

Book Review: Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet

by blog admin

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Roger Scruton argues that conservatism is far better suited to tackle environmental problems than either liberalism or socialism. He shows that rather than entrusting the environment to unwieldy NGOs and international committees, we must assume personal responsibility and foster local sovereignty. **Sarah Lester** finds this book offers an accessible and thorough review of a literature rarely discussed in conservative politics.



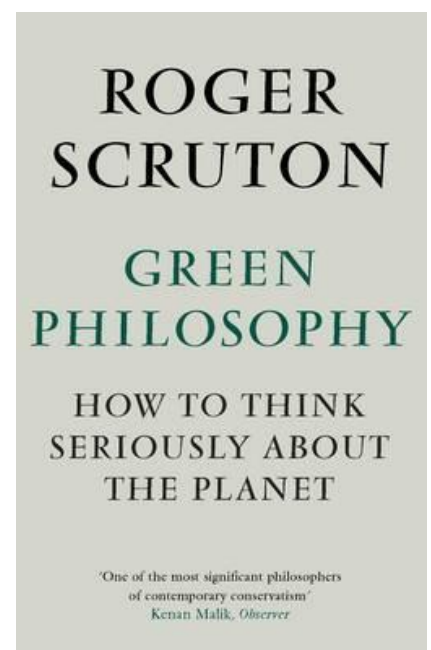
Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet. Roger Scruton. Atlantic Books. January 2012.

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In *Green Philosophy*, [Roger Scruton](#) aims to give a voice to the political right who wish to “think seriously about the planet”. Scruton is an English philosopher and writer who has published widely on the topic of conservatism and political philosophy. *Green Philosophy* is both admirably structured and well referenced — it is obvious Scruton has read more classic environmental texts than many of us could ever hope to read. Alongside reviewing the literature, the author argues that conservative right politics are more suited to addressing environmental problems than leftist social or liberal approaches. The book is extremely timely given its publication in 2012 amid a Conservative-Liberal coalition government which aims to marry economic efficiency and environmental protection.

Scruton’s main argument throughout the book centres on the twin pillars of a market-economy and the conservative individuals’ “love and feeling for home”, for which the author uses the term “oikophilia”. The chapters of the book addressing market forces focus initially on the role of the government: arguing that environmental problems should not be “confiscated by the state” (3). Scruton allows the government a structuring role, but in the same breath lumps many of the environmental failings of the past on governmental policies – especially those in the former Soviet Union. Unfortunately bad environmental policy can come from a variety of sources, state governments are not the only purveyor of environmental harms.

Scruton provides a decent summary of the key problems understood by the “leftists” of market failure, and then claims remarkably that “the tragedy of the commons is not due to market failure, but to market absence” (141). As a magician distracting with one hand and acting with another, Scruton then manages to reference both Garrett Hardin’s *The Tragedy of the Commons* and Elinor Ostrom’s *Governing the Commons* in support of this argument. The book’s discussion of market solutions really starts to stray from a logical path during chapter five: boasting a very limited view that “markets distribute costs to those who cause them and benefits to those who work for them”. If that was true it is doubtful whether the unpleasant working conditions and low pay in parts of Southeast Asia and Africa would exist and the Western world would have started to address the problem of climate change 10 years ago. The market solutions suggested by the book – property rights, stewardship, and the use of trustees to protect the environment – are interesting choices given the conservative preference for economic taxes or trading systems, and they also provide the book with a layer of depth that sets it apart from other texts in this genre.



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On the problem of presenting climate change to a wide audience, the book takes the line that “the global warming that is occurring may not be all man-made; but it is still our problem”. Thus avoiding having to present a history of climate change science and enabling the book to delve more deeply into mitigation ideas. For example, the sections on the precautionary principle are particularly well written, discussing the limitations of a ‘no-risk’ approach in the cases of cost-benefit system employed by the US Environmental Protection Agency and the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. While regulators and policymakers continue to disagree about the usefulness of the precautionary approach, the tool is still widely referred to in international climate debates and mitigation policy.

Finally, after a chapter entitled “Getting Nowhere” the book fleshes out Scruton’s ideas on oikophilia and “civic environmentalism”, which suggests that home-loving individuals will take responsibility for their local environments and that all people need a philosophy of conservation. Whilst this idea is in theory a great one, and arguably the thought at the centre of liberal theorist and those advocating behavioural change, the book’s version does appear to be one narrated by a Geography teacher from the 1950s reminiscing about the ‘old school curriculum’ (369). The key problem with these sections is the fictional world which Scruton portrays: many of us would like to think of an England with patch-work fields, log-fires, cosy cottages and boy-Scout troupes, but this England is a reality for few. The book’s recounting of English development history borders on a revisionist’s dream of a childhood filled with *Swallows and Amazons*, angling, and the stewardship and sportsmanship in a good game of cricket.

Whilst this description of oikophilia is moving and will connect with some individuals, Scruton also claims that “it is obvious to a conservative that our reckless pursuit of individual gratification jeopardizes the social order as that it jeopardizes the planet” (13). Is it? If so, someone should really enlighten [George Osborne](#), whose statement at last year’s Conservative party conference of “we’re not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business” may reflect the true opinions of many conservatives around Britain.

The book strongly advocates demand response, suggesting that individuals have a financial incentive to reduce their consumption. However, in the case of electricity demand this has largely been shown to be an incomplete idea as increasing prices have differential impacts on the amount of energy used by households. For a conservative, the idea that “the solution is to adjust our demands, so as to bear the costs ourselves, and to find the way to put pressure on business to do likewise” (17) is an outstanding suggestion. By that statement alone Scruton could be deemed an environmental leftist advocating behavioural change and limitations of lifestyle and wealth.

However, other solutions proposed by Scruton are named without real discussion – for example the introduction of a flat-rate carbon tax based on the amount of carbon in the production of goods, or creating a global cap-and-trade system (388). Stating possible policies for a solution without aligning himself to any specific ideas occurs throughout the book: Scruton’s appendixes on *Global Justice* and *How Should We Live* are examples of this and one might ask why these are not a central pillars of thought in Scruton’s “Green Philosophy” and why they are left for a few minor pages at the end of the book.

In general, Scruton’s book provides an accessible and thorough review of a literature not often discussed in conservative politics and for this reason is a welcome addition to a body of work which does traditionally attract the left-leaning reader. Perhaps as we barge forwards into 2013, we can take some suggestions from Scruton’s book: act as an individual, act with a green philosophy, and act now.

Sarah Lester is the Research and Policy Impact Analyst at the Grantham Institute, Imperial College London. This blog piece is written in her personal capacity. Sarah joined the Grantham Institute in June 2010, prior to this Sarah was at the Climate Policy Initiative at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin) and has also worked in the Electricity Policy Research Group at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include international and UK climate mitigation policy, electricity market reform, and methods of communicating scientific and policy research on climate change to incentivise systemic innovation and

change. [Read reviews by Sarah.](#)