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Review

Flourishing and Synthesis

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*Flourishing and Happiness in a Free Society:
Toward a Synthesis of Aristotelianism, Austrian Economics, and Ayn Rand's Objectivism*
Edward W. Younkens
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xiv + 212 pp., index

That Edward W. Younkens is well and widely read is apparent in light of the diverse, mutually illuminating subjects he brings together in this short but impressive book: Aristotle, Ayn Rand, and the Austrian economists Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, and Murray Rothbard. These thinkers, and the schools they represent, are participatory, not wholly separate or distinct, in their celebration of capitalism. Each thinker has, to be sure, his or her own colorful methodologies and idiosyncrasies; but the differences among them are often overstated and under-analyzed, or treated with such closed-minded certainty that insistences on ideological purity preclude searches for significant commonalities.

The ideas championed by these thinkers are not only reconcilable, Younkens suggests, but complementary and profoundly, sometimes intimately, connected. "By combining and synthesizing elements found in Aristotle's writings, Austrian Economics, Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, and in the writings of neo-Aristotelian classical liberal philosophers of human flourishing," Younkens explains, "we have the potential to reframe the argument for a free society into a consistent reality-based whole whose integrated sum of knowledge and explanatory power is greater than the sum of its parts" (16). In an era of groupthink and infighting among those who profess individualism and liberty, reason and freethinking, the clarification of intersections between various lines of individualist thought is happy indeed. It's refreshing to read a book that aims to build rather than

demolish, coordinate rather than exclude. Differences of opinion are important, and there are certain issues on which reasonably and rationally minded people—Aristotelians, Objectivists, and Austrian economists included—will disagree. But differences of opinion are not all that matter.

Truth matters; knowledge matters; the future matters. To the extent that this book integrates the shared ideas and vocabularies of different thinkers, it, too, matters a great deal. It is, after all, through shared ideas and vocabularies, arrived at independently, over time, in disparate times and places, that individuals glean and confirm truth. Younkens seeks, to this end, nothing less than a reevaluation of existing paradigms in pursuit of perennial themes reflecting and describing truth. His is a work of synergy and fusion; his is a work of revivification.

Flourishing and Happiness in a Free Society opens with a “Preface” and an “Introduction” written by Younkens. Readers of this journal will not find anything original or surprising here. These sections, while noteworthy, merely lay the foundation for what is to come. They contain no footnotes, but provide extensive recommended reading lists and summarize unifying premises among the book’s principal foci: Aristotle, Rand, Menger, Mises, and Rothbard. In sweeping strokes, Younkens explains that later thinkers depended upon and revised earlier thinkers—that Rand, Menger, and Mises, for instance, borrowed from Aristotle even as they modified and reworked Aristotle. In conjunction with the “Conclusion,” which recapitulates the most important theses and arguments of the book, these sections “bookend,” as it were, the more substantive, detailed, and thorough chapters.

Two of these chapters initially appeared as articles in the pages of this journal; each of these chapters transitions from a thesis, to a summary of the schools of thought that Younkens shows are compatible, and finally to the syntheses that describe this compatibility in detail. In the first two chapters, Younkens condenses his syntheses beneath the heading “Toward an Integrated Framework.” These represent what Younkens calls “paradigms.” Lest a reader misunderstand his paradigms, Younkens graphs them in flowchart format (see, e.g., 22, 57, 98, 110).

The flowcharts will assist not only students struggling to reduce

Younkens’s arguments to “digestible” talking-points, but also experts who tend to over-scrutinize details and consequently fail to see the forest for the trees. I, for one, can see how a dedicated scholar, caught up in Younkens’s attempt to reconcile the value theories of Menger, Mises, and Rand (48–52), might miss the importance of this reconciliation to the praxeological methods of Rothbard, which harmonize with Randian thinking to the extent that they concern “the nature of man and the world, natural law, natural rights, and a rational ethics based on human nature and discovered through reason” (54); that they agree “that the purpose of political philosophy and ethics is the promotion of productive human life on earth” (54); that they determine “the proper rules for a rational society by using reason to examine the nature of human life and the world and by employing logical deductions to ascertain what these natures suggest” (54); and that they agree “on the volitional nature of rational human consciousness” (54).

It’s not possible in a short review to spell out each mark of solidarity or departure among Younkens’s subjects, so let me cite an example from the “Introduction.” Here Younkens lists elements of thought that his subjects have in common and that make up his synthesizing paradigm: “(1) an objective, realistic, natural-law-oriented metaphysics; (2) a natural rights theory based on the nature of man and the world; (3) an objective epistemology which describes essences or concepts as epistemologically contextual and relational rather than as metaphysical; (4) a biocentric theory of value; (5) praxeology as a tool for understanding how people cooperate and compete and for deducing universal principles of economics; and (6) an ethic of human flourishing based on reason, free will, and individuality” (21).

My only complaint with a list like this—and like other such lists in the book—is that it is so general as to lose its force. Although the elements in the list signify an underlying pattern, they are so vague, broad, and fluctuant that they could include schools of thought that clearly do not comport with the values and theories of Aristotelians, Austrians, or Objectivists. For instance, neoconservatism would seem to rely on an “objective, realistic, natural-law-oriented metaphysics,” just as it would seem to rely on a “natural rights theory based on the nature of man and the world.”

It's crucial to note, then, that the elements Younkens lists cannot be taken in isolation, but must be viewed in relation to the other elements. The elements, though different, work in concert; they're interactive—they combine and cooperate. It bears noting, too, that these elements do not add up to a “master science” or “cure-all” plan for human organization. Rather, they provide the intellectual fodder necessary for ideas to take root and blossom. Younkens cultivates a consistent, ordered application of multiple strands of theory, but he does not champion a top-down, one-size-fits-all political program based on the ideas he brings together. As he himself says, in plainly evangelical terms,

We must work in and through other people in order to get them excited about and dedicated to furthering the prospects of a free society. We have tremendous opportunities because each of us simultaneously participates in numerous associations with others. We can master and clearly present abstract systematic free-market theory in a readily accessible manner, advocate specific measures moving America in the right direction, discern ways in our daily lives in which we can practice the freedom philosophy, and create attention-creating devices such as slogans through which we can attract potential new believers. We must each use our rationality to select the actions that will consistently and constantly bring us toward the future free society in which we would want to live. (174)

When Objectivists are asked whom they admire among economists, they usually name Mises and reference *Human Action*. The objections and qualifications that follow this endorsement, however, specify that Mises's economic work is more appealing than his philosophy. Objectivists find Mises's philosophy to be too pragmatic and perhaps epistemologically deficient; they nevertheless endorse his economics—a tribute that they wouldn't extend to Hayek, whom Rand deplored. Despite all that, Objectivists and Austrians have been longstanding supporters of capitalism, and the Austrian school has served as an economic surrogate (of sorts) for Objectivists, though never without qualification. Younkens's book touches upon but

doesn't belabor major differences of opinion because Younkens seeks to “develop a powerful, reality-based argument for a free society in which individuals have the opportunity to flourish and to be happy” (157). He seeks, in short, to “outline the essentials of a worldview leaving it to philosophers and economists to fill in the details and to evaluate, critique, revise, refine, and extend [his] systematic understanding” (157).

I'm surprised, to some degree, that more people haven't meticulously and systematically expounded upon the correlations and congruities within and between the schools of thought that Younkens treats with vigor. I know several individuals who seem, at least in principle, to adhere to the teachings of Objectivism and Austrian economics simultaneously. These individuals, despite having noted the conflicts between these schools, still think of the schools as a pair. These individuals, moreover, are not always able to convey *why* they think this way, but perhaps what they have in mind involves the interrelations that Younkens describes. Put another way, perhaps these individuals can support Objectivism and Austrian economics at once because on some sublimated level, they consider the two schools as joined in modus and method. If that's the case, Younkens ought to be celebrated for expressing what some, perhaps many, have already sensed: that the constituent parts of Aristotelianism, Austrian Economics, and Objectivism are generative and instructive when taken together.