

THE LOCUTORIUM

THE PERSON IN BATTLE

An interview essay with Roger Scruton, by Gabriel Torretta, O.P.

In April 2008, Aliza Shvarts began a bold trajectory to shock-art stardom with an installation originally intended to be her senior art project at Yale. Shvarts claimed to have spent nine months artificially inseminating herself and taking abortifacients at 28-day intervals, filming the results on a camcorder. Self-destruction disguised as art-installment was nothing new, of course, and the proposed final form of Shvarts' project (never realized) positively dripped with shock-art clichés—fake (?) blood, Vaseline, hundreds of feet of plastic sheeting, and a box full of unpleasant secrets, all of which was to be chaotically lavished with four different projected video feeds. That the whole event proved to be a hoax—as near as anyone can tell given the schizophrenic exchange of denials and counter-denials from Shvarts herself—was no more surprising than her appearance on MTV two years later, pontificating with pop profundity on a Kanye West video.

The Shvarts debacle and its highly choreographed media life-cycle sits at the destructive confluence of currents in contemporary culture; while being itself a radical extreme, it was made possible by the streams of isolation from others, alienation from one's own body, ideology, rootlessness, and consumerism on which the tree of modern life is fed. The Shvarts affair is an unconscious incarnation of the problem David Foster Wallace confronts in *Infinite Jest*: In a world that has jettisoned any more meaningful sources of identity than entertainment through self-satisfaction, realities like



SHITAO - CONVERSATION AT THE EDGE
OF THE VOID

the self, the person, and humanity tend to vanish under the raging waves of solipsistic despair.

But the streams of Shvarts' and Wallace's world have also fed the field of the New Evangelization, a vast horizon of white-ripe wheat that too often collapses and rots for the want of a harvester who knows how to reap it. And small wonder: Some of contemporary culture's streams seem too tainted to produce anything but bad fruit, so one finds it difficult to resist the temptation to write off mainstream culture as a ruined nihilistic mess and turn instead

to smaller fields fed by purer streams. Happier Keats' Arcadia, "with streams that deepen freshly into bowers," than the world's troubled waters.

Fortunately, some of our contemporaries have neither blindly embraced modern culture nor left it to its own devices. The philosopher Roger Scruton has spent much of his life exploring the philosophical, cultural, religious, and political roots of contemporary Western culture, in its strengths and weaknesses.

His project has been one of both analysis and remedy, to elucidate the perilous moves that have pulled us away from our traditional sources of meaning and to search for ways to allow that meaning to speak to us anew.

Though himself a Christian, Scruton has chosen to begin his philosophical reasoning by granting certain premises of the Enlightenment in order to make the case for a revivification of tradition from within the modern conceptual framework—namely, that God is dead or at least inaccessible, that it is epistemologically impossible to work backward from the experience of the world to derive a proof of God’s existence, that man longs for a transcendence that he can feel emotionally but never know rationally, and “that there is no going back, that we must live with our enlightened condition and endure the inner tension to which it condemns us.”

These presuppositions give Scruton’s philosophy a striking shape; heavily influenced by Kant, Hegel, and Burke, he recognizes an unsatisfying “inner tension” in the Enlightenment thinkers, which he seeks to overcome with an interpersonal ethics that shows traces of both Buber and Levinas, grounding morality in the lived encounter with other persons, not in theoretical abstractions. Sharing Kant’s wonder at “the starry sky above” and the developments of modern science, Scruton is fluent in the modern scientific debates and their philosophical implications, especially in the realms of neuroscience (on which he is currently writing a book), genetics, and evolutionary biology; likewise devoted to Kant’s “moral law within,” he limits the epistemological hegemony of modern science by suborning it to the science of the person, in which human meaning and reasons are found.

The post-Enlightenment search for the reality of the person has been a guiding leitmotif for Scruton’s prodigious career in letters, during which he has written more than thirty books. Most of his writings grapple with the problem of personhood in the present day, viewed especially through the lenses of aesthetics, culture, philosophy, and politics. Scruton’s distinctive focus on the person lends a gripping realism and depth to topics that in lesser hands

might seem overplayed or impossibly general, including animal rights, sexual desire, Wagner, environmentalism, architecture, the nature of beauty, even fox hunting.

After decades of exploring personhood under different lights, however, Scruton chose to make a complete if schematic analysis of the problems facing personhood in the contemporary world. Delivered as the 2010 Gifford Lectures and published in 2012 under the title *The Face of God*, Scruton's analysis shows that man currently labors under a threefold alienation that is both a cause and an effect of his loss of respect for the person: the alienation of man from man, of man from his world, and of man from God. This threefold alienation has left man adrift on the seas of materialist consumerism, turning more and more to entertainments that dehumanize and destroy. Commercial-political shock-art like Aliza Schvarts' is just a crude symptom of a larger problem: that we have forgotten the face of God and, in so doing, have become faceless ourselves.

In September 2012, Professor Scruton granted *Dominicana* an e-mail interview. In the questions that follow I have followed the path traced by his description of man's threefold alienation, exploring possible avenues for the rediscovery of the face of man, the world, and God. The inspiration for the questions comes largely from Scruton's two newest books, *The Face of God* and *How to Think Seriously about the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism*, along with his earlier work *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*. My goal was not to rehearse problematics already addressed in those books, but to reframe those ideas in new contexts, to apply them to new problems, and occasionally even to challenge them.

Professor Scruton's replies to my questions are brief but fruitful, pointing to new horizons for art, criticism, culture, and politics. My short discussions of his answers are a preliminary attempt to flesh out some of these new ideas, and are not intended to represent Scruton's own thought.

In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict states: “Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. That light is both the light of reason and the light of faith, through which the intellect attains to the natural and supernatural truth of charity: it grasps its meaning as gift, acceptance, and communion. Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality.” In contemporary America we see abundant evidence of the latter point: A company that gives to ‘charity’ could be supporting anything from shelters for homeless people to shelters for homeless cats, and will boast just as happily about either. In a society that sees impassable fissures between faith and reason, nature and supernature, how can authentic charity be renewed?

Scruton Replies: *I entirely agree with Pope Benedict. There are things which present themselves as charity but which are based on self-indulgent feelings and a wilful disregard of the truth. To renew the charitable impulse we must first see all that we have and wish to make our own as a gift. And then we must look for the other who rightfully requires a share of it. I don't know how to do this, and maybe you are right to imply that, without the recognition that our natural world depends upon a supernatural origin, it cannot be easily done, and certainly not easily maintained.*

The source and safeguarding of charitable activity is a vexing problem. The right ordering of property has always been a key concern for Christianity, from the dire warnings about the miserly rich in James 5:1-6 to the early Church's concern for almsgiving, through to the social doctrine of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. John Paul II's *Centessimus Annus* in particular emphasizes the supernatural horizon that gives Christian temporal charity its meaning, arguing that the Genesis creation accounts reveal that “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring

anyone. This is *the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods.*"

Yet at the same time that encyclical suggests a possible grounding for charitable activity in the natural law of human personhood:

A person's work is naturally interrelated with the work of others. More than ever, work is *work with others* and *work for others*: it is a matter of doing something for someone else. Work becomes ever more fruitful and productive to the extent that people become more knowledgeable of the productive potentialities of the earth and more profoundly cognizant of the needs of those for whom their work is done.

Work attains its meaning as an activity among persons, so labor and its fruits cannot be considered as radically isolated realities; even though the individual has his due right to private property, goods of themselves carry a relational character that carries with it an inbuilt direction toward mutual satisfaction of needs through both shared labor and charity.

While the status of creation as a universal gift from the benevolent Creator is surely necessary to reign in and correct man's perpetual misunderstandings about the nature of property, perhaps a natural, philosophical argument stemming from the relations among human persons could provide a foundation of truth on which to build a local culture of charity freed from the sentimentality that springs from an inadequate understanding of man and his relation to the world. Such a personalist charity, grounded in reason and the nature of man yet open to transformation in grace, may provide a common starting point for both Christians and non-Christians seeking to revitalize the practice of charity.

In speaking of charity in the quote above, Pope Benedict raises the important question of communion, a particular kind of unity shared only between persons. Historically our notion of the person stems from the early Christian struggle to understand the Triune

God, and the need to see other humans as persons in the image of the God who is a communion of persons is a major heritage that Christianity has bequeathed the world; given the widespread secularization of Western culture, what is the present state and future fate of personhood?

Scruton Replies: I think the Trinitarian view of God is important for the reason you imply, that it makes personal relations central to the highest way of being. It also endorses our attempts to see each other as persons rather than as animals. My own view is that Islam is in a state of crisis today because it has never recognised the personality of God, or His corresponding need for relations of mutuality with His creation. Christians don't suffer from that crisis. But our secular world is beginning to lose the sense that personhood is another mode of being from the being of animals. My own philosophy has been an attempt to rescue personhood from that predicament, to present the truths of the Christian vision to people who are no longer Christians.

Intellectually, the notion of personhood is in a strange place now. As Scruton notes, many intellectual trends have devalued or outright rejected the idea of personhood, arguing that man-as-person is a kind of self-protecting and irrational myth used to separate us from other forms of life that we wish to be free to use and abuse; think of certain extreme branches of neurodeterminism, reductionistic models of evolutionary biology, or political/economic modes of impersonalism like communism, fascism, and consumerism. Other intellectuals, from the existentialists to Buber to Scruton himself, have formulated profound theories of the person that share a conceptual background with the Christian origins of the person while speaking from a fundamentally secular worldview.

Christianity itself has, on one hand, experienced a profound recommitment to the theory of the person and its centrality to the

faith; theologians as prominent as Luigi Giussani, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI have proposed the mystery of the person—both divine and human—to contemporary man with renewed fervor. On the other hand, many Christians have lost the idea of God as a person—let alone as a Trinity of persons; the most recent *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* from the Pew Forum in 2007 shows that only sixty percent of self-identified U.S. Catholics, sixty-two percent of mainline Protestants, and seventy-nine percent of Evangelical Protestants acknowledge a personal God.

The loss of a sense of a personal God may betray an unreflective willingness to absorb prevailing secular trends about the unimportance of the person. Regardless of the source, however, the path forward for man surely involves a re-awakening to the irreducible mystery of the person, a path that will itself begin by rediscovering that, in the words of Benedict XVI, “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

The Internet in particular poses difficult problems for communion and personhood in the realm of communication. The explosive growth of pornography is an obvious example of the depersonalizing effects of Internet technology, but even more neutral entities like anonymous blogs and social media like Facebook and Twitter have inherent tendencies to reduce the human person from a mystery to a collection of facts and opinions. Is it possible to personalize the Internet? How can the Internet be used to strength the bond between communication and personhood?

Scruton Replies: I wish I had an answer to the Internet problem. It is clear that it is easier to interest people in what is lowest and most demeaning through this medium. But of course I am replying to you by e-mail, and in that way showing that the medium can be personalised. We need a new form

of education, which begins from the premise that the Internet is dangerous, a sea of temptation and destruction, and that we must not embark on that sea until we are prepared. Facebook and Twitter are more dangerous than they seem, for they teach people to exist in another way, as a collection of transient images and sound-bites, with no lasting affections or beliefs, in a web of negotiable relationships which cannot be relied upon and which can turn from phony love to real hatred in the twinkle of an eye. But we can counter these things only through the Internet, developing sites in which children learn to be careful and learn also to be cared for in another and more lasting way.

Certainly one of the problems of the Internet is its nearly infinite series of possible uses. The old bromide that the Internet is like an ocean that's exactly one inch deep is both true and false; false because the Internet provides a means of genuine contact between people and a transmission of real knowledge in an inimitable way, as anyone who has ever used Skype or JSTOR can testify, but true because the sheer number of possible uses of the Internet often prevents anyone from using it deeply. Like a greedy dog that has barely tasted one bone before trying to snaffle another, the incautious Internet user finds himself drawn in so many directions at once that he never does anything worth mentioning.

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter pose a related problem: by offering perpetual access to the private lives of everyone one has ever met, they tend to prevent the focused attention and individual love that is necessary for the growth of a real relationship between persons. In his curmudgeonly work *In Praise of Shadows*, the Japanese novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichirō describes how he tried every possible means to prevent the entry of a telephone into his house, and then hid it from sight once he finally caved. Tanizaki's insight is a warning to the Internet culture: He was, in part, concerned about losing the integrity of his life and

relationships by having them become too easy, too public, and too ever-present.

For further reflection on the potential evangelical harms and uses of the Internet, I refer the reader to “Disputed Questions: Preaching and the Internet,” an exchange of ideas between Br. Clement Dickie, O.P., and Br. Innocent Smith, O.P., on the subject, contained in the Winter 2011 issue of *Dominicana*.

Moving from questions about man to the world in which man finds himself, I’d like to explore some of the theological and anthropological implications of contemporary environmental concerns. In your book on environmental theory, *How to Think Seriously about the Planet*, you emphasize that environmental crises stem in part from man’s desire to push the cost of his actions onto other people, be they powerless members of the same society, invisible members of other societies, or, perhaps most dangerously, unborn members of future societies. The philosopher Rémi Brague has argued that secular society, lacking a credible account of the connection between past, present, and future people, is incapable of providing its members with a real incentive for limiting present satisfaction for the sake of hypothetical people in the distant future. What solution do you see to the problem of present incentives for future goods?

Scruton Replies: *Rémi Brague is right that, in a secular society, the connections between present, past and future generations are weakened. This is part of what Burke had in mind in criticising the secular philosophy of the French Revolution, and the Social Contract in particular – namely, that it vested all power and all right in those living now, and so permitted the squandering of resources and the destruction of savings. One of the benefits of a public religion is that it puts all matters of present politics in the perspective of an unchanging relation between man and God, and thereby, as Chesterton puts it, enfranchises the dead. The Romans had an*

interesting approach to all this, not requiring of their citizens to practise any particular religion, but insisting on the place of pietas in everyday conduct, and an acknowledgement thereby of the fragility of our world. Whether we can, in our situation, revive a kind of secular piety is another question – but I say something about this in my book, in particular in the chapters on home, Heimat etc.

Scruton provides valuable background for these issues in *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, arguing that, after the Enlightenment, Western society lost the unreflective heritage of common culture, adopting consciously created and chosen aesthetic ideals or ideologies. These ideals have crumbled, however, leaving the present popular culture without a tradition inherited from the past or a strong vision of the future that includes the present, encouraging people to live as if only the current moment and its satisfactions will ever be real. A current tagline on the Pepsi webpage captures the idea perfectly: "NOW IS ALIVE, FUN AND FEARLESS. NOW IS REFRESHING. NOW IS EPIC. AND MOST OF ALL, NOW IS WHAT WE MAKE IT."

But how are we to speak of *then*—be it the past or the future—to the Now Generation? Unsurprisingly, Scruton's answer lies in the rediscovery of the person, in finding ways to call attention to the individual's embeddedness within a network of interpersonal relationships and thus help him to realize his responsibility to hand on to the future what he has received from the past. Scruton fleshes out these ideas in admirable detail in the chapters he alludes to in *How to Think Seriously about the Planet*, and I refer the reader to them for a more thorough treatment.

We will pick up this thread in more detail below, but here we should note that the difficulties associated with reconstructing a secular *pietas* are surely as troublesome as the difficulties surrounding a rediscovery of true religion. The cultural forces of the twentieth century have all worked to encourage an indifference or even a distaste for a future that we will never see; the normalization

of intentionally childless romantic partnerships, both heterosexual and homosexual, a disposable market of consumer goods, even the accumulation of national and personal debt militate against any organic notion of intergenerational responsibility. Attempts to ground contemporary ethics in a transmittable natural philosophy of personhood are important steps in the right direction, but we may find that the sterilizing effects of modern secular culture can only be reversed by conversion to a worldview informed by someone wholly Other—by a rediscovery of the face of God.

What should Christianity's response to environmentalism be? Rather than merely adding a supernatural gloss to a fundamentally natural behavior, is there a properly supernatural dimension to man's dwelling in the land? What does a theological environmentalism look like, and how does or doesn't it overlap with contemporary environmental movements?

***Scruton Replies:** Contemporary environmental movements tend to be aggressively secular, and often growing from the residue of leftist hostility to capitalism and free enterprise. But there are exceptions. The Church of England has taken environmental issues seriously, and Ian Christie has been a great force in advocating this. I think Christians are naturally disposed towards care for their environment and for the earth, since they understand both as a gift from God over which we are stewards. Our accountability for the earth is written in our destiny, and the Bible presents us with a picture of the earth as a habitat entirely adapted to our needs. What the Christian religion can add to environmental movements is the belief in, and experience of, the sacred – the recognition that we live among consecrated things, and that we should approach them with reverence and not treat them merely as instruments for our fleeting purposes.*



CASPAR D. FRIEDRICH - MORNING IN THE SUDETEN MOUNTAINS

Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate* provides a useful context for Scruton's notion of the Christian sacrality of the environment, both affirming it and providing proper limits to its application:

When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation.

The Christian attends to the environment precisely because God has given him dominance over creation, a gift that must be lived as received from the previous generation and handed on to the next. The environment is sacred in that it both points beyond itself to the Creator who made it out of love and exists as a divine gift held in trust.

Christian environmentalism does not exist in its own right, but rather as a subset of theological anthropology. The Christian cannot understand the environment unless he understands who God is, who man is, and how the two relate. Augustine sings a paean to the structures of nature in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* because he sees nature as a means of divine communication with man, not because he believes nature to be divine; Boniface chopped down an ancient tree because a group of Germanic pagans were worshipping it, and were thereby forgetting their own humanity. Christians seeking to join the environmental movement should strive to bring with them this salutary balance of exuberant love for the created world and grateful respect for the place God made for man within it.

I'd like to close with a question reflecting on man's relation to God. In *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* you give a compelling account of the state of contemporary Western society:

A community that has survived its gods has three options. It can find some secular path to the ethical life. Or it can fake the higher emotions, while living without them. Or it can give up pretending, and so collapse, as Burke put it, into the 'dust and powder of individuality.' These are the stark choices that confront us...

In the book you defend the first option, "the way of high culture, which teaches us to live as if our lives mattered eternally."

And yet, the crises that have undermined high culture in the present day seem as severe as the intellectual crises that led large sections of the West away from Christianity, including the fraught heritage of the Enlightenment, the collapse of modernism into post-modern ironic 'kitsch-art', the rootless wanderings of popular culture, and the resilience of a reductionistic neuro-psychological view of the human that leaves no room for beauty or art, just to name a few. Since contemporary culture has apostatized from high

culture as much as it has apostatized from Christianity, I wonder if a fourth option might not be at least as reasonable as the three in your list: the culture can discover that its gods are still alive.

Granted that neither the fourth option nor the first—the rediscovery of Christianity as a dynamic encounter with the living God or the rediscovery of high culture as a source of ultimate meaning—will be easily achieved, why should a society—or an individual—turn to a simulacrum of religious experience when it—or he—could turn instead to genuine religion?

Scruton Replies: I agree with you that the high culture in which I have always put my trust has been effectively destroyed by its own appointed guardians, and that without the religious core it persists only as a fragile shell. So the fourth option is, perhaps, the only one available. But this means, as you say, rejecting the premise of modern life, that God is dead, and starting all over again, seeking for the living God, and hoping to be visited by his grace. If people are prepared to live the religious life, then their example will once again make this course available to the mass of mankind, and there will be hope. At the same time, we must constantly fight those who are trying to destroy the memory of the spiritual way of life, and assailing all those things in which that memory is contained. In particular we should exercise our aesthetic choices in art devoted to the ideals of beauty and order, and refrain from the kind of desecration that has become the norm in modern art schools.

Presupposing the philosophical conclusions of the Enlightenment has given Scruton the tools to assess the problems of modernity from within, delivering even his harshest critiques in an idiom that remains credible and familiar to the secular reader. Any writer must choose the battles he wants to fight at the outset of a project; Scruton's choice has been to begin with the Kantian stance that the metaphysical questions of God's existence should

be supplanted—even if not answered wholly in the negative—by epistemological and ethical questions about man himself, and to argue in defense of the human person from there. His project is fixing modernity, not abandoning it. Scruton's dozens of books and distinguished academic career testify to the effectiveness of his choice.

Yet a question remains about the inherent limitations of such a project. If any of the conclusions of the Enlightenment are wrong, then an internal critique that builds from those conclusions will eventually begin to impugn its own presuppositions. Scruton's invaluable work on modern culture does precisely that; having argued from rational, Enlightenment principles, he shows how post-Enlightenment culture has proven unable to offer a coherent answer to the human question. Moreover, this culture has been unable to protect the human person from its worst impulses, as Shvarts' clichéd violence-as-art—and the very fact that it is a cliché—makes abundantly clear. Scruton's project is emphatically not proving God's existence, but he has convincingly shown that a culture that declares the death of God, in so doing, signs its own death sentence.

A Catholic response to Scruton's analysis must be subtle. To use his conclusions as an excuse to reject modernity entirely, as if modern man could be saved by sidestepping the last four hundred years and returning to a (largely imaginary) philosophical and theological golden age, is illusory and dangerous in the extreme. Likewise, ignoring the implosion of modern culture and striving to reshape Christianity according to the principles of the Enlightenment results in irrelevance at best. What we are to do, then, just *is* the question of the New Evangelization: how to speak about God once "God is dead" is dead.

Scruton points to an answer that resounds with the Gospel *kerygma*: Be open to grace, look for God, seek his face, be changed by his self-revelation. Let the event of Christ, the reality of the God-man, guide and transform all aspects of life, from daily

experiences in the family to the creation of art. Only a people that has been transformed by grace can be an example that will draw others. But to be a city on a hill, the City of God must produce the fruits of any city: brotherly love above all, expressed in care for the environment; temporal charity; and the love of beauty in art, architecture, music, and literature. Such a transformation need not be violent or antiquarian; Christianity took the best of Roman, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon culture and made them better by healing their wounds. The same has occurred throughout Christian history, and it can happen again if we have the courage to face modernity on its own terms, open to the Gospel.

Roger Scruton's philosophy is a proposal. In the midst of ideological media whirlwinds like Aliza Shvarts' shock-art or the hopeless, entertainment-seeking rootlessness described so aptly by David Foster Wallace, Scruton has spent forty years steadily and patiently re-proposing the concept of the person, suggesting that key loci of contemporary relativism—sex, aesthetics, and politics—can be sources of meaning and tradition when grounded in the irreducible personhood of the human being.

Perhaps, he suggests, we have trouble seeing the face of God because we have lost the face of man. As C.S. Lewis says of the gods in his masterful retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, "How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?" I can think of no more apt answer than that given by Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*: "Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear." The task of the Christian in the modern world is to live, write, speak, and make art in the light of Christ, to grapple anew with the deep mysteries of man and so be led to the Father.

Gabriel Torretta entered the Order of Preachers in 2008