

Advice to the Philosophically Perplexed

J. C. Lester

Despite receiving high praise from Professors Barry, Narveson, Flew, and Gray (see the [first page](#) of the paperback), the review puts the level of *Escape from Leviathan* (*EfL*) as “undergraduate” and rates it one star.¹ While undergraduates may profit from reading *EfL*, it is not mainly at their level. Norman Barry specifically warns “this book is not to be recommended to beginners”. The review either applies unusually high standards of philosophical argumentation or is simply philosophically perplexed.

It is hard to answer the charge that libertarianism is “implausible” when no alleged examples or arguments are given. To explain and defend relevant theories of rationality, liberty, welfare, and anarchy is not “ingeniously redefining key terms”. Theories, not definitions, are important; as Karl Popper rightly saw and as is agreed with in the book’s introduction (p. 3). And these theories are defended as being independently plausible rather than merely compatible in an *ad hoc* way.

No argument is given as to why an apriorist theory of instrumental rationality cannot legitimately and usefully embrace “desire, value and reason for action” (as *EfL* argues it can, at some length) and thereby allow for economic analysis rather than dogmatic assertions of ‘irrationality’ and ‘incommensurability’. Therefore, it is hard to reply to the review’s apparent incredulity. *EfL* also explains how it is possible that we need not “desire some [of our own] desires” (if you desire to smoke, you might also have a second-order desire not to have that desire) or “value some [of our own] values” (if you feel that you value your appearance to a narcissistic degree, you might also have a second-order value not to have that value). But as it is *not* explained why the review finds this “perplexing”, it does not seem useful to add anything.

The review asserts that the “definition” (really, an abstract theory) of libertarian interpersonal liberty (the absence of [initiated] imposed costs) “attracts obvious counterexamples”. But the only suggestion of an offered counterexample is the confused question, “is inherited debt really a lack of liberty?” If my father’s debt were to be simply imposed on me (rather than merely to be taken out of his estate before any remaining inheritance is passed on), then that would seem to be a restriction on my liberty. If I willingly took on his business knowing it to be in debt, then that would not. Where is the “obvious” problem?

The review does not grasp why or how *EfL* uses a non-moralised theory of liberty (as the implicit abstraction that is presupposed by libertarianism). It is because the book is defending the positive thesis that (libertarian) liberty does not systematically clash with overall want-satisfaction welfare or private-property anarchy: an extreme version of “the classical liberal compatibility thesis” (as *EfL* calls it). This is explained clearly in the introductory chapter and referred back to throughout. Morals are an irrelevant distraction from this positive claim. That is why it does not discuss “say, absence of illegitimately imposed cost?” (as the review asks). As all this is thoroughly explained in *EfL*, it is foolish to ask “Why seek to maximize it? Why even care if it is compatible with welfare?” and state that “No answers are given”. It is foolish in the sense not only that answers are given, but also in the sense that the compatibility of these things is obviously of great moral and practical consequence (as is also explained in the introductory chapter).

The review also finds it a “perplexing claim that ‘what I have control over I own in a *de facto* sense’” and asks, “Is, even *de facto*, ownership ever just a question of control?” The answer is yes.² If the review had a counterargument to the given explanation, then it would be possible to reply to it. And again, “Can one add, as Lester does, that if there is liberty, then there is ownership [...]?” Yes, one can add that; and one will be right. And *EfL* adds it with arguments.³ The review states that *EfL*, “cannot appeal to a normative (i.e. moralized) requirement to avoid imposing costs on others, to avoid lessening

¹ S. Meckled-Garcia booknote on *Escape from Leviathan*, *Political Studies* (September 2001, p. 786).

² If I have ultimate control over something, then I have what is in effect (or *de facto*) ownership, even if the legal institution of property does not yet exist. But to avoid confusion, it is probably better to leave property unmentioned in the state-of-nature application of the abstract theory.

³ If interpersonal liberty is hypothesised as maximally to be applied to a state of nature, then one has ultimate control over oneself and any unused resources that one starts to use. The institution of property is only then contingently entailed as a practical way of defending such liberty.

liberty, by not taking what they have made”. It does not need to appeal to the normative. The theory of liberty rules out *initiated* imposed costs. Making something from natural resources does not usually *initiate* imposed costs on other people (significantly and non-reciprocally⁴). But “taking what they have made” usually does *initiate* imposed costs on them (significantly and non-reciprocally). Therefore, if liberty is assumed to be instantiated, then “taking what they have made” is logically precluded.

As *EfL* is critical rationalist (the review offers no evidence of understanding the short introductory chapter), it does not have any “foundational premises”, so “the value of reading this book” can hardly depend on them. This “value of reading this book” remark also appears to suggest that one should not value reading books with which one has fundamental disagreements. That is a very foolish intellectual position. On the contrary, one should seek out such books as being of especial value in challenging one’s central theories. Then one should read them carefully to make sure what they are actually arguing. Then one should attempt to formulate real arguments against them. This is all alien to the current practices exhibited in the review.

The review concludes, “It is also worth remarking that the notion of duty, or responsibility, does not even feature in the index”. Not only is this not worth remarking, it is clear evidence that the review does not properly grasp the nature of the basic non-normative thesis that the book is defending.

Even as a first-year undergraduate review, this is an F.

(July 2002; revised January 2022.)

⁴ For philosophical explanations of the qualifications, see Lester, J. C. 2022. Eleutheric-Conjectural Libertarianism: a Concise Philosophical Explanation, PhilPapers: <https://philpapers.org/rec/INDNLA>.