

Tibor Foaming with Much Blood

Applying critical rationalism, all criticism is to be welcomed. A serious response can help to elucidate matters even when the criticisms are poor, misconceived, and hostile. Thus, we turn to the review.¹ It begins with this mangled pseudo-quotation:

“As far as I can tell, no one has hitherto provided an adequate account of liberty in this sense [‘It is about the voluntary interaction of persons rather than selfish individualism, as its detractors sometimes misrepresent it’].”

The part in square parentheses is included as though it might be a sufficient explanation of what went before. Far from it. It is a small part of a longer passage that is itself merely introducing the general idea of liberty that is about to be discussed. The point of the first assertion is that a clear formulation of *liberty* in the libertarian sense did not appear to exist. And such a clear formulation is what is being attempted in that particular chapter.² *EfL* tentatively offers its own version of this small but important aspect of libertarianism. Nowhere does it say or imply that “no one has hitherto done as good a job as the author at treating a vital issue in political philosophy”. So, it is not clear why the review holds that “this amounts to either hype or a very significant piece of intellectual news”. The review objects that “no list of contenders is provided”. But, as the review even quotes, there do not appear to be other contenders as regards a clear formulation. However, *EfL* explicitly says that Murray Rothbard and David Friedman have typical approaches and what is wrong with those (71ff). Not being foundationalist, *EfL* does not attempt to “back up” its formulation of interpersonal liberty; but to explain it and defend it from criticism. As it is short but crucial (the absence of [initiated] imposed costs), why does the review not bother to quote or criticise it? And why does it not tell us what its own preferred formulation is?

EfL starts by saying, “There is only one thing that is seriously morally wrong with the world, and that is politics”; but “morally” is carelessly omitted in the review’s misquotation. This is not “quickly qualified” (as the review asserts) by stating what is meant by that: “all that, and only what, involves the state”. To make something explicit is not to qualify it. If someone says he has a doctor as a neighbour, he does not qualify that by adding that he means a physician and not someone with a PhD. Two small points, perhaps, but typical of the carelessness in what is a quite short review.

When writing of what is “seriously morally wrong with the world”, it ought to be obvious that *EfL* is referring to alleged general heavyweight contenders such as capitalism, environmental degradation, patriarchy, man’s immoral nature, etc. It should be clear enough that it means that the state is the greatest single moral evil by a very long way indeed (does any libertarian doubt this? does the review doubt this?). In any case, to pique the reader’s interest, a certain rhetorical generalisation does not seem out of place in an opening line of a book. It immediately goes on to explain that all other major worries are caused or exacerbated by politics or not really problems at all. By comparison, any remaining “crimes by individuals” and “personal failures” (that the review cites) are indeed relatively insignificant. A world without politics would be orders of magnitude better than it is now. But then perhaps the review is not pro-anarchist and, if so, is more sympathetic to politics. It states of these lesser individual problems, “One may assume that we will not find [them] among what is ‘wrong with the world’ ... Or ... they are the fault of politics”. Of course, these lesser wrongs are still wrongs and not all the fault of politics; and nothing *EfL* says implies otherwise. That the review can find it “evident from this much, this is a provocative but annoying book” shows more about its own careless misreading and animus than the book itself.

We are then told, “The author makes all kinds of general allegations against people who have worked on various issues with which he is concerned”. What are these “general allegations against people”? Could this be an accusation of libel? No, the review says “their ‘arguments have been rarely

¹ Machan, Tibor. “A Hobbesian Defense of Anarchy” reviewing J. C. Lester’s *Escape from Leviathan: Liberty, Welfare, and Anarchy Reconciled* (*EfL*) in *The Review of Politics*, Volume 63, Issue 3, Summer 2001, pp. 612-614.

² A more recent attempt is, “[The Heterodox ‘Fourth Paradigm’ of Libertarianism: An Abstract Eleutherology Plus Critical Rationalism](#)”, *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Volume 23 (2019): 91–116.

clear, consistent, comprehensive, and nonmoral’’. But what *EfL* actually says is that “such arguments are rarely clear, consistent, comprehensive, and non-moral”. This assertion is explicitly and only about *arguments*, and only those concerning the extreme version of the, implicit, libertarian/classical-liberal/pro-market “Compatibility Thesis” (of liberty, welfare, and anarchy) that the book is out to defend. It is hard to see how this assertion can reasonably be construed as, “all kinds of general allegations against people”.

The review continues: “We are not told why it is not paradoxical to consider it *wrong* to discuss matters of normative politics in non-moral terms. What sense of ‘wrong’ is being deployed here if not at least a mildly moral one?” Presumably, that “non-moral” should be ‘moral’. The introductory chapter explains the objective (or positive) nature of the thesis that is being defended and why, therefore, moral advocacy is avoided as irrelevant and potentially confusing. It does not suggest that it is “wrong” ever to discuss politics in moral terms. Otherwise, it would hardly have that opening sentence (which the review misquotes by omitting “morally”).

The review objects to “all this self-congratulation”. It is entirely irrelevant to any philosophical argument in the book, of course, but the review might have cited *one* alleged example (given that it appears to be making “general allegations against people”). It continues, “The more modest task of the author, once we discount the hype, is to defend ‘the practical compatibility of liberty and welfare in the market’.” That “task” is intended to be a bold conjecture and it probably does not strike most readers as in any way “modest” (they might even regard it as “hype”). Moreover, it is the only overall task. So, there is no other task than which it could be “more modest”.

We are then told that the book interprets human “welfare” as “subjective satisfaction”. No, that is not how welfare is theorised. Welfare is explained and defended as having one’s unimposed (or spontaneous) wants satisfied, which might not lead to an end-state of “subjective satisfaction” (as with preference utilitarianism, utility is a motive and not a goal). The review might have made fewer such errors if it had only quoted accurately.

It asks: “Does the author manage to dispel the notion that the view being advanced is a grand tautology?” And yet it does not mention the idea that, in those limited aspects where this particular point might appear relevant, the defence explicitly involves a critical-rationalist interpretation of *a priori* arguments. Does the review hold there is no difference between what is tautological and what is *a priori*? We are simply not told.

The review then writes of “Lester’s claim that valuing and desiring are identical”. Again, a quotation might be useful here. A reader might easily think that this claim is asserted somewhere in *EfL*. It is not. It is explained how values can plausibly and innocuously be interpreted as special kinds of desires; for the purpose of subjecting them to economic analysis. That is not to say values are identical with desires any more than saying that cats are types of mammals is saying that all mammals are cats. As the review then restates its own fairly conventional views without addressing *EfL*’s arguments, which criticise such views, the reader is referred to the arguments it ignores.

EfL follow many philosophers, not least David Hume, in defending the compatibilist view of freewill: that freewill is not inconsistent with determinism (and, indeed, seems to presuppose it). Perhaps there is genuine indeterminism at the quantum level. But that only seems to allow for some randomness rather than a radical ‘free will’ in the self-determining sense that escapes both determinism and randomness.³ So *EfL* follows the common usage of ‘free will’ as not being compelled by other people, as the review correctly sees. Perhaps this would be inconsistent, as the review implies, with a theory that “places such significance on the idea of *initiated* force”. But *EfL* does no such thing. It goes to some length to explain why initiated ‘force’ or ‘coercion’ needs to be replaced by the idea of initiated imposed costs when theorising liberty.

This typically slapdash slip aside, how can one answer the review’s question: “where is this sense of the creative capacity of human beings which enables them to take the initiative?” As stated, *EfL* holds that we cannot escape determinism—unless with some quantum randomness—even in our brains. But this does not mean that we cannot have our own ideas about what we want to do, and have creative ideas through our conscious interactions with ideas and abstractions. The review does not offer any argument for how thoughts or actions can be initiated outside of determinism or randomness. A

³ For a more-recent suggestion that free will can escape both determinism and randomness, see Lester, J. C., *Two Dialogues*, Buckingham, England: The University of Buckingham Press (2017), pp. 24-26.

“natural event” can indeed restrict our “freedom” (in the sense of available opportunities), but that is simply not the *interpersonal* sense of liberty that *EfL* is addressing. And the reason that a “crime” (a non-trivial and foreseeable initiated imposition, in *EfL*’s terms) is “significantly different from some natural impediment” (as the review puts it) is that it is a result of a decision, even if determined, rooted in a particular person. Such decisions *can* be affected by whether they are disallowed on pain of penalty, or whether restitution will be enforced. This appears to presuppose some deterministic, or at least stable, framework of what a particular person is. By contrast, there is no point in making people liable for their mere bodily movements when these are caused by genuinely unforeseeable external accidents. Intelligent responses to compatibilism are possible, of course, but it is not relevant here to pose them and respond to them.

Of an *a priori* (Austrian economics) sense of ‘self-interest’ that *EfL* explains and defends, the review again totally fails to address the arguments and merely restates its own, trite common sense, position. It is as though *EfL*’s words were skimmed with just enough attention to spot the *apparent* thesis as an excuse to launch into the review’s manifesto. The review holds that *EfL* defends psychological egoism, and so proceeds to attack this theory. But *EfL* spends some time criticising that theory itself, while showing how genuine altruism is still usefully compatible with an Austrian-economics interpretation of ‘self-interest’: in short, as these are always interests *of* the self but not necessarily interests *in* the self.

EfL similarly argues how it can be useful and innocuous to treat various kinds of “pro-active attitudes” (as the review calls them, continuing: “wanting, wishing, desiring, intending or having as one’s purpose, for example”) as types of preferences. The review again objects by rehearsing its own view without bothering to show exactly where *EfL*’s arguments err. It suggests that “One may, for example, prefer to laugh at a funeral but chooses not to do so”. However, if one judges laughter to be too inappropriate, say, then surely one’s *overall* preference is not to laugh. The review seems to be using ‘preference’ to mean something like ‘initial inclination’. But that is clearly not the sense of ‘preference’ that *EfL* is defending. The review’s common-sense approach continues with the bald assertion, “Preferences are overridden a lot, as are desires, wishes and so forth”. This completely fails to explain how one is not doing, or trying to do, what one *overall* most prefers to do *under the perceived circumstances at the time*.

The review continues that it “is perhaps this that renders Lester tone deaf to morality, failing to appreciate how we can act because we let simple preferences have their way with us as opposed to considered judgments”. There is a fair amount about morality in *EfL*. It is all, what is sometimes called, meta-ethics: because the Compatibility Thesis is on the positive congruence of liberty, welfare, and anarchy (rather than arguing about what is morally preferable). As usual, none of this is quoted or faulted. The review simply contradicts it all by gesturing towards its own naïve view. And that view is so jejune expressed that it is far from clear that it is really inconsistent with what is being contradicted. *EfL* explicitly allows that our momentary preferences might sometimes get the better of our more considered judgements. But it explains how such things must be what we most prefer to do at the time, and how they do not appear wrong to us at the time. Hence, they do not escape ‘rationality’ in either the Austrian economics or the reasoning senses. It is not that *EfL* is “tone deaf to morality”; the review is ‘tone deaf to philosophy’ (i.e., precise philosophical argument).⁴

As explained earlier, *EfL* explicitly offers a libertarian theory of interpersonal liberty as, in abbreviated form, the “absence of [initiated] imposed costs” and tries to show how this solves various problems and paradoxes that arise with normal libertarian accounts. The review says of this, without even citing the exact theory or trying to explain its objections to it, “I do not think we have here anything terribly novel”. It is, of course, supposed to be an abstract theorisation of the implicit *libertarian* conception of liberty rather than something completely novel. But how many explicit theories of libertarian liberty are there? *EfL* cites a few of the, at best, somewhat vague ones and explains what is wrong with them and how *EfL*’s differs. The review continues that there is “certainly nothing that does not face its own share of difficult problems - e.g., with the ideas of initiated force, or voluntariness, neither much explored where it should have been”. Of course, *EfL*’s theory of liberty is full of “its own

⁴ A more detailed defence of *a priori* instrumental rationality can now be found in, Lester, J. C. “[Adversus ‘Adversus Homo Economicus’: Critique of the ‘Critique of Lester’s Account of Instrumental Rationality’](https://philpapers.org/rec/LESAAH-2)”, PhilPapers: <https://philpapers.org/rec/LESAAH-2>.

share of difficult problems”—which seems to concede that it is a separate and at least partly novel theory (or how could they be “its own”?). *EfL* spends some time dealing with possible problems with the basic theory before moving on to confront it with all the standard problems. What does the review expect? A simple and unproblematic account of liberty that causes everyone to kick themselves for not having spotted it before? And what *exactly* are the problems “with the ideas of initiated force, or voluntariness, neither much explored where it should have been”? For one thing, as already explained, the theory of liberty is about the absence of *initiated impositions* (which is explored *ad nauseam*) and explicitly *not* “initiated force” (which is explained to be a hopeless characterisation of what libertarians are against). *EfL* does say things about voluntariness. How are they problematic? No clues in the review.

The review moans, irrelevantly even if it were accurate, that *EfL* “fails to justify Lester’s boastfulness about the breakthrough work of this book”. Where is all this “boastfulness”? Where is “breakthrough work”, or anything equivalent, in the text? There is some minuscule publisher’s blurb on the inside backflap of the dust jacket that finally mentions “ground-breaking work”. Most people take a publisher’s blurb with a pinch of salt. But perhaps this is the ‘boast’ that has piqued the review. *EfL* also explains at length, in various relevant places, why and how it is not justificationist; and so not trying to “justify” anything.

At least *EfL* does its intellectual opponents the courtesy of comprehensively and accurately quoting them, and trying to deal with what they actually say (however mistaken, it is freely admitted, that it might be; e.g., p. 41). The “infelicities” that the review allegedly finds in the entirety of *EfL* appear to be dwarfed by the magnitude of those that the review really manages to cram into an extremely short review (even after dropping or correcting some of them, without acknowledgement, after a response to an earlier version of this reply).

Finally, the review complains about *EfL*’s supposed “idea of human motivation” and gives a quotation from Ronald Coase that it “might benefit from considering”: “There is no reason to suppose that most human beings are engaged in maximising anything ...”. But no “idea of human motivation” is advocated in the book. There are, rather, various *a priori* arguments about what it means for an *agent* to choose something or act on that choice. *EfL* explicitly says, “this view is not specific to any notion of economic *man*. There is no substantive theory of human nature here. This notion of self-interested motivation is naturally applicable to all beings capable of action” (p. 47). And to say that we seem *a priori* bound to act on what we are—on balance at that moment—most interested in achieving, does not entail that we are maximisers of any particular overall end. But why bother to pay any attention to what a book actually says when you already know all the answers?

The review “might benefit from considering” a point made by Friedrich Hegel:

The easiest thing of all is to pass judgments on what has a solid substantial content; it is more difficult to grasp it, and most of all difficult to do both together and produce the systematic exposition of it. (*The Phenomenology of Mind*, Preface, section 3.)

Or even its own favourite writer:

For my money this kind of assertion by a philosopher is disappointing and, indeed, may encourage a bad reputation for philosophy. Where does a philosopher come off asserting something for which no argument or evidence is provided? (Tibor R. Machan, Letter to *The Philosophers’ Magazine*. Issue 16; Autumn 2001.)

(September 2001; revised January 2022, partly because the version in *The Review of Politics* differs from the earlier one that was on *againstpolitics.com*—including corrections of some of the errors the original reply pointed out, but without any acknowledgement to that reply).