

Connecting truth with beauty exalts them both

“Imagination, like reason, is a seeker after truth: it is a part of the alertness with which we encounter one another, and those who lack imagination see less than the whole,” says Xanthippe, the wife of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, in *Xanthippe’s Laws*.

Xanthippe’s Laws is a work of fiction, one part of the *Xanthippic Dialogues*, a series of highly sophisticated parodies of Platonic dialogues. They were written by an imaginative conservative, Roger Scruton, and first published in 1993.

The parodies have a serious philosophical purpose. In addition, they are literary masterpieces. Unfortunately, the brilliant defense of marriage and family that they contain is unheeded by “the moronic inferno” of our times.



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The phrase “moronic inferno” comes from author Saul Bellow, and while Martin Amis made it into the title of a book of observations on the insanities of modern life, perhaps the best and most convincing critique of our modern insanities can be glimpsed only through an ancient lens – for example, if we can imagine what Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates, might have to say to Socrates’ biggest fan, Plato.

Thus, in *Xanthippe’s Laws*, Roger Scruton has Xanthippe and Plato discuss “the truths which only stories can convey.”

The remark is exquisitely self-referential, because

this same fictional dialogue unfolds as a rich discussion between Xanthippe and Plato about politics.

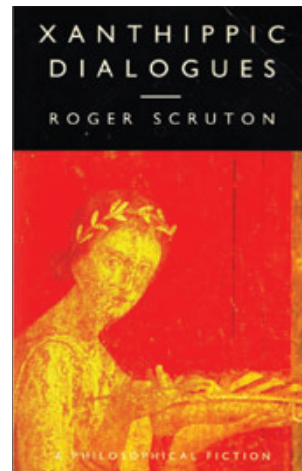
In the dialogue, we learn that the diversity that ought to flourish in our world is a diversity engendered by free associations, and not imposed from above by ridiculous fascist planning – the sort familiar to readers of Plato’s own *Republic* and *Laws*.

Scruton has Xanthippe and Plato speak about true and spontaneous human diversity, from which springs love, the most worthwhile thing in life. One section of their conversation reminds me of these lines from E.M. Forster in his novel *Howard’s End*:

“Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at

its height.”

Likewise, the following section from Scruton’s dialogue *Xanthippe’s Laws* exhorts us to “only connect,” but Xanthippe ob-



serves that this is impossible if government coercion and control extinguishes the fundamental space in which human connection might take place:

“PLATO: You are cer-

tainly right, Xanthippe. For the solitary man compares himself with no one, and – like Diogenes, whom they call ‘the dog’ – is blind in his heart to honour as he is blind to shame.

XANTHIPPE: But the person who is compelled into the company of others, by a tyrant, say, who is forced to march to another’s tune or brave another’s danger: such a person, I imagine, does not regard success as honourable, or failure as a thing of blame. For his goals are not his own. He acts for a purpose, certainly, and reasonably: he marches beneath the alien banner for fear of the whip at his back. But his action is a means, and not an end, and its fulfilment is no fulfilment of his.

PLATO: I begin to see what you are getting at.

XANTHIPPE: I too begin to see it. For it follows, does it not, that free associations are the true source of what is ultimately worth while, and of the motives – honour and shame – which make it so. It is from our little institutions – and I count the family as the most important among them, along with the brotherhoods and sisterhoods, the groups of kinsmen, the religious guilds and dining clubs – that the meaning of life, or rather the many meanings of life, derive. Without them, deprived of our goals, we can do nothing of value: all our actions then become means, and since nothing has intrinsic purpose, nothing has purpose at all. Our lives become lost in calculation, but the only object of this calculation is to survive the present moment and calculate again. Would you consider that a good life for a rational being?

PLATO: By no means.

XANTHIPPE: Indeed, it is not the life of a rational being at all, since no part of it is reasonable: nothing is done for a reasonable end, and therefore everything is done without reason.”

Tyrannical political forces, we learn from Xanthippe, oppose the right ordering of human affection. By nature, ordered love is meant to flourish as a by-

product of small but beautiful human associations, those “little platoons” in which our lives and loves are ordered and enacted – the family especially.

Edmund Burke wrote eloquently against tyranny in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. “To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind.”

“The interest of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it; and as none but bad men would justify it in abuse,” wrote Burke, “none but traitors would barter it away for their own personal advantage.”

As Pope Francis said back in March: “There cannot be true peace if everyone is his own criterion, if everyone can always claim exclusively his own rights, without at the same time caring for the good of others, of everyone, on the basis of the nature that unites every human being on this earth.”

But as technological observer Marshall McLuhan said, “The new information environment tends to supplant Nature.” In the age of “the moronic inferno,” the desecration of beautiful things is everywhere.

Love and connection, attachment and affection – about such beautiful things, there are nonetheless still “truths which only stories can convey.”

And if our imaginations were to “only connect” truth with beauty, then both would be exalted, and human love would be seen at its height.

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