Booknotes

A common complaint about contemporary philosophy and philosophers, at least in the English speaking world, is that they do not discuss topics of interest to the general educated public, or if they do, they do so in a way that repels the ordinary reader. So it is gratifying to be able to point to two recent books which not only buck this trend, but which tackle matters of the highest relevance to the way we live now: love and saving the planet. Both topics have indeed taken on a quasi-religious aura in our time, a point not over-looked by our authors. But there is, as we will see another and perhaps rather unexpected convergence between Simon May's *Love: A History* (Yale University Press, 2011) and Roger Scruton's *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet* (Atlantic Books, London, 2012) – apart from the fact that both are extremely well-written in ways we have come to expect from each of these authors, sharply aphoristic in May's case and elegantly spirited in Scruton's.

Both books are also rich in argument, analysis and detail, in ways which preclude us from giving more than a very broad brush account of their content. May's book is indeed a history of love, the prelude to a second book in which he will develop his own account of this endlessly puzzling phenomenon. In the present book, in Nietzschean-genealogical mode, he uses history to explain how it is that love has come both to play so prominent a role in our culture, and also so misunderstood, even mistaken a one. May discerns four key stages in this history, the unconditional love demanded by the capricious God of the Old Testament, the Platonic vision of love as a stage on the way to transcendence of this world, the Augustinian-Lutheran moment in which God enters humanity in such a way as to make us capable of unconditional love, and finally the period ushered in by Rousseau (ours) in which all this weight which love has accrued in Western sensibility is thrown on to the loved human person, who is, of course, unable to answer to it or satisfy the lover. So we become mired in three damaging illusions, that (human) love is unconditional, that it is eternal and that it demands complete selflessness, none of which it does or can or should be. Nor should it lead us to a denigration of this world: that way lies Wagnerian *Liebestod*, which is what happens once (mere) human lovers, without religious hope, start on the Platonic road.

While May thinks that love (in which he includes love of children, friendship and loves of many types as well as the romantic and sexual)

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has become 'overloaded', he neither denigrates it, nor is his own account without ambition. On our own, as individuals, we are all inherently vulnerable and insufficient. What we need is what he calls ontological grounding or rootedness in someone distinct from us, and this is what love is or could be. As such it is neither unconditional or unself-interested. Whether we get it or not from those we love is, of course, another question. We may be back with the capriciousness of the God of the Old Testament – or perhaps, as May warns us, with the flirtatious Philine of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, who loves freely and generously but where and when she will (captured perfectly in Hugo Wolf's enchanting song of that name). From the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Goethe's Philine, we await May's own treatise on love in his second volume with impatience.

Roger Scruton's green philosophy is the result of long and profound thinking both about conservation and about politics. It includes, among other things, judicious and well-balanced reviews of issues such as global warming and trans-national environmental politics. Scruton also argues interestingly against the precautionary principle (where there is a risk, one must do everything to guard against it) and in favour of what he calls resilience, the capacity we have (and which has been built into us by evolution) to respond to problems as and when they occur. He advocates research into new types of energy and is critical of much large scale environmental legislation and its unintended consequences, and he places more faith in market solutions to problems than many environmentalists, seeing in them the very self-correcting mechanisms large scale governmental initiatives all too often lack (though he is sharply of consumerism, and many of its manifestations such as supermarkets, packaging and foreign holidays).

But underlying these discussions of often familiar topics is an impassioned argument in favour of what Scruton calls oikophilia, love of home, and against its antithesis, oikophobia. Many left-wing thinkers and politicians, and many environmental campaigners have been, and are, in Scruton's terms oikophobes, that is to say they are contemptuous of local loyalties and traditions and use state or international power to ride rough-shod over them. For Scruton, this is not just wrong in itself; as we see in popular responses to much EU legislation it is likely to be counter-productive. The best hope for the environmental movement – and in that sense for the planet – is to encourage and foster a love of one's home, one's locality and one's nation, so that people resist desecration of their earth, and then of the earth more generally.

In this context, Scruton points to the benign and positive effect Ruskin and his followers in England (in the National Trust and

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elsewhere) have had in fostering a genuine care for the environment and the landscape. Drawing on the poetry of Rilke and on speculations about how in attachment to landscape the idea of the sacred survives the fading of religious belief, Scruton says 'we must live in another way, with a kind of tenderness towards places and their history, towards the things we see and name, and which are refashioned by age after age, until they live in our hands and eyes as part of ourselves.'

Readers may argue about how far oikophilia can take us in addressing environmental questions, but following Scruton's elegantly insistent exposition, few will deny its value and significance; for many it will seem a far more secure starting point in our deliberations about the environment than what too often look like the alarmist exaggerations of professional environmental campaigners and their draconian policy proposals.

The point of convergence between May and Scruton is that both see a sense of home as ontologically or existentially necessary, and both write movingly about its significance in a post-religious age. The deep question this raises is whether what they are looking for can ultimately be supplied non-religiously. But, what may be of immediate interest to readers of *Philosophy* will be to see the extent to which these genuinely important works of serious philosophy find a home in the corridors of university philosophy departments.

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