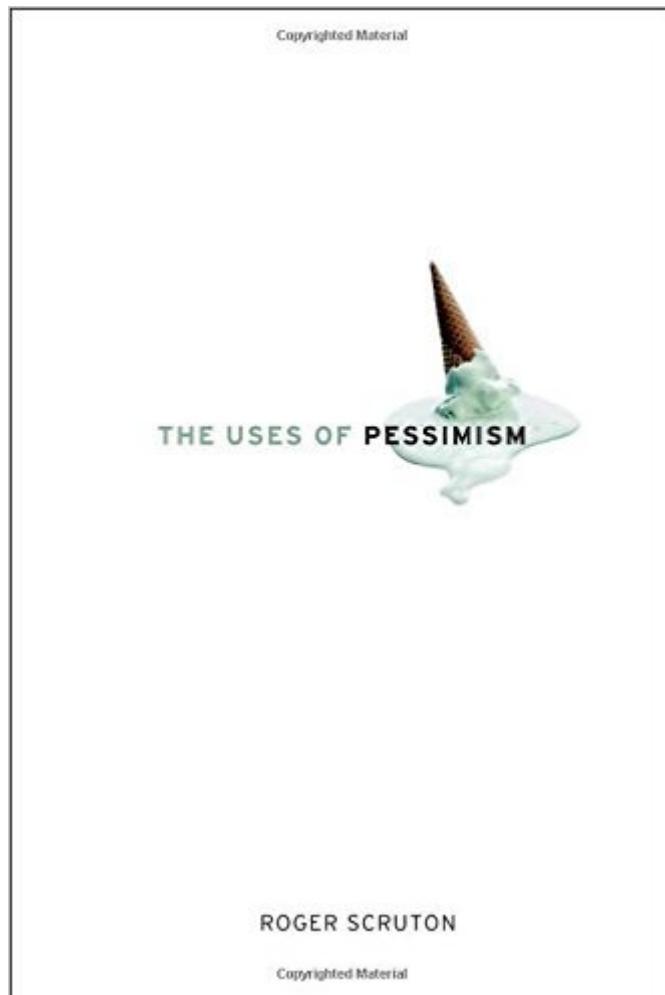


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The Uses Of Pessimism: And The Danger Of False Hope



Synopsis

Ranging widely over human history and culture, from ancient Greece to the current global economic downturn, Scruton makes a counterintuitive yet persuasive case that optimists and idealists -- with their ignorance about the truths of human nature and human society, and their naive hopes about what can be changed -- have wrought havoc for centuries. Scruton's argument is nuanced, however, and his preference for pessimism is not a dark view of human nature; rather his is a 'hopeful pessimism' which urges that instead of utopian efforts to reform human society or human nature, we focus on the only reform that we can truly master -- the improvement of ourselves through the cultivation of our better instincts. Written in Scruton's trademark style-- erudite, sweeping in scope across centuries and cultures, and unafraid to offend-- this book is sure to intrigue and provoke readers concerned with the state of Western culture, the nature of human beings, and the question of whether social progress is truly possible.

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Customer Reviews

Roger Scruton's concern in this wonderful essay is with the dangers of false hope (his subtitle) and the particular fallacies that make such "unscrupulous optimism"--the term he takes from Schopenhauer to distinguish it from a scrupulous and constrained optimism--so powerful and impervious to reason. The fallacies he considers include among others the Best Case Fallacy (i.e., the failure to consider scrupulously worst case scenarios), the Planning Fallacy, the Utopian Fallacy, and the Zero-Sum Fallacy (I fail because you succeed). In the abstract, these are useful cautions that no-one sensibly could dismiss out of hand. But Scruton has a more important and more

polemical purpose. He aims to show how these fallacies pervade a larger social and political vision that has been ascendant since the Enlightenment and especially the deadly triumph of "Reason" in the French Revolution. That vision of Reason rests on an unscrupulous optimism that sweeps away the collective problem-solving of generations codified through customs, traditions, and laws built from the bottom up, like English and American common law or Swiss political arrangements. It replaces that common, inherited wisdom with the will of the radical and enlightened few. The utopian or planning elite sweep aside all previous traditions and practices, along with the wishes of ordinary people, who have to be led to a higher level of wisdom by the progressive, forward-looking vanguard. The force of Scruton's argument lies in the detail and concreteness with which he specifies these dangers in every aspect of life, not only in totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, but also as destructive forces in the democratic West. He describes in chilling and vivid detail the bizarre grip of the EU bureaucracy on the once democratic and sovereign nations within its orbit. He shows how hundreds of thousands of regulations are issued at an accelerating rate by an unaccountable bureaucracy whose many mistakes cannot be rectified through democratic processes. Once adopted, those measures cannot be repealed by the nations involved. By the founding treaties of the EU, measures that centralize control in the EU cannot be reversed without constitutional change or leaving the Union altogether. When the Irish electorate rejected the Lisbon Treaty, the bureaucracy merely said that citizens should vote again. Scruton shows how brutally the bureaucrats sweep away the customs and traditions of centuries, in the process destroying, for example, family farming and the countryside of Romania. He describes how a European directive requiring the presence of a qualified veterinarian at every abattoir led to the closing of most local abattoirs in England, requiring that cattle be taken much greater distances to be slaughtered, so that when disease did break out it spread across the country instead of being localized. Scruton is particularly scathing in his account of modern architecture, with its contempt both for history and tradition and for the wishes of the people who were to live in and around its brutal structures. Le Corbusier, a key modern architect whose megalomaniac plans are still studied reverently in architecture schools, comes in for particular scorn. Another twist to Scruton's anti-utopian argument is that the self-image of the progressive elite as more advanced than the masses whose lives they want to manage, is itself illusory. An important aspect of the book is the effort to explain these fallacies' resistance to reason or evidence. They are, he argues, residues of an earlier stage of human development, one that still holds value in emergencies, but is destructive in times or conditions of peace. There is an implied analogy here to the fight-flight response--once essential for daily survival, but now often dysfunctional as a pattern of intensified arousal in

conditions that do not require it. The tabula rasa vision of the human being--found in notions of constructing a new "socialist man" or a new human type or, in its weirdest manifestation yet, in a transhuman type that is seen as replacing humans with cyborgs or a new genetically engineered post-human species--casts aside those compromises and constraints that previously shaped us. In Scruton's view, then, the fallacies he describes are rooted in the material needs of hunter-gatherer bands, where everything depends on the will and decisiveness of the chieftain--the leader's collective 'I' is at the same time the 'we' of the community. One reason that the fallacies are so impervious to refutation is that they are "not new additions to the repertoire of human madness but the residues of our forefathers' honest attempts to get things right...thought processes that were selected in the life and death struggles from which settled societies eventually emerged" (p.203). Liberal, optimistic, progressive thinking is not, from this perspective, an advance on the ways and customs of the unenlightened masses, but a regression to more primitive ways of thinking. Scruton's purpose is to defend the world of compromise and half measures, love, friendship, irony, and forgiveness from the Pleistocene mindset of the enlightened that would sweep them all away. Scruton is an erudite, witty curmudgeon, always a delight to read. At times, his manner is reminiscent of a father who provokes his liberal and idealistic children by making provocative remarks he knows the young people will find outrageous. He knows there is nothing he can say that will persuade the younger persons to re-examine their views or look at them with a measure of irony. The elder will not be intimidated or silenced by the usual conversation-stopping insults (right wing, racist, sexist, bourgeois, hegemonic, etc.) but thinks it pointless to defend himself against them. However seriously misguided he thinks the young are, and however disappointed in their failure to take seriously the fruits of his knowledge, experience, and wisdom, he consoles himself by getting a rise out of them and a chuckle from the other grown-ups.

According to Scruton, the world is harmed not by pessimists (though he does not tolerate unbridled pessimism) but rather by unbridled optimists, people who believe in their fallacious ideas so fervently that nothing can dissuade them. True believers. Scruton, realizing that those folks would not hear his argument even if they read it, makes the case so that those of us who are prudent pessimists can recognize the optimists' tactics and understand better the importance of our pessimism. At just over 230 pages, this is a quick read and the language is not lofty, so potential readers shouldn't be too nervous about picking up the book. I think the book is so important that I may well buy several copies for friends and family.

Scruton turns the traditional pessimists are old farts v optimists are shiny believers in a better future debate on its head in this elegantly written polemic. It is wise pessimists who emerge the true optimists as they believe human life is not so bad as it is. It is the deep rooted ties and modes of social organisation that make for harmonious human living. The rationalist optimists who uproot these traditions, sacrificing them on the altar of a better future are the most negative and destructive people as they don't trust small scale human organisation as it is. This fallacy has been repeated throughout history, most notably in the French and Russian revolutions, both rationalist crusades. And its menace can be seen in the arts, with 'shock' and 'originality' - witness the notorious Tracy Emin's unmade bed replacing respect for forms and techniques of old. In architecture the egocentric 'I' schemes of Norman Foster and his colleagues have replaced the understated yet commonly held belief that buildings should be modest in scale and respectful of their surroundings. The EU holds no respect for individual communities, riding roughshod over local needs with its gargantuan bureaucracy. And in education, at least two generations of schoolchildren have been ruined by a child centred version of teaching which dismisses the traditional strictures of a knowledge based curriculum on the grounds that children should be free to express themselves before they have actually acquired anything worth knowing. Scruton's polemic is a wry and elegant treatise on the conservative beliefs he has developed throughout his life. It is a welcome addition to the literature on conservative philosophy.

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