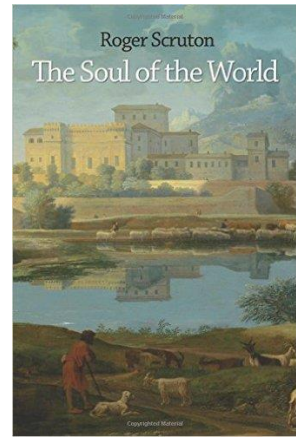


Roger Scruton

The Soul of the World

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Notes by Alison Morgan August 2015



Book based on lectures given in the Divinity Faculty, Cambridge, in 2011. 'My intention has been to draw on philosophical discussions of mind, art, music, politics, and law in order to define what is at stake in the current disputes over the nature and ground of religious belief.'

My notes, often using his words – direct quotes marked as such.

1. Believing in God

Current discussions arise partly from the confrontation between Christianity and modern science, and partly in response to 9/11. The first is an intellectual confrontation (about the nature of reality), the second an emotional one (about how we should live). Within the second, there is a connection between sacrifice and meaning; the meaning of life can be said to reside in the thing for which one's own life can be sacrificed. Some religions demand sacrifice of others, some demand self-sacrifice. If there is progress in the religious history of mankind, it resides in the gradual preference of the self over the other as the primary sacrificial victim. It is in this that the Christian religion rests its moral claim.

Evolutionary psychology produces a picture of religious belief that discounts its rational credentials – it's all about group selection, it's an adaptation like any other. The problem is that whereas our behaviour may promote the goal of reproduction, our mental states do not; our thinking latches onto a realm of necessary truth, and reaches far beyond the puzzles that we need to solve. What is mathematics about? – because puzzling over it is of no use for group survival.

'To explain religion in terms of its reproductive function is to leave unexplained and indeed unperceived the central core of the phenomenon, which is the religious *thought* – the *aboutness* of the urge to sacrifice, of the need to worship and obey, of the trepidation of the one who approaches holy and forbidden things and who prays for their permission.' – 7-8. Atheists must be challenged to find arguments directed at the content of the belief, rather than at its origins. The problem they must overcome is the problem of God's presence. People who are looking for God are not looking for the proof of his existence, but for an encounter with him, one which occurs in this life but reaches beyond it. Those who claim to have found God always speak in these terms – of intimacy, trust. Further, this has a social dimension, for you don't just believe a religion, you belong to it.

Christianity is unique in that its sacraments rehearse the solution that previous explorations of the sacred could not find, which is the self-sacrifice of God.

2. Looking for people

There is another function that religion performs: the maintenance of the life of the person. Religions focus the moral sense, ring-fence those aspects of life in which personal responsibilities are rooted (sex, family, territory, law). They feed into emotions, like hope and charity, which lift us above those which rule the lives of other animals, and cause us to live by culture not by instinct.

What is a person? The word comes from the Latin *persona* or theatrical mask; in Roman law it was taken up to denote the subject of the law, with his rights and duties. In philosophy Boethius said a person is an individual substance of a rational nature; it's about identity. So – Locke asks, can a person have a different history from the human organism in which he is embodied? It's about our capacity to reason, Kant suggests; it happens when I distinguish myself from others and compel them to recognise me, says Hegel.

Science cannot tell me who I am, or where, or when or how; a scientific description of the world does not mention which of the objects within it I am; the identification of any object in the first person case is ruled out by the enterprise of scientific explanation. That doesn't mean we have only a subjective existence, though; we are both objects and subjects.

We can know the world through science, offer systematic answers to the question 'what exists?' But the world can be known in another way, through the practice of *Verstehen*. We see the world in two ways: essential rationally, and emotionally. Take Beethoven's 3rd Piano Concerto. From the point of view of science this consists of a series of pitched sounds, one after the other, identified by frequency. But we don't hear a series of pitched sounds, we hear a melody, a kind of action in musical space. Or take art: you can describe a picture fully in terms of its represented subject, which is seen in the distribution of coloured patches. But... The things we hear in music are not illusions; someone who fails to hear them does not hear all there is to hear, just as someone who fails to see the face in a picture fails to see all that is there. Music is part of the real world, but it is perceivable only to those who are able to respond to sound in ways that have no part to play in the physical science of acoustics. 'We might conclude it's as absurd to say that the world is nothing but the order of nature, as physics describes it, as to say that the *Mona Lisa* is nothing but a smear of pigments. Drawing that conclusion is the first step in the search for God.' 40.

3. Looking at the brain

Neuroscience claims to provide better explanations for human behaviour than can be obtained from philosophy. And yet the concept of the person resists translation into the idiom of neuroscience. Our lives form a continuous narrative in which individual identity is maintained from moment to moment and year to year- we can't be dismissed as adaptations hardwired into our brains. Our behaviour is not predetermined; we have choices, and we can behave altruistically.

'Information' bears thinking about – for a person, it's a fact, explanation, concept; for a computer, it's an algorithm, a digitally coded input.

Consider Botticelli's Birth of Venus. It contains information quite different from the digitalised instructions which might produce it on a screen; information that, information about something. So how do we move from one of these concepts of information to the other? How do we explain the emergence of thoughts *about* something from processes that are entirely explained by the transformation of visually encoded data? Because the difference is *interpretation*.

How should a philosopher approach the findings of neuroscience? By saying there can be one reality, which is understood in more than one way. So in describing a sequence of sounds as a melody, I lift the sounds out of the physical world, and reposition them in the human world, the world of our responses, intentions and self-knowledge.

But how then do we know we are not dealing in fictions, once we have done this? Might the concepts of person, freedom, reason and accountability form a shared hallucination which will vanish when the matter of human life is seen with the cool eye of science? The test is the fact that the subject (me) is always realised in the world of objects (you). In all our responses to each other, we look into the other; our existence and identity are formed in the context of relationships, the I-You encounter. This intentionality of relationship is what makes the evolutionary and reductionist perspectives on the human condition so hard to accept; and explains the complaint that our secular societies suffer from a spiritual deficit. In all that is deepest in our lives – faith, love, friendship, family, art, music, literature – we address the other.

4. The First-Person Plural

We know ourselves through our network of free interactions; the concept of person can be explained only in terms of first-person knowledge and I-to-You encounter. We could not replace our way of understanding each other with some science, however comprehensive, of the human brain.

Discussion of the concept of rights and how that influences our understanding of self. The concept of rights is embedded in human reason itself, and forms the basis of our political order. Rights are however often inflated – beyond 'natural rights', which are rights to be free from this or that form of harm, to something which is simply about our interests. The idea of natural rights is that they stand outside moral or legal controversies, whereas now it's used to take sides in such controversies. Hence the growing list of 'human rights' that have no grounding in our ordinary free dealings, but which exist to achieve some overarching political purpose.

We have other contractual obligations: things we choose to bind ourselves to. We see this in the difference between a contract/vow, justice/piety, affection/love. The second in each pair creates an existential tie, not a set of specific obligations. (The vanishing of marital vows represents a transition from status (the 'substantial unity' of marriage) to contract, and is evidence of the state refashioning marriage for a secular age.) All three are non-transferable attachments, and by their nature they invest the other person with a unique value which

distinguishes him from all others in the universe. A world without such bonds is one in which we cannot be truly at home, because the transcendental dimension has gone.

5. Facing each other

When I look at a face, I do not understand it biologically, as the visible film that encases another brain and lets in, through eyes and ears, the information that the brain is processing. I understand it as the real presence in our shared world of *you*. When I confront a face, I am not confronting a physical part of a person, as when I look at her shoulder; I am confronting *her*, the individual centre of consciousness. So for example there are deceiving faces, but not deceiving shoulders! We do not simply look at each other; we look into each other. The face is the symbol of our individual and a display of his individuality. To say what it is we see when we see a face, a smile, a look, we must use concepts from a language other than the language of science.

6. Facing the earth

'Myths of origins are attempts to make sense of the human condition, by projecting human nature back to an imaginary origin unencumbered by history and institutions. The myth displays a world in which persons exist *from the beginning*, and uses that device to explore the predicament of persons here and now.' 115 Myths of origins contrast sharply with the science of origins. Such myths try to explain the transition from the life of the human animal to that of the human person; this cannot be understood through the lens of biology. The concept of beauty, the aesthetic experience, the awareness of the sacred, move us similarly away from a purely physical world into a different realm. When the world looks back at me with my eyes, as it does in aesthetic experience, it is addressing me in another way – it is revealing to me the fundamental truth that being is a gift.

7. The sacred space of music

Art, literature and music belong to the world that is shaped by our own consciousness, and we study them not by explaining how they arose but by interpreting what they mean. Explanation has a method, and it is the method of science. Interpretation goes in search of a method, but is never sure of finding one. Darwinism has now invaded the humanities, explaining that the meaning of art and music resides in what they do for our genes; they are simply adaptations which contribute to our survival. So a woman who sings to her baby is more likely to bond well; so her singing increases the chances of his survival – and over time, this means that singing becomes a part of who we all are. Or take beauty; peacocks have lovely tails because they impress peahens. Or take art – women fall for artists just as peahens fall for peacocks, so art becomes valued. The problem with this is that it's upside down. Natural selection in fact works the other way round – maladaptive traits are not selected. Of everything that exists it could be said that it has not disappeared under evolutionary pressure – which tells us nothing at all about how the thing in question came to exist. Take music. Music is there to be understood, and understanding it is not about neural pathways or acoustical relations; music is a movement in musical space. It's a theme that unfolds, and that cannot be put into words. Take Beethoven again. The melody moves from C up to E-flat. But what moved? Not C; not some kind of musical ectoplasm that travels across the void between semitones... Music does not work as a language works. In fact it's unclear today whether music is to be listened to or merely overheard – or maybe even just *looked at*, as the sound effects fill the background of a gripping video. And dance – the music of mass culture is based not on melody but on repetition, and those who dance to it do not so much dance with their partners as dance at them – for there is no 'with' established by the musical line. It's addictive, rather as sex outside the world of vows is addictive, object-based and ultimately unsatisfying. Just as words go out towards the thing they cannot touch or meet, towards the subject that no words can encompass, so does music go out into a space beyond the order of nature, where untouchable things reside. It reveals something about our world that perhaps cannot be stated or explained. Music contains emotion – eg sadness. We listen say to Rachmaninov, and we hear the contours of sadness (drooping, weariness, heaviness); but the features we hear are not present in the music in any literal sense. We are dealing with a metaphorical perception, not a real one. 'Music is a movement of nothing in a space that is nowhere, with a purpose that is no-one's, in which we hear a non-existent feeling the object of which is nobody. And that is the meaning of music.' 166.

Great works of art are the remedy for our metaphysical loneliness. They make a difference to our lives; they grant us an intimation of the depth and worthwhileness of things. 173.

8. Seeking God

I have introduced the reader to 2 fundamental thoughts: first, that the I-You intentionality projects itself beyond the boundary of the natural world, and second, that in doing so it uncovers our religious need. The first thought finds confirmation in music, which addresses us from beyond the borders of the natural world. The second is implied throughout: there are many ways in which we move beyond the physical world and encounter the sacred. The key question is – is the sacred merely a human invention, or does it come to us also from God? Aft, literature and history tell the story of our religious need, and our quest for the being who might answer it. Where does that need come from?

Creation – physics has no use for the idea of creation. In our own lives, though, we are constantly confronted with the thought of nothingness. I am confronted constantly by the thought that this me, which I know only as subject and cannot know as object, will one day be destroyed without remainder. The self is composed of nothing, and therefore leaves nothing behind. Death is the boundary of my world. When I look at the dead body of another, it is no longer that other, but an object that belongs to him. He has vanished. It is proof of his nothingness and a warning that the same fate will be mine – which is why we treat dead bodies with such honour. They are gifts received by those who have left them, now to be given back, relinquished by the community in a collective act of sacrifice.

The 'I' is transcendental, which doesn't mean it exists elsewhere, but that it exists in another way, as music exists in another way from sound, and God in another way from the world. '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. Why not say, rather, that we stand here on the edge of a mystery?' 185. God exists outside space and time, and yet we may encounter him as a subject within it. Just as I myself am both an organism and yet also a free subject whose identity does not lie within that organism.

Thinking again about neo-Darwinian theory, which explains the appearance of design in nature through natural selection operating on random genetic mutations – but which encounters serious difficulties in accounting for the basic forms and body plans of species. It is apparent that more information is required to make a viable animal than the information stored in its genetic code.

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. To approach death is to draw near to God.

Alison Morgan

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk

www.resource-arm.net