The Soul of the World – Roger Scruton

Roger Scruton’s *The Soul of the World* is essentially a quest for a sacred, transcendental source of meaning and order for the physical universe that stands beyond it. At the core of the book is the distinction between the subject and the object. The former makes sense of the world in a completely different way from the latter although it is built on (in Scruton’s parlance, *emerges* from) it. Scruton leads us from the subject as we each experience it in ourselves, the human *person*, through to what he hopes is a single, Creator Subject we can relate to (and indeed love) in the divine perspective.

**The Good**

Curtailing Evolutionary Explanations

To start off with, Scruton makes a valid argument against the modern tendency to explain everything in terms of evolutionary biology. His argument centres on the fact that evolutionary explanations don’t take into consideration our thoughts about things (what he calls their ‘aboutness’) but our thoughts and opinions are pivotally important in determining what (and more importantly ‘why’) we do what we do. In short, evolutionary explanations fail to factor the self-reflective mind into their calculations and as such, can never provide a full and complete explanation.

Subject vs. Object

Scruton identifies two separate perspectives the self-conscious being can approach the world from; as object and as subject. The first is the purview of *science* and deals with *explanations* in terms of *cause and effect*. The second involves the world seen from a *first person perspective* and seeks to *understand* based on *reasons* (be careful, not ‘reason’).

The world encountered as an object is reducible to the *order of nature*; to describe the world encountered as a subject, Scruton resurrects a Husserlian term, the *Lebenswelt*. The latter demands an *interpretation* rather than an explanation and looks not to answer *what?*, but to answer *why?* This will make more sense if we look at specific applications of this distinction.

*Persons*

Scruton’s first port of call where he applies this framework is the individual human being. The human, as an object, is a physical organism; but as a subject, is a *person*. To be a person is to look at the world in a different way from a physical organism. This difference lies in our capacity for *first person awareness*. We are aware of the world but we are also aware of ourselves in that world in a way that no other animal on the planet is.

Scruton is perfectly clear that the human is a physical organism first and then a person on top of that, i.e. personhood is *emergent* from the physical. Another way to say this is that the physical is ontologically prior to the person. Without the physical organism there can be no person, but the reverse does not hold. I.e. even without the person, the physical organism could still exist. However it doesn’t follow from this that the person is therefore reducible to the physical organism.

Scruton gives an analogy in terms of the Mona Lisa. The Mona Lisa is physically nothing more than a collection of dots of colour on a canvas. We can describe the Mona Lisa completely and fully by just analysing it into individual pixels of colour. But is it right to say that this is *all* the Mona Lisa is? Is it just dots of colour?

Scruton says that we can also step back and look at the painting as a complete work, at which time we will see a face leap out at us from the canvas; a face that was previously hidden from view. We can also describe the Mona Lisa this way; a woman with a high forehead, long brown hair, etc., and we can do so completely and fully without ever making reference to a single pixel.

The Mona Lisa has two incommensurable but nevertheless complete descriptions. The one as a collection of coloured pixels on a canvas which we can analyse in as much detail as we would care to, ultimately identifying the atoms and subatomic particles that make up each dot of coloured paint. The other as a woman who somehow ‘emerges’ from the coloured dots that make her up. Which description is correct? Which one is ‘really’ the Mona Lisa?

Scruton would say that neither question make sense. Both ways of viewing and describing the Mona Lisa are valid, despite the fact that they yield completely different accounts. What’s more, these accounts are so different that the ways we talk about the Mona Lisa differ depending on which perspective we are taking. For example, looking at the woman in the picture we can say she is staring directly ahead. This makes absolutely no sense at the level of coloured pixels, pixels don’t ‘stare’. We can identify the actual coloured pixels that make up her eyes and describe them in full but we will never find anything in them doing any ‘staring’.

In the same way, human beings are describable (and capable of describing the world) from two different perspectives. One as an object in the physical world, causally explainable and reducible to little ‘pixels’ we call atoms; the other as a subject, a first person perspective which transcends the physical world (while nevertheless being composed of it).

Like the Mona Lisa, these two views of the human being also admit of two completely different lexicons. One is limited to nothing more than mechanical descriptions using terms like velocity, spin, momentum and so on, while the other references things like motives, decisions, choice, etc. These lexical worlds are non-transferrable between the two perspectives, yet both are completely valid in their respective realms.

 Scruton calls this unique capacity for these two perspectives afforded to the self-conscious being (the order of nature or the *Lebenswelt*), *cognitive dualism*, and distinguishes it from Cartesian dualism, which he (correctly, in my view) flat out rejects.

Things get even more interesting when Scruton considers what happens when a subject relates itself to another subject. He calls this the *I-You* encounter and it is special precisely because it is not a meeting of two objects, which would be concerned with causal explanations, but a meeting of two subjects, and is therefore concerned with understanding *why* the other does what he or she does.

Approaching the other as an object of nature we might explain her action X as being because chemical C was released in her brain, but this is unsatisfactory in the *Lebenswelt* which might see action X stemming from motive M which the subject herself would be held accountable for. Both views are full descriptions but very different.

In a way, the *Lebenswelt* is just the acknowledgement that the first person perspective, which trades in terms like motive, reason, promise, etc., is just as valid as the scientific perspective, which can make no sense of the above relations and instead deals with causation.

This unique way of approaching the other as subject, draws meaning and significance from their actions (seeing the image instead of the coloured pixels) through what Scruton calls the “overreaching intentionality of interpersonal attitudes”. Although the other is a physical object existing in space-time, we don’t see him or her like that; we encounter and relate to the other as a subject who somehow *transcends* the order of nature. In fact, it’s just about impossible to relate to another ‘You’ treating him or her as a causal object.

*The Brain*

Scruton follows the same pattern with respect to neuroscience. He says that even if we finally succeed in describing all of the input/output processes that our thoughts are built on – i.e. a complete fully reduced picture of the brain – we still won’t have described thoughts themselves. Even if these input/output processes are what our thoughts actually are (and Scruton doesn’t deny that they are), we have access to these thoughts in a completely different way – that of the first person perspective, and this perspective gives thoughts meaning, intention, and significance (an image on the canvas) as opposed to a mathematical array (dots of paint on a canvas).

Scruton says that we are single, unified subjects and calls this truth ‘transcendental’ because it transcends all argument, i.e. it is the premise, without which, argument makes no sense. He calls our freedom transcendental too, on the same grounds, i.e. I can only answer the question, “what shall *I* do?”, by assuming that I am free. Both of these notions are fundamental parts of our first person perspective on the world, and on that basis, I think, Scruton is right to register them as valid, even though our thoughts are determined by physical, neural processes we have no actual control over.

This sentence encapsulates the tension that fills Scruton’s book; the tension between the subject and the object, between the *Lebenswelt* and nature. Causal processes may tell us one thing (all our thoughts are determined) but we experience something different (that we have freewill). Scruton attempts a balance between the two, in effect saying that both views are true – the answer we get to our question though depends on whether we are looking at the *Lebenswelt* or the order of nature. The different views give different answers but both are equally valid; we are free in the *Lebenswelt* (if we weren’t we wouldn’t be able to *decide* to do anything) but determined in the physical world (our brains are physical organs which therefore fall under the jurisdiction of the causal universe).

Armed so, Scruton takes on the famous experiments by Benjamin Libet which found a signal firing in the brain *before* the subject reported deciding to perform a simple movement, suggesting that our brain makes our decisions without *us*, so to speak, and we just follow along blissfully ignorant, all the while mistakenly *thinking* that we are actually calling the shots.

He shrewdly notes that these kinds of experiment look for a subject in the world of objects and of course, fail to find one, for there is none. A subject will never be found in the world of causality because that world is just a mechanical sequence of cause and effect. It’s like trying to find a left earlobe somewhere in the pixels of paint that make up the Mona Lisa. Going deeper into the picture is moving in the wrong direction to find the woman depicted there.

Libet’s experiments purport to show that intention and freedom are illusions. We *think* it is our free decision to move our finger when we want, but *in reality* our brain makes that decision, not *us* (our conscious selves). Scruton says that ‘intention’ refers to nothing in the world of cause and effect but rather means the subject can say “I did this” without having to check anything (the mental processes that preceded the action, for example). Likewise, ‘freedom’, is nothing to do with causal chains, but rather, means that we can justify our actions and know with certainty what we will do – not by predicting it but by doing it.

*The Vow*

Scruton spends a whole chapter drifting through rights theory and the concepts that make contracts workable before alighting on the real force of the section; the difference between contract-like agreements and non-contractual obligations.

Contracts confer specific duties on the parties and include penalties for failure to honour the terms. But most of our relationships don’t, in fact, fall under the umbrella of the contract. Scruton offers three examples. The first contrasts the *contract* with the *vow*. The vow, as in marriage, brings a host of expectations and promises with it but lacks the highly detailed specifications and penalties that a contract stipulates. The second compares *justice* to *piety*. An obligation of justice is owed to someone because they are entitled to it; they have a right to something. Piety on the other hand, recognises no contract-like obligations but still demands something; as in a certain behaviour from children towards their parents. His final example contrasts *affection* with *love*. Specifically, love is a non-transferrable and non-substitutable attachment to another, whereas affection is a more general, less-focused emotion.

He laments the modern secular trend that is increasingly substituting the latter in each of the three relationships for the former. He (correctly, I think) points out that we don’t and can’t live with each other if we ‘contractualise’ our relationships in this way. We lose something ‘human’ in our relationships if we subject them all to terms and conditions and fine print. This ‘human’ something is of course, Scruton’s subject-to-subject, transcendent, ‘I-You’ relation and what we sacrifice it for is to treat each other as objects.

*‘Real Presence’*

Early in his book, Scruton asked how it was possible for the transcendent subject (fundamentally a *perspective* which transcends the physical and is not definable in any of its terms) to appear in the world of causality. At the time he was referring to God but he first suggests an answer for the human subject.

The first person perspective appears in the order of nature through the *face*. Although the face is essentially a physical object, completely described by the physical science of biology and bound by mechanistic, causal laws, this is not how we encounter it in the *Lebenswelt*. When we see the face of the ‘other’, we don’t see a physical object, we see the subject that lies behind it.

Although the face is reducible to its parts we don’t experience another’s mouth as a ‘tool for eating’ or even a ‘feature that enables speech’, we typically don’t encounter the other’s ‘mouth’ at all, instead we automatically and intuitively see ‘behind’ and ‘through’ it to the information that the subject conveys to us through it.

Scruton also makes special mention of the eyes which serve as a balcony for the subject behind to survey the world. It is this fact that makes the gaze of the ‘other’ so unnerving when directed at us. We feel the accusing and judging stare that calls us to account for our actions, exposing us in a way that no mere object can.

*Dwelling*

Another area Scruton finds his subject–object distinction useful is ‘place’, specifically the Earth, the home of the person. He argues that when we look at (and indeed live and work in) our buildings as subjects (from the first person perspective) we ought to see places with meaning and significance beyond their objective, instrumental usefulness.

He laments our modern, secular architecture which is designed only with function in mind and gives no thought to aesthetic beauty or nurturing the lives of the persons who inhabit them. He waxes poetic in this section describing fluted columns (as opposed to the straight, functional tower) that contrast light and shadow in a pleasing way, gardens designed without purpose so we too can empty ourselves of purpose when we enter them, and streets (as opposed to thoroughfares designed to move traffic through) that people could ‘linger’ on and talk to others.

**The Bad**

The Sacred / Transcendent

Scruton frequently throws these terms about in his book, which on its own would be fine, but he uses them inconsistently in an attempt to borrow credibility from his subject-object distinction and impute it to religion. Early on, Scruton defines religious thought as involving a personal relation with the *transcendent* (a term he, at this point, links very clearly to God as a ‘presence’ beyond (transcending) space and time) and concerned with the *sacred*.

He defines the sacred as a kind of gateway to the transcendent. This arouses another concept vital to the sacred, *the taboo*. Scruton takes this to be the defilement of the sacred, which essentially boils down to reducing it to the status of a normal thing, or treating it as we would treat something normal (i.e. *non*-sacred).

So far, this is fine. We often associate the sacred (and the transcendent) with religion in the way Scruton has described. The problem arises when he starts using these same terms to describe the *first person perspective* of the subject. The *I-You* encounter is a *sacred* relation; the truth of our subjective unity and freedom are both *transcendental* (because they *transcend* argument, Scruton advises, but this obviously conflates with his earlier use of the same term to describe a God-like ‘real presence’); our non-contractual obligations which involve treating each other as persons (not instruments) are *sacred* and *transcendental*, and so on.

In fact, he subsumes all of his insights surrounding the unique capacity we have for ‘cognitive dualism’ under the banner of the *sacred* and *transcendental*, but this creates an unjustified connection between cognitive dualism and God. I don’t think Scruton has succeeded in showing that the religious notion of the ‘sacred’ is the same as the subjective notion of the ‘sacred’ his book outlines.

After all, the *Lebenswelt* is nothing more than a ‘perspective’ we bring to reality – it is nothing like a transcendent realm where a transcendent Being dwells. Scruton does make a couple of disclaimers early on that he is not arguing that a real God exists, but then he goes on to strongly hint that the ‘transcendent’ first-person perspective is in fact, perfectly transferrable to the religious.

The Deterioration of Modernity

*Sacred Bonds to Contracts*

Scruton bemoans the fact that secularisation has remade the world from one of obligations into one of contracts. I do think he is right in saying that something is lost if we ‘contractualise’ our relationships. The problem is that he (subtly) invokes religion as, apparently, the only way to confer meaning on the non-contractual obligations he outlines. It is true that this is one way to go about marking the obligation and it also true that this was the way we have done it in the past, but is it the best way? We gain a ‘sacred’ quality to our obligations, sure, but at the expense of reason and common sense.

The point is that secularisation doesn’t *have to* result in contracts where there used to be obligations. There is far more at work here than the mere weakening of religion and the rise of scepticism. This is a discussion Scruton doesn’t go into which is why his subtle prods at how religion and the religious view made life better are slightly disingenuous.

*Sex*

Scruton reveals his Christian roots with his almost puritanical comments about sex and how secular modernity ‘objectifies’ the other party, reducing the encounter to that of subject-object, instead of subject-subject. Sex, in Scruton’s eyes, is a sacred, intimate encounter between two loving, committed subjects… and nothing else.

I think Scruton is putting way too much onto the sexual act here. He emphasises the gravity and seriousness inherent in the act of sex and finds in this, justification for the Christian notions of guilt and shame that poisoned our minds towards this most natural of impulses for centuries. He even modestly suggests (in a single, unsubstantiated sentence) that Original Sin is nothing more than a recognition and awareness of the significance of the act of sex… as if no one in Christian history ever preached Original Sin as a black mark upon our souls (conferred on the individual through the male semen, no less), which prevented us getting into heaven and could only be redeemed by accepting Jesus Christ as our personal saviour.

The way Scruton tells the story, sex used to be viewed as nothing but a wholesome, ‘sacred’ experience but now everybody is objectifying everyone else. This is clearly false. People have been objectifying members of the opposite sex for the whole of human history. It is not just naturally human, but naturally *male* and *female*, to be aroused by the opposite sex, and this in a purely physical, objective fashion. Of course, this doesn’t mean that *all* of our sexual encounters have to be of this variety but it certainly doesn’t render them somehow less appropriate or ‘wrong’ either.

Of course, sex *can* be a ‘sacred’ union between two ‘subjects’ but it can also be a casual encounter between two consenting adults or just a climactic solo release of pent-up sexual energy. Scruton, unsurprisingly, also comes down hard on pornography, which to him is the epitome of the *object*-driven sexual encounter.

I don’t want to get too caught up in this topic because it doesn’t feature much in Scruton’s book, but I will allow myself a little bit of a rant. In the animal kingdom, sex is a procedure solely designed for procreation. This is the *objective*, evolutionary explanation. Persons however, are capable of a different sexual encounter, an *I-You* one, where subject meets subject. We interpret this experience in a different way from the genetic-driven, impulse to procreate even though that is what it boils down to in the physical, objectively-seen world.

Sex can be understood from both perspectives but, and this is where Scruton shows his biases, *the objective experience is just as valid as the subjective experience*. We are genetically programmed to be attracted to the opposite sex and our social conditioning has probably increased our fondness for certain anatomical parts, but what is wrong with that? What is wrong with analysing the portrait to see the individual dots of colour that make it up, instead of gazing on the Mona Lisa? The first person perspective gives us another way of looking at the world but we must be careful we don’t impose artificial and arbitrary values on one or the other, especially when we can trace those values to a religion that is notorious for having a problem with sex.

Naturally, anything taken to the extreme is detrimental and Scruton rightly points out that an addiction to pornography is a blight on the individual, but the same can be said of any addiction, although perhaps more care needs to be exercised surrounding pornography given the easy access and particularly pleasant feeling that indulgence delivers.

*Dwelling*

As I have already mentioned, Scruton waxes poetic with regard to architecture (at least as it used to be), and in my opinion he goes too far. His choice of language to describe modern buildings and streets (“escapes upward as though fleeing from itself”, “…the sky, which it wounds with blunt, aggressive punches”, “the air above them is lashed and torn by wires”) is poured on a little thick and immediately draws attention to itself; the lady doth protest too much, methinks.

He gives such a one-sided account of the crimes and failings of modern architecture that it is obvious he is anything but objective. Like so often in such accounts, there is a kernel of truth in what Scruton says, about how the modern city (and the buildings in it) has exploded and caused the loss of something - something valuable, simple, and even rustic - that we used to enjoy. But Scruton takes this kernel and coaxes an oak tree from it.

Can Scruton really not find anything aesthetically pleasing in modern architecture? Are all modern buildings slabs of granite that wound the sky with blunt, aggressive punches? And, were all buildings in the ‘golden days’ of yesteryear constructed like the temples Scruton raves about? Of course not. Most of the buildings people lived in, the actual *dwellings*, were tiny and poorly-constructed, boasting none of the arches or columns that Scruton finds so attractive.

In his religious plug for this chapter, he gives the temple central importance saying that the “architecture derives from the temple, for the reason that the city derives from its god” (p. 129), hence the *sacred*, as it applies to our buildings, can never be understood in secular terms. Again, we see Scruton confusing the transcendent, first person perspective of the subject for the religious and supernatural. He ties everything in the city back to the temple claiming that “the I of God resides in this place” (p. 123). Clearly, this is overextending his subject-object cognitive dualism. Somewhere, Scruton leaped from a first person *human* perspective to a *supernatural* perspective without bothering to justify the latter in any way, constructing it out of thin air, as it were. He even goes so far as to make the irresponsible and completely unfounded (according to either the objective *or* subjective perspective) suggestion that the temple is where the real presence of God is located; “God is a real presence in his temple, as you are in your body.” (p. 123) Needless to say, he has to do a lot more work than this before we can accept such a statement.

Scruton also takes this opportunity to romanticise the Israelites in their search for the Promised Land. “The Jewish patriarchs regarded the Promised Land… as an inheritance, to be cared for and passed on. This was how they justified the cruel, and in modern eyes unforgivable, extermination of the Canaanites” (p. 121). Notice the implicit justification of the Israelite’s slaughter of other tribes; it’s unforgivable *in modern eyes*; why the qualification? Obviously, it wasn’t unforgivable to them; no one’s crimes are unforgivable in their own eyes.

But doesn’t this example perfectly illustrate the dangers of conflating the sacred with the supernatural? If the Israelites had managed to see their Promised Land as a sacred space which they could care for, nurture, and pass on to future generations without slipping into the delusion that they had some kind of divine right to it, couldn’t the insane (and unforgivable, in *anyone’s* eyes) extermination of a tribe have been averted? If the sacred can’t be purchased without the supernatural, perhaps we are just better off leaving it on the shelf. I’m sure the first person perspective of the Canaanites would agree with this sentiment.

Redefining Religion

Scruton takes a number of liberties with his definitions and interpretations of religion which only serve to distort and confuse the issue. All too often, he suspiciously *re*interprets doctrine in ways that happen to support the thesis of his book and also lend much needed credibility to religion. In doing so, he extracts gems of quite profound wisdom from ancient religious texts (thereby imputing this wisdom to their authors), apparently without realising that he is the one putting them there.

*‘Myths of Origins’*

Scruton rejects any kind of literal interpretation of the Bible. According to him many of the stories in the Bible are just that; stories. They are depicted as factual accounts of an event that actually happened at a certain time and place but in actuality, they illustrate psychological truths about humans, and are therefore applicable at all times and all places (here is another opportunity to use the word ‘transcendent’, which Scruton doesn’t waste, for these stories *transcend* any single time and place).

As an example of these myths of origins, Scruton goes on to interpret the myth of the Fall as warning us, “that we are tempted to conceive our most intimate relations in objectifying terms, as an affair of bodies in which the other is no longer present as a subject in his face.” (p. 107) I.e. the Fall was nothing to do with an apple, but was rather about how we ‘fell’ from the *transcendent* world where we related to each other as subject to subject and started seeing and treating each other as objects.

Of course he is right about these stories being myths but his attempt to salvage some value from them despite this, takes things a bit too far. The myths of religions are exactly like novels and movies made today that contain moral themes or attempt to reveal elements of the human psyche. The only difference is that everybody (even Christians) knows the latter are false. The important point is that the really good fictitious stories humans have created all throughout history are really good precisely because they offer a commentary on these kinds of topics, but, we don’t endow novels with any sense of sacred or transcendent awe.

There is also the problem that Scruton is certainly reading too much into these myths. If his interpretation above is right, it essentially means that he wasted his time writing an entire book about something that people already knew over two thousand years ago. Is it really plausible that Iron Age individuals could have conceived of the *Lebenswelt* as Scruton describes it in a book written 2,014 odd years later, after centuries of philosophical, scientific and cultural progress? Of course, there is nothing wrong with making these interpretations now, but don’t make the mistake of thinking the people who wrote these things also interpreted them the same way.

Another problem is that despite the fact that Roger Scruton, a man born in the 20th century, may see these stories as myths and not literal events to be believed, how many other people see them in that way or *have seen* them that way in history? No matter what he or anyone else might say, this book *is* a defence of religion, therefore it needs to defend religion as it is, not as Scruton might like it to be.

He claims these stories aren’t real, but that is not the way they were conceived or presented and it’s not even the way they are treated, in the main, now. No priest stands up in church and starts his sermon by saying God *didn’t* make the universe in six days or that the Fall is just a myth… but wait, because even so, we can learn something important about ourselves from it.

This is a move we see from religious sympathisers time and time again. They claim to defend religion but the religion they are defending is nothing like what religion *really* is. It is an *inverted straw man* defence. They purport to be defending something real (and deeply flawed) by appeal to something false but much stronger.

*Sacrifice*

For Scruton, “self-sacrifice… underpins the moral life” (p. 182), and he points to Christianity as the prime exemplar of this noble attitude; after all, it was God who sacrificed himself for humanity and “from this we are to learn the way of forgiveness” (p. 182).

Let me be clear about this – there is absolutely nothing we can learn about forgiveness by entertaining the belief that one party (God) had to suffer and die a horrendous death in order to fulfil a debt that a second party (us) owes to a third party (that same God), all so the third party (God again) could finally forgive the second party.

Now Scruton would never put it in such terms but that is because he doesn’t want to confront Christianity as it really is – he would prefer to construct his *anti*-straw man and let that take the brunt of the attack. However, even someone who doesn’t mind playing as fast and loose with religious facts as Scruton, won’t go so far as to say that the crucifixion was a myth and should be understood as promoting a general truth. So what does he do? He completely ignores the uncomfortable ‘facts’ Christians believe (and have always believed) about the crucifixion.

*Taking Artistic Licence with the Bible*

In 1 Corinthians 13 St. Paul says, “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face”. Scruton has no hesitation in saying, “However, by “then” he meant “beyond the here and now,” in the transcendental realm where God resides.” (p. 11) There is absolutely no indication that that is what St. Paul was getting at. In reading the whole passage, it actually sounds more like St. Paul is saying nothing more profound than, as we learn more about God, embrace Christianity, and grow spiritually, we come to perceive the ‘truth’ more clearly. Or do you think it more likely St. Paul had read Roger Scruton? Or perhaps just anticipated him by two thousand years?

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In another section, Scruton boldly claims the Bible is flat-out wrong, “The tree of knowledge that caused the fall of man is surely wrongly described as giving us the knowledge of good and evil. Rather, it gave us the knowledge of ourselves as objects – we fell from the realm of subjectivity into the world of things.” (pp. 105-106) Now, as if by magic, the Bible nicely aligns with Scruton’s philosophical framework; but note how here, he doesn’t even bother trying to put his own twist on the Bible, he just rewrites it. Then he can claim that Christianity isn’t as simplistic and obviously fictitious as the atheists maintain.

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In another place, Scruton suggests that the covenant God established with the Israelites, “implies that God’s relation to us is of the same kind as the relations that we create through our promises and contracts. Our relation to God is a relation between free beings…” (p. 78) Of course, what Scruton is aiming at here is making God a subject – that is, transcendent and so undetectable in the physical, objective world – but is that what the ancient authors of the Old Testament were getting at with their covenant do you think? Is that the way it has been preached for centuries?

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Scruton also tries his hand at justifying Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Ishmael for God. He says it *might* be seen to be just as horrific as the Aztec’s behaviour, “However, Abraham was giving up something that he deeply loved… Both Abraham and God had passed through the boundary of the covenant that had just been struck between them”. He says, “Abraham proceeded without hesitation from the secure order of the covenant into the troubled order of creation where rules and deals are set aside” (p. 181).

Is this admirable? Is this treating the *I-You* relationship that Abraham had with his son as sacred? Again, in attempting to defend religious superstition, Scruton merely provides a reason for taking care that we don’t let our first person perspective drift into supernatural territory.

Grasping at Religious Straws

*The Lebenswelt and the Universe*

Scruton makes a particularly wild leap on page 36 where, after introducing the idea that the first person perspective opens up the previously hidden *Leibenswelt* to the subject through the concepts of agency and accountability rather than causality, he says, “those concepts of agency and accountability extend their reach beyond the horizon of nature, so as to pose the question that science cannot formulate – the question “why?” asked of the world as a whole.”

We have already seen how the subject relates to the world through reasons, not causes (even if those causes are ontologically prior), i.e. we don’t ask someone, “What chemical process and/or changes in quantum tubules in your brain caused you to do that?”; we ask them, “*Why* did you do that?”. This makes sense because we know there is a human subject ‘behind’ the physical organism. On the other hand, *there is absolutely no reason to suspect that a divine subject exists ‘behind’ the physical universe*. Scruton doesn’t seem to see a need to support this wild leap from the human subject to the divine subject and it is in this single neglect that the book fails to accomplish the task of validating religion and the supernatural.

What he does say regarding this is that the atheists claim that this “why?” question asked of the world has no answer; “But if you say this because you think that there are no cogent “why?” questions other than those that seek for causes, then you are merely turning aside from the argument. The teleological foundation of the world is not perceivable to science, or describable in scientific terms. Hence it can be neither proved nor disproved by scientific method. It can be established only through the web of understanding, by showing… that accountability lies in our nature.” (p. 185)

But even allowing for Scruton’s cognitive dualism, i.e. the idea that there is a transcendental subject, emergent from and different from the physical, we are still lacking any such subject for the universe as a whole.

This subject, if it existed, would remain invisible to science so Scruton suggests we find it in the “web of understanding”, that “accountability that lies in our nature”. But with these nebulous phrases, Scruton hasn’t gotten us any closer to God. I am not denying the “web of understanding” that exists between subjects or the “accountability” we demand of another subject, but these ways of relating tell us nothing about *whether a particular subject exists or not*. At bottom, we are still dealing with the greatest problem every religion faces; *deus absconditus*, the absent God.

*God and Mathematics*

On page nine, Scruton makes a quite ludicrous metaphysical claim. He suggests that God might be a transcendent being, principally meaning that he lies outside space and time, and therefore have absolutely no causal influence in the world. That is fine, but he loses the plot when he then says that, “If this is sufficient to exclude God from our ontology, then many other things too must be excluded. We have beliefs about numbers, sets, and other mathematical objects. And these too are outside space and time…”

It’s hard to know how seriously Scruton takes himself at this point. One hopes that the God he is defending (albeit subtly) throughout his book has more going for him than numbers and mathematical objects. Thankfully, Scruton doesn’t pursue this line of inquiry any further so I don’t have to either. He does however draw a parting conclusion which he directs at any atheists who happen to be reading his book at that moment; “this means that the issue of theological truth cannot be closed so simply as the atheists wish.” Scruton is suggesting (seriously, as far as I can tell) that since philosophers and mathematicians still don’t know the ontological status of mathematical objects, we can’t rule out the existence of God either. Perhaps Scruton is seeking to revive a Pythagorean religion.

*The Transcendent God*

Scruton pushes on. If God is outside of space and time, ‘transcendent’, then there can be no causal connection between God and us (causality is a feature of the physical). In that case, anything that believers say about God, by way of explanation (necessarily limited to the physical), can bear no relation at all to His (transcendental) truth. Atheist attacks on the believer’s explanations and beliefs are therefore equally impotent and can’t disprove the (transcendental) truth either.

This is an odd way of defending religious claims though. Although he successfully dismisses atheist attacks, he does so by claiming that the beliefs of the people they are arguing against (the religious believers) are completely groundless and have no basis in truth.

It is at this point that Scruton follows up by asking the question that appears in my next section, so I will leave it to be continued there…

How can the Transcendent Appear in the Objective World?

Scruton asks this question at the beginning of the book; how a *subjective* God who transcends time and space can yet appear as a ‘real presence’ in the objective world of physical causality. He offers two early, tentative answers, the first is an appeal to mystic nonsense; the second, to *experience*.

Regarding the first, Scruton says, “God reveals himself by concealing himself, as he concealed himself from Moses in the burning bush…” (p. 10) This is sheer, unabashed, mystery-mongering, which Scruton also tries to link to the passage in Exodus where God says to Moses that no one may see him and live.

Ah, of course! Now, it’s so clear. God was *actually* saying that it’s impossible to see him because he is a Scrutonian transcendent subject, existing beyond space and time. Luckily they can still hear him though…

The second tentative answer is an appeal to experience, where Scruton says, “it [the “real presence” of the eternal God] comes to us with a self-verifying character that silences scepticism” (p. 11). The problem, of course, is that humans have been equally convinced of many weird and wonderful things from etheric aliens to ghosts to dreams that predict the future to demons that sit on their chests while they are sleeping. Opening that door lets in a whole lot of things better left outside.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t get any better. At the end of the book, Scruton admits he can’t answer the question of how a transcendent God can appear in the physical, but attempts to divert suspicion by saying, “But then I cannot answer the question asked of you and me, how one and the same being can be an organism, and also a free subject who is called to account in the space of reasons” (p. 186). In other words, he doesn’t know how a transcendent, human subject can appear in the world, yet it does; and so even though he doesn’t know how a transcendent God can appear in the world, He might still be able to do so.

This seems like a disingenuous claim to me. Scruton is trying to equate the mystery of how a divine subject could be a ‘real presence’ in the world with the mystery of how the human subject can appear in the physical world. There are a couple of reasons why this rings untrue. First, we know the human subject exists because we *are* such human subjects. Even though Scruton pleads ignorance when it comes to knowing how the transcendental, human subject can appear in the physical world, he is justified in accepting it because he has incontrovertible proof that it is real; i.e. he *is* one such subject. There is no such evidence in favour of a divine subject.

Second, while we may not know the exact mechanism by which the human subject appears in the physical world, we do know that such an appearance is grounded in the physical body, in particular, the brain and, as Scruton pointed out, the face. There is no corresponding medium that presents itself as even being potentially capable of facilitating such an entry by God into the objective world (and even if one did, would we believe it? God, the subject appears in a cracker after a priest says a few Latin words and waves his hand over it).

Remember that the subject exists only through the first person *perspective* of an otherwise objective entity; it is nothing we could identify as *substance*, either in this or a ‘transcendental’ realm; because *there is no transcendental realm* either. In all of this discussion about transcendence, it is easy to start imagining a ‘realm’ of the transcendent that perhaps starts to open up the space for an a-temporal, a-causal God to exist. This is pure fantasy. Transcendence, as Scruton defines it, is a perspective, not a higher ‘place’. We are eminently justified in positing the human subject because we know the causal object it is grounded in; needless to say, a divine subject lacks such a comparable object to ‘emerge’ from.

Of course this isn’t ‘proof’ that such an object doesn’t exist, but it shows Scruton’s analogy between the human and divine subject is anything but equal.

The Closing Chapter

In the final chapter, Scruton brings to the fore what had, throughout the body of the book, been a relatively subtle prodding and nudging in the direction of the supernatural. Subtle links established between his theory of cognitive dualism and religious supernaturalism are asserted with more force, albeit with no more credibility.

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Scruton claims that, “Secular morality remains within the order of the covenant – seeking to found obligations in contract” (p. 178), but is this fair? At the very heart of humanism lies the recognition that we are all human and therefore deserve to be treated as such. Surely, this gives us as much reason as any against treating each other as means to an end (and more reason than most religions do)?

Not just this, Scruton seems to forget that the original covenant was created between God and the Israelites in which the latter, if they just followed a number of (very specifically outlined) rules, would inherit the Promised Land (no matter who was already living on it). Those rules have changed over time – and please don’t think I am talking about the much lauded ten commandments, the first four of which are only about worshipping God, the fifth is about keeping one day a week holy, and four of the remaining five are nothing more than fairly rudimentary codes of conduct we codified long before the Israelites figured them out – but there are still a handful, which if you manage to follow, God will grant you eternity in heaven (this is, of course, Christianity as most Christians believe it). How could this be more like a contract?

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In a similar vein, still on the subject of rights and contracts, Scruton says, “no one has a right to forgiveness… Forgiveness comes, when it comes, as a gift… it is earned by penitence, contrition, and atonement – acts that cannot be terms of a contract” (p. 182). But this raises at least two questions; if forgiveness is a gift, why did Christ have to die on the cross? And if forgiveness is earned by atonement, how is it that someone else’s sacrifice can somehow work on my behalf?

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There is a tangible tension in the way Scruton recommends religious rituals be accepted and undertaken by believers. On pages 182 and 184, he acknowledges ritual as “a way of uniting people around a shared need” and as such, are “instruments of social reproduction” preserving and strengthening the community. These rituals are often accompanied by explanations which are “presented in the moment of worship as items of belief. But they should be understood in another way. They are ways of tying the *Lebenswelt* to nature.”

So essentially, we are to believe these “myths of origins” while at the same time knowing they are completely false. Scruton doesn’t seem to think this is a problem but no matter how you try to dress this situation up, there is no mistaking that it is make-believe. It is *pretending* to believe in what everyone knows is a fiction… and the kind of people that such an act will satisfy are generally not the kind of people worth satisfying.

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The thrust of Scruton’s whole book, the subject-object distinction in the world, commits him to defining God as a subject (in the same way that we are), which means God is a first person perspective (although I have already pointed out that Scruton fails to adequately identify *what* exactly this transcendent Being is the first person perspective of, or *why* we should suppose such a Being even exists – not everything partakes in Scruton’s *cognitive dualism*), and so, “if he exists, he is a person, marked by those features that are essential to personhood, such as self-knowledge, freedom, and the sense of right and wrong.” (p. 190)

This is fine, but Scruton then goes on to say that “God, if he exists, is One, and he is Creator” (p. 190). Now, we have to be careful because each of these words actually has two meanings. When believers say God is One, they mean something like God is everything or we are all a part of God. When they say he is Creator, they mean he created the universe. Scruton however, doesn’t mean either of these.

Scruton’s ‘One’ means just that there can’t be two gods; it is a refutation of polytheism. ‘Creator’, he says, means that God is the “ultimate reason for its [the universe] being” (p. 191).

First, note that both of Scruton’s definitions are radically different from how Christians typically interpret them. Second, Scruton’s God is so hazily defined that I’m not sure it follows at all that, “God, if he exists, is One, and he is Creator”.

He says God is One because, “God is the end point of our search for reasons, and if there were two of him, that end point would never be reached” (p. 190). This is a classic example of question-begging; a practice which we see time and time again amongst religious adherents.

God is One because God is the end point.

God is One because God is… One.

Because Scruton has not provided any kind of information about what God is (he exists outside time and space so by his own account we *cannot* have any such information), if God is a subject, like us, then there is absolutely no reason at all why there can’t be more than one God, more than one ‘reason’ for why things are the way they are. *Why* must there be only One “ultimate reason” for the universe? In reading Scruton, the only answer he seems to give is, because that is what we are looking for. Unfortunately, just because we are looking for something is no guarantee we will actually find it or even that it exists in the first place.

You might be tempted to argue that it stands to reason that there can only be ‘One’ first person perspective subject in God’s position; after all, there can only be one first person perspective subject for each human person; there aren’t two Roger Scrutons standing in a subjective relation to the physical world. But this is clearly false because if God is the subject of the universe (if such a thing exists, of course) then he is also subject of everything in it, which means he is subject of my physical organism *as well* as me being the subject of my physical organism. So, apparently there *can* be two first person perspectives of the one physical object. This also means there can be more than one subject for the universe too.

Scruton says God is Creator but he didn’t actually create the universe because, being a first person perspective, he doesn’t stand in a causal relationship to it. Rather, he is Creator in the sense that he is the, “ultimate reason for its [the universe] being”. But is this right?

Remember what Scruton says of us, the human subject, and how this perspective differs from that of science; when asked for an explanation of why we did something, we don’t rattle off the sequence of chemical reactions and atomic motions that triggered certain neurons in our brains. We give a *reason*. “I drank the water because I was thirsty”. This is one of the fundamental distinctions between the two subject-object perspectives.

Now, if God is the same as us (a first person perspective, a subject) then he isn’t *a* reason, he is *able to give* a reason for the state of the universe. These are quite different. You are not *the* reason for your being, you are able to *give a reason* for something you do. This must be the same relation God, if he exists, stands in relation to the universe. God, if he exists, would not be able to give a reason for why the universe exists any more than you can give a reason for why you exist.

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In the end, Scruton as good as admits that his God is not just forever unknowable, but whether he is there or not is also unknowable. What he does do however, is offer a reason by analogy of how we might be able to keep our faith; “The search for God often seems hopeless; but the usual grounds given for thinking this imply that the search for the other person is hopeless too.” (p. 185)

In other words, we can’t find God with our scientific analysis of the causal, objective world but we can’t find any *human* subject through this kind of investigation either even though we know they exist, so maybe God is out there as well.

I have already criticised Scruton’s drawing an analogy between the human subject and the divine one, not on the grounds that they should be fundamentally different, but on the grounds that even though we can’t relate to the human subject through science, *we* can *relate to it because it* actually *exists*. What Scruton is offering is the *theoretical* possibility that God may exist outside of space and time, as a subject, but if this was to become the benchmark for belief we would all be filled with more superstitious nonsense than any of us could tolerate.

Finally, Scruton admits defeat with the catch cry of every UFO enthusiast, Bigfoot believer, and ghost hunter; “Why not say, rather, that we stand here on the edge of a mystery?” (p. 185) to which we can reply with just as much force, “Why not say, rather, that there is no mystery at all.”

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Having failed to raise God beyond the status of a counterfactual, Scruton proceeds to discuss faith which boils down to the same thing every religion says, “Faith means believing… that there is sufficient reason in the mind of God for all that is” (p. 191). It means believing that there is a *telos* (purpose) to the universe; in other words, believing that there is a God.

However, he goes on to distinguish faith from religion. Faith is an “attitude to the world” (p. 192) whereas, “the heart of religion is [meticulous] ritual” (p. 192). He also emphasises that, “For faith, however, works [observing the rituals] are not enough… What matters is that you believe.” (p. 194) So, ‘faith’ means not just performing the rituals and conforming to the doctrines but also believing them.

If only everybody had faith like this, we would see heaven on earth overnight, right? No. The problem is that these meticulous rituals are seen as sacred, which means, “the wrong word, the wrong gesture, the wrong way of addressing the god-all such departures are not just errors but profanations.” (p. 192) Couple this fervent adherence to ritual with the belief that these rituals aren’t just methods of strengthening the community and bolstering the ‘tribal spirit’, but are an *actual* gateway to the sacred and transcendent, and you have a recipe for never-ending war. Take a look at what happens when someone accidentally throws a Qur’an in the rubbish in a Muslim country. Or glance through history to see the many wars have been fought over supposedly ‘holy’ and ‘sacred’ places or beliefs.

You might argue that a belief in the sanctity of a ritual need not translate into an impinging on other people’s rights to hold to their own sacred rituals, even if they are different from ours. The problem is that respecting other people’s beliefs/rituals is a rational attitude whereas the belief that rituals are sacred gateways to the transcendent is irrational. Irrational beliefs like this *inevitably* spawn more irrational beliefs and irrational behaviour, until some group of believers start running riot because they think another group of believers are torturing the body of their saviour (in wafer form) or bombs start being thrown around because an image of their prophet appears in cartoon form.

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The very last topics Scruton discusses are death and transcendence. He admits that, “Religion in its original manifestation was a remedy for death” (p. 196). He is also quite clear that, “The afterlife, conceived as a condition that succeeds death in time, is an absurdity. For succession in time belongs within the causal envelope” (p. 198). I agree with him completely so far but it wouldn’t be a very good religious tale if he ended on such an anti-climactic note. So how does he redeem himself with his religious fan base? He whispers a few pseudo-philosophic, semi-mystical, religious sweet nothings in their ears.

He leans on the authority of St. Paul and his suspicious interpretation of the “glass darkly” quote we discussed earlier. If you recall, “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face” where ‘then’ means, according to Scruton, after death. Just for good measure Scruton also quotes a poet to support him here because, as we all know, poets never talk in unreal metaphor. Then Scruton lays it on us, “Here, it seems to me, is a way in which faith verges on hope. We can shun death as an annihilation, or greet it as a transition. We can see it as a loss of something precious, or as the gain of another way of being. It is, in a sense, up to us.” (p. 197)

A transition? A gain of another way of being? It is up to us?!

This doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. There is no afterlife in time but death is still a transition? There’s absolutely no evidence for or against so it’s up to us if we believe it or not? For what during the greater part of the book is a very insightful and valuable discussion about the subjective and the objective*,* this weak dithering at the denouement is quite disappointing.

But Scruton hasn’t finished yet – he also wants to redefine ‘salvation’, which he says is a “right relation with the creator [and] in no way requires eternal life… But *it* does require an acceptance of death and a sense that in death we are meeting our creator… to whom we must account for our faults.” (p. 198)

Hmm, in just what way are we meeting the creator (a subject like us) after we die despite the absence of an afterlife “so conceived”? Fortunately, Scruton doesn’t appear to feel the burden of actually justifying himself since, “This is a mystical thought, and there is no way of translating it into the idiom of natural science” (p. 198).

Disappointing doesn’t even begin to describe this chain of non-reasoning and the weak, contradictory, nonsensical inferences which come based on loosely-interpreted Biblical quotes and poetry. Taking refuge by calling it “mystical” is about the most dishonest thing a philosopher can do and Scruton should be ashamed of himself for playing this metaphysical equivalent of the “God did it” argument.

**Conclusion**

Scruton has written a thought-provoking book which is an attempt to justify the religious attitude through appeal to an interesting subject-object dual perspective he calls *cognitive dualism*. Where he defends and explains this perspective, he is at his philosophical best; unfortunately when he tries to extend this phenomenological centre-point into the realm of religion and the existence of God, he wears his argument a little thin and holes start to appear.

Unfortunately any eager Christians out there who hope to gain something from Scruton’s argument will be sorely disappointed. First, Scruton fails to provide any kind of indication that God actually exists; belief is apparently just “up to us” (like we’re discussing whether to have chicken or beef for dinner), and secondly, and more damaging (not so long ago this would have been called ‘heresy’), Scruton’s God is absolutely nothing like the Christian God we have been brought up to know and love/fear. His God can’t communicate with us, didn’t create us, and didn’t create the universe because he has absolutely no causal relation with it. Not only that, he is causally determined first and foremost and only on top of that is he an emergent first person perspective subject (exactly like us). I have met few Christians who would endorse such a God.

Having said that, Scruton’s idea that God is a first person perspective of the universe in the same way we are a first person perspective of a physical organism is quite charming (albeit in a heretical way). It gives order and meaning to the universe in the same way I give order and meaning to my actions. Despite its aesthetic appeal, there are some serious obstacles to endorsing it though, the principle one being the fact that there is absolutely no reason to believe it’s true. If we go along with this, why not choose instead to believe in a more provincial deity who is specifically looking out for me?

Overall, there is much useful philosophy that can be taken away from *The Soul of the World* and it is worth reading for that alone (which probably makes up a good 70% of the book). Scruton’s ideas related to his *cognitive dualism* are extremely stimulating and thought-provoking. It is only in the remaining 30%, where Scruton forays into the religious/supernatural, that things start to come apart and reasoned thought is replaced with scriptural *re*-interpretation, vague pseudo-philosophy, and mystical leaps of faith.

This gives *The Soul of the World* a unique kind of *literate dualism* in which as a religious text, it appears that Scruton has failed to convince and has in fact, over-extended himself; whereas from a philosophical perspective however, the opposite holds true and Scruton has succeeded in producing a thoroughly interesting book.