenological school of the recent past, and in particular of Merleau-Ponty, who played a major role in developing this concept.[[37]](#endnote-37) He was also aware of the French philosophical preoccupation with the concept of the ‘other’, which exercised French thinkers from Sartre to Levinas. This interest was to a large extent due to the indirect influence of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which was brought to Paris by Alexandre Kojève in a lecture series between 1933 and 1939. Hegel also played a major role in the birth of Scruton’s concept of social knowledge. Yet I am inclined to think that his reading of Hegel was only helpful in making explicit a practice he was already familiar with by the time he started to study Hegel in a systematic manner. It seems more likely that his own tradition, the common law of England, and the convention-based parliamentary procedures of the British Parliament must have played more important role in his thinking. Scruton had a lifelong interest in the history and political arrangements of Britain, and in particular, of England, as illustrated in his books on the nation, on England and on settling.[[38]](#endnote-38) When Scruton writes about embodied knowledge, he is certainly referring to the knowledge accumulated within a particular society. This sort of knowledge has never been made explicit with the help of a strictly defined symbolic language, as in the natural sciences or in mathematics. Instead, this knowledge dwells in the attitudes of the people, in their interactions with each other, and generally, in the relational patterns of a field of practice.

Embodied is not the only adjective Scruton uses to define the social knowledge he has in mind. He also adds that the practices associated with it are ‘inherited forms of social knowledge’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Inheritance in this case means that these institutionalised practices come from the past, and therefore they can be seen as long-term forms of accumulated knowledge. Scruton is careful to note, however, that this epistemological accumulation differs from the way money or scientific knowledge is accumulated. Conceptual knowledge can be encapsulated in texts on screen or in printed books. Social knowledge, on the other hand, exists only in and through its repeated exercise: ‘it is social, tacit, practical, and can never be captured in a formula or plan.’[[40]](#endnote-40) Once again, it is worth focusing on the adjectives: social knowledge is tacit and practical. I would argue that the term tacit in Scruton’s description refers to the famous work by Michael Polányi, entitled *Tacit Knowledge*.[[41]](#endnote-41) This then raises the question of the source of his term practical. I have two suggestions. Either Scruton is referring to Michael Oakeshott or to Aristotle (or perhaps to both). Oakeshott, who distinguished practical knowledge from technical knowledge, defined the first in the following way: ‘it exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules.’[[42]](#endnote-42) Obviously this is something quite close to what Scruton identifies as social knowledge – especially if we take into account that Oakeshott suggested also calling practical knowledge traditional knowledge. He uses the example of cookery, claiming that the art of good cooking cannot be learnt only from books. The student of cookery also has to learn by imitating those who have already acquired the art of cooking. Yet Oakeshott certainly does not limit the relevance of the term to cookery. He also claims: ‘what is true of cookery, of painting, of natural science and religion, is no less true of politics’, referring to what Pericles spoke of in the funeral oration written by Thucydides. According to Scruton it addressed the issue of ‘the value of practical and traditional knowledge’ as its main theme.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Oakeshott’s understanding of practical knowledge is quite close, in fact, to Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*, often translated as practical knowledge or practical wisdom. Aristotle describes the practically wise person as one who has the ability ‘to deliberate correctly about what is good and advantageous for himself… /and/ about what sorts of things further living well as a whole.’[[44]](#endnote-44) It is deliberation and judgement which defines for him practical wisdom, and his description takes into account human imperfection. Aristotle’s examples include Phidias, and Polyclitus, two sculptors, both of whom famously embodied the best virtues of their craft. He also cites Pericles as an example of the practically wise statesman, who has ‘a theoretical grasp on what is good for themselves and for human beings’.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Scruton again quotes Burke, who famously criticised those who rely ‘on their own private stock of reason’, instead of harnessing ‘the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.’[[46]](#endnote-46) Even though Scruton also criticised Burke, as noted above, for his wrong formulation of accumulation, his main point is that social knowledge is, by definition, more reliable than a private stock of reason, when it comes to social matters. This point is crucial in his criticism of liberalism. As Scruton points out, the liberal approach is rooted in the Lockean-Cartesian-Kantian trust in individual human rationality, a self-confidence which is not shared by Scruton. As he understands it, liberalism ‘implies that we can make rational choices, knowing what to do and how to do it, without the benefit of social knowledge—in other words, without the hard-earned legacy of consensual solutions.’[[47]](#endnote-47) It is next worth examining this notion of a ‘hard-earned legacy of consensual solutions’.

The rationale of *oikophilia*

It was in Scruton’s book on Green Philosophy that he worked out a fully-fledged version of his philosophy of *oikophilia*.[[48]](#endnote-48) This book is based on a contrast between social engineering with central control and a policy based on local affections, resulting in *homeostasis* and resilience.[[49]](#endnote-49) The philosophical argument in favour of the latter perspective centres on the nature of practical reasoning. To show the relevance of preserving the local customs Scruton once again refers to ‘common-law rights – notably rights of way, green lanes and rights of commons –ʼ in order to show that through such customary conventions common law ‘ensured that the countryside remained open’, and thus the owners’ self-interest ‘did not undermine the experience of collective settlement’.[[50]](#endnote-50) Further examples he gives include a narrative of civil society initiatives to preserve the landscape of the countryside, as well as the townscapes and city centres of ancient towns. According to Scruton, much of that effort was based on a common-sense aesthetical preference for the old-fashioned, instead of the rigid functionality of the modern. An example of that preference can be found in G. M. Trevelyan’s book *Must England’s Beauty Perish*? published in 1926, which decried urban sprawl and the destruction caused by road constructions. A further reference point for Scruton was the architect Clough Williams-Ellis, who in his book *England and the Octopus*, drew attention to the dangers of modern urban developments. All these individual efforts, taken together, influenced a majority to vote in Parliament for the Town and Country Planning Act after the Second World War, ‘establishing Green Belts… and laying down nationwide constraints on building in rural areas’.[[51]](#endnote-51) This law helped to preserve historic town centres around Britain.

Scruton also compares two rather different initiatives which led to the establishment of new settlements: Milton Keynes, from 1967 and Poundbury, from 1993. He claims that Milton Keynes, a government investment, followed the paradigm of the sprawl, and turned out to be a negative example, spreading ‘over eighty-eight square miles of aesthetic pollution’, causing ‘an ecological disaster of the first order, and a monument to state planning’.[[52]](#endnote-52) His counter-example is Poundbury, initiated not by the government, but by a cooperation between an architect and the Prince of Wales, and characterised as ‘small, compact, with a centripetal plan that leaves each landowner free to build within aesthetic side-constraints’.[[53]](#endnote-53)

By themselves, all of these examples are no more than historical precursors, precedents, or empirical data. The philosophical explanation is yet to come. Why should a policy based on local attachments be more promising than a rationally planned economy, based on the central control of local developments? Scruton addresses this issue in a philosophical chapter, addressing beauty, piety and desecration. His focus on aesthetic value might seem to be a subjective choice, explained by his own taste. However, his proposal to take aesthetic judgement as a model for a resource of inherited social knowledge is based on the assumption of the existence of something like a common standard of taste, which enjoys priority over individual aesthetic preferences. Scruton takes the example of the traditional European city. The key to its sustainability, the fact that it serves as a renewable habitat, is due to it being an example of what happens ‘when people are guided by a shared tradition that makes aesthetic judgement central, and which lays down standards that constrain what everybody does’.[[54]](#endnote-54) The point he is trying to make is that if aesthetic choice is an expression of, or at least is in harmony with a common standard, based on inherited social knowledge, it can lead to decisions that benefit the long term survival of the local community. Or to put it in another way: inherited social knowledge helps us to make common aesthetic judgements, which will help to preserve the local natural or built environment. Manners, or local customs, are continuous with aesthetic choices, and they can serve as a guide even in correcting a tradition from the inside. Both beauty and local manners are helpful as coordinating devices, ‘whereby individuals can adjust to each other and live on terms’.[[55]](#endnote-55) Put another way, aesthetic choice serves as an invisible hand which arranges human relationships instead of the use of power by a central authority.

Conclusions

Scruton lost his illusions about enlightened rationality as a young man in 1968 in Paris. He argued in his philosophy for inherited and embodied social knowledge and local attachments, based on established, common aesthetic judgements and local manners, as a conservative alternative to the enlightened ideal of individual, instrumental rationality advocated by thinkers like Rousseau or Kant. Scruton does not make a devastating critique of Kant. Instead, his main target was Rousseau, whom he identifies as a forerunner of not only the French Revolution, but also of liberalism, and its latter- day perversion in the aggressive ideology of the Paris of 1968. While Rousseau tried to build his social and moral philosophy on the concept of the social contract, Scruton’s rests on inherited, embodied forms of social knowledge. In pursuing this ideal he regards himself as the follower of Burke, whom he regards as an enlightened critic of enlightened rationality. The final section of this paper argued that Scruton’s concept of *oikophilia*, the love of the local environment, is an alternative form of communal rationality, and as such much more viable than the artificial social planning of central state or party authorities, or global capitalist investments.

Notes

1. Roger Scruton, “Why I became a Conservative,” *The New Criterion*, February, 2003., available at: <https://newcriterion.com/issues/2003/2/why-i-became-a-conservative>

   Slightly revised version: Roger Scruton, “How I became a Conservative,” in Scruton, *Gentle Regrets. Thoughts from a Life* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 33–56. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Scruton, *Gentle Regrets*, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) Translated into English as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1970). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Scruton, *Gentle Regrets*, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For the present author’s account of the same topic see: [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Scruton, *Gentle Regrets*, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Roger Scruton, “Enlightenment,” in: *Modern Culture* (London and New York: Continuum, 1998/2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Scruton, “Rousseau & the origins of liberalism,” *The New Criterion*, 1998. Republished in *The Roger Scruton Reader*, compiled by Mark Dooley (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 43–55. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Scruton, *Rousseau*, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Scruton, *Philosophy and Public Culture*. A public lecture at Princeton University, April 3., 2017. Available at: <https://www.roger-scruton.com/archive/lectures-speeches/usa/439-philosophy-and-the-public-culture-a-public-lecture-at-princeton-university-april-17> [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Even Hume, who was an exact contemporary of Rousseau, and who did his best to offer him an asylum from the vexations of the French king in Britain, was not able to convince Rousseau of the utility of well functioning tradition-based institutions. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Scruton quotes Rousseau from Émile: ʻJ’aime mieux être homme à paradoxes qu’homme à préjugés.ʼ Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. David Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” in Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985, 1987), 73–79. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cicero, Cic.Inv. Rhet. 2. 66. Quoted in Oxford Classical Dictionary, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-5079> [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Lawrence Shapiro and Shannon Spaulding, “Embodied Cognition,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2021 Edition, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/embodied-cognition/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. This is how Scruton describes Merleau-Ponty’s take on the concept of embodied knowledge: “For Merleau-Ponty the Other is both outside me and within, revealed in the phenomenology of my own embodiment.” Roger Scruton, *Confessions of a Sceptical Francophile*, available at: <https://www.roger-scruton.com/articles/284-confessions-of-a-sceptical-francophile> [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Roger Scruton, *The Need for Nations* (London: Civitas Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2004); Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000); Roger Scruton, *News from Somewhere. On Settling* (London and New York, Continuum, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 5–43, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid, 13, n. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. See VI.5-13. in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publising, 2014), 1140a25–1145a15. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Scruton, *Rousseau*. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy, How to Think Seriously about the Planet* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Scruton, *Green Philosophy*, 325. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid, 334. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid, 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid, 347. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid, 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid, 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)