

## How to be a conservative Roger Scruton

Scruton leads into the book with a description of his childhood. His father was a working class guy, a labor voter by habit who distrusted the aristocracy in a way that only an English workingman can. Nonetheless, he was quite conservative in his own way. Scruton has a good quote to the effect that people tend to be conservative in the matters that are closest to them. His father worked with his hands, and was conservative when it came to architecture. He savored hanging on to what was good, old and true in English church and secular architecture.

The second chapter introduces the theme of conservatism. People grow up in a web of relationships that is already in place, supporting them as they grow. From the inside out, it includes parents, extended family and clan, neighborhood groups and civic associations, church, local and provincial governments and finally national government. To that, in his lifetime in mind, have been added supranational organizations such as the European Union, WTO and the United Nations.

It is the organizations that are closest to us that have the most influence on our formation. In my words, not Scruton's, human beings are social primates. Fellow members of our family and tribe introduces into the habits and customs of our people. More than that, they joined together to defend the tribe against outsiders and against tragedies such as famine or the unexpected death of a breadwinner. As members of the group we accept an obligation to support the others, in return for which we receive their unstated commitment to support us. Though we call this the "social contract," there is nothing written, and the consideration being exchanged transcends the merely financial. Moreover, our commitment is often not rational.

A great many books address these themes. The ones that come immediately to mind are *Mother Nature and Mothers and Others* by Sarah Blaffer Hardy on our primate inheritance, and books by Daniel Kahneman and Dan Ariely on irrationality.

At the end of this review, I offer a few of the most useful quotations from Scruton's second chapter entitled "Starting from Home."

The next six chapters address the ways in which conservatism turns out to be form of social organization that best fits human nature. We are not atomistic, free-floating and independent creatures of the Enlightenment, but we are born to be and function best as interdependent members of society. The chapter titles are:

- The truth in Nationalism
- The Truth in Socialism
- The Truth in Capitalism
- The Truth in Liberalism
- The Truth in Multiculturalism
- The Truth in Environmentalism
- The Truth in Internationalism
- The Truth in Conservatism

Woven throughout these chapters is the notion of contracts freely entered by free men, and obligations willingly accepted. For instance, the argument against multiculturalism and internationalism is simply that many of those who would come to enjoyed the benefits of living in England do not reciprocate by integrating themselves into British society. Quite specifically, many cling to Sharia law. The argument against communism and fascism is that the obligations are taken under duress, not freely accepted.

A theme that appears throughout the book is that conservatism is a rearguard action. As Bill Buckley said, "Standing athwart the world yelling 'Stop!'" He is concerned that it is a losing battle, but a battle worth fighting nonetheless.

With that as a review, here are the particularly useful quotes I copied from chapter 2, "Starting from Home."

"A market can deliver a rational allocation of goods and services only where there is trust between its participants, and trust exists only where people take responsibility for their actions and make themselves accountable to those with whom they deal. In other words, economic order depends on moral order."

Scruton, Roger. *How to be a conservative* (Kindle Locations 403-405). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

"(Edmund) Burke saw society as an association of the dead, the living and the unborn. Its binding principle is not contract, but something more akin to love. Society is a shared inheritance for the sake of which we learn to circumscribe our demands, to see our own place in things as part of a continuous chain of giving and receiving, and to recognize that the good things we inherit are not ours to spoil. There is a line of obligation that connects us to those who gave us what we have; and our concern for the future is an extension of that line. We take the future of our community into account not by fictitious cost-benefit calculations, but more concretely, by seeing ourselves as inheriting benefits and passing them on.

"Burke's complaint against the revolutionaries was that they assumed the right to spend all trusts and endowments on their own self-made emergency. Schools, church foundations, hospitals – all institutions that had been founded by people, now dead, for the benefit of their successors – were expropriated or destroyed, the result being the total waste of accumulated savings, leading to massive inflation, the collapse of education and the loss of the traditional forms of social and medical relief. In this way, contempt for the dead leads to the disenfranchisement of the unborn, and although that result is not, perhaps, inevitable, it has been repeated by all subsequent revolutions. Through their contempt for the intentions and emotions of those who had laid things by, revolutions have systematically destroyed the stock of social capital, and always revolutionaries justify this by impeccable utilitarian reasoning. *Homo oeconomicus* enters the world without social capital of his own, and he consumes whatever he finds.

"Society, Burke believed, depends upon relations of affection and loyalty, and these can be built only from below, through face-to-face interaction. It is in the family, in local clubs and societies, in school, workplace, church, team, regiment and university that people learn to interact as free beings, taking responsibility for their actions and accounting to their neighbours. When society is organized from above, either by the top-down government of a revolutionary dictatorship, or by the impersonal edicts of an inscrutable bureaucracy, then accountability rapidly disappears from the political order, and from society too. Top-down government breeds irresponsible individuals, and the confiscation of civil society by the state leads to a widespread refusal among the citizens to act for themselves."

Scruton, Roger. *How to be a conservative* (Kindle Locations 425-438). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

"Although the social contract exists in many forms, its ruling principle was announced by Hobbes with the assertion that there can be 'no obligation on any man which ariseth not from some act of his own'. 1 My obligations are my own creation, binding because freely chosen. When you and I exchange promises, the resulting contract is freely undertaken, and any breach does violence not merely to the other but also to the self, since it is a repudiation of a well-grounded rational choice. If we could construe our obligation to the state on the model of a contract, therefore, we would have justified it in terms that all rational beings must accept. Contracts are the paradigms of self-chosen obligations – obligations that are not imposed, commanded or coerced but freely undertaken. When law is founded in a social contract, therefore, obedience to the law is simply the other side of free choice. Freedom and obedience are one and the same."

Scruton, Roger. *How to be a conservative* (Kindle Locations 464-467). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

"Unless the 'contract between the living' can be phrased in such a way that the dead and the unborn are a part of it, it becomes a contract to appropriate the earth's resources for the benefit of its temporary residents."

Scruton, Roger. How to be a conservative (Kindle Locations 495-496). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

"We can envisage society as founded in a contract only if we see its members as capable of the free and responsible choice that a contract requires. But only in certain circumstances will human beings develop into rational choosers, capable of undertaking obligations and honouring promises, and oriented towards one another in a posture of responsibility. In the course of acquiring this posture towards others, people acquire obligations of quite another kind – obligations to parents, to family, to place and community, upon all of which they have depended for the nurture without which the human animal cannot develop into the human person. Those obligations are not obligations of justice, such as arise from the free dealings of human adults. The Romans knew them as obligations of piety (pietas), meaning that they stem from the natural gratitude towards what is given, a gratitude that we spontaneously direct to the gods."

Scruton, Roger. How to be a conservative (Kindle Locations 501-507). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.