

## **EDMUND OPITZ AND THE CHASTENING OF SECULAR LIBERTARIANISM**

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*Abstract:* Edmund Opitz (1914-2006) was a major figure in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Christian libertarianism who advanced libertarian ideals in the face of widespread dismissal and opposition from Christian leaders. Beyond his correspondence with Christian leaders, Opitz pursued more sympathetic exchanges with secular thinkers in the libertarian movement. The common purpose Opitz shared with secular libertarians, however, did not dissuade him from challenging his collaborators to reconsider the metaphysical basis for the libertarian message. Drawing from previously unpublished correspondence between Opitz and Ludwig von Mises, this paper explores Opitz's own efforts to "chasten" his secular libertarian allies. Opitz was a Christian thinker uniquely positioned to critique both mainstream Christian collectivists, whom he faulted for eschewing the moral consequences of Christian faith, and secular libertarians, whom he challenged to embrace the metaphysical foundations essential to libertarian ethics.

*Keyword:* Opitz, Mises, Christian, libertarian, ethics

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

It would not be inaccurate to call the Reverend Edmund A. Opitz (1914-2006) the father of American Christian libertarianism. A former Unitarian turned Congregationalist minister, Opitz served for more than 30 years as a staff member of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), a major libertarian think tank currently based in Atlanta, GA. Prior

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to his work with FEE, Opitz was the regional conference director for Spiritual Mobilization, a national Christian libertarian organization that in its heyday in the 1950s published a periodical, *Faith and Freedom*, that reached over 20,000 Christian ministers.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s Opitz founded The Remnant, a national fellowship of conservative and libertarian-minded church leaders as well as the Nockian Society, an organization devoted to the work of libertarian iconoclast Albert Jay Nock. Over his career Opitz authored several books in which he sought to defend capitalism and libertarian ideals, believing them to be the natural consequence of Christian belief.<sup>3</sup> Opitz was unrelenting in challenging rival, more mainstream visions of Christian social ethics that in his view bowed to the false gods of socialism and the social welfare state.

In the early 1950s Opitz pursued extensive personal correspondence with prominent figures of the Christian academy including Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, Liston Pope, Amos Wilder, John Howard Yoder, Daniel Day Williams, Robert Handy, Ralph Roy, and James Luther Adams.<sup>4</sup> These engagements bore little public fruit, save for a single series of letters between Opitz and Union Theological Seminary professor John C. Bennett (1902-1995). Initially a private exchange between a former student and his professor, the Opitz-Bennett letters were eventually published in *Faith & Freedom* and were included by

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<sup>2</sup> See Eckard V. Toy, Jr. "Spiritual Mobilization: The Failure of an Ultraconservative Ideal in the 1950's," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 6.2 (April 1970): 77-86.

<sup>3</sup> *The Kingdom Without God: Road's End for the Social Gospel* (Los Angeles: Foundation for Social Research, 1956); *The Libertarian Theology of Freedom* (Tampa: Halberg Publishing Corporation, 1999); *Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1992); *Religion: Foundation of the Free Society* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Much of this private correspondence is preserved at the University of Oregon's Research Collection of Conservative and Libertarian Studies. I am indebted to the University of Oregon library staff for their assistance in accessing this material.

Opitz in several books that he authored.<sup>5</sup> Opitz's private correspondence reveals a man deeply committed to advancing libertarian ideals in Christian circles but ultimately struggling to gain a hearing among Christian leaders who dismissed him as little more than a shill for Big Business.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond his correspondence with Christian leaders, Opitz pursued more sympathetic exchanges with secular thinkers in the libertarian movement. Opitz regularly corresponded with libertarian luminaries like Ludwig von Mises and F.A. Hayek. While these exchanges with fellow libertarians were more generous than those he shared with church leaders, Opitz did not shy away from challenging weaknesses he perceived within the work of his secular libertarian allies. Throughout his career Opitz worked alongside secular libertarian leaders in making the case for limited government and free markets even as he interrogated the inability of secular libertarianism to offer a compelling account of its own moral commitments. Opitz was a Christian thinker uniquely positioned to critique both mainstream Christian collectivists, whom he faulted for eschewing the moral consequences of Christian faith, and secular libertarians, whom he challenged to embrace the metaphysical foundations essential to libertarian ethics. It is Opitz's chastening of his secular libertarian allies that is the focus of this paper.

## **II. OPITZ, MISES, AND "THE DOCTRINE OF SELF-INTEREST"**

The earliest version of this challenge came in the form of a paper Opitz wrote to an icon of 20<sup>th</sup> century libertarianism: Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973). An Austrian School economist, by the early 1960s Mises was a

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<sup>5</sup> See Edmund Opitz, *The Libertarian Theology of Freedom* (Tampa, FL: Halberg Publishing Corporation, 1999), 23-57.

<sup>6</sup> See Vic McCracken, "For God and Liberty: Edmund Opitz and the Moral Logic of Christian Libertarianism," *Revelation and Leadership in the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of Ian Arthur Fair*, edited by Andrei A. Orlov (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020): 161-180.

renowned figure in libertarian circles whose influence persists well into the contemporary libertarian movement. Opitz's relationship with Mises was both professional and personal, extending at least as far back as the early 1950s. In June 1952, Opitz attended a Mises seminar, and the following month he offered to assist the Mises family with sightseeing during their family vacation in Los Angeles. Opitz personally contacted Cecille B. DeMille to arrange a visit for Mises and his wife at Paramount Studios.<sup>7</sup> The following year, Mises wrote to Opitz thanking him for the invitation to attend a Spiritual Mobilization conference at Buck Hills Falls, speaking favorably of his experience at the event.<sup>8</sup> In 1954, Opitz wrote to Mises requesting permission to use a revised version of a quote from Mises's *Socialism* in the introduction to *The Kingdom Without God: Road's End for the Social Gospel*.<sup>9</sup>

In many ways the cordial relationship Opitz shared with Mises is a surprising testimony to the unlikely relationships forged during the fledgling days of the modern libertarian movement. Opitz was a congregationalist Christian minister. Mises was an agnostic Jew. Throughout his career Mises expressed overt skepticism about the possibility of reconciling Christianity with the moral ethos of capitalism. "It is an error to speak of the social teachings of primitive Christianity," said Mises in his 1922 work, *Socialism*.<sup>10</sup> Mises believed that the moral posture of Jesus's apocalypticism was one of cultivated indifference to worldly questions of production, those things that are soon to pass away. "Jesus was no social reformer," declared Mises. "His teachings had no

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<sup>7</sup> Opitz letter to Mises, July 31, 1952, series 1, box 25, folder 7, Ludwig von Mises Collection, Grove City College Archives, Grove City, PA. Documents from this archive hereafter cited as Ludwig von Mises Collection.

<sup>8</sup> Mises letter to Opitz, June 14, 1953, collection 009, box 1, folder 3, Edmund Opitz Papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, OR. Documents from this archive hereafter cited as Edmund Opitz papers.

<sup>9</sup> Opitz letter to Mises, June 8, 1954, series 1, box 25, folder 7, Ludwig von Mises Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Social Analysis*, translated by J. Kahane (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), 375.

moral application to life on earth, and his instructions to the disciples only have a meaning in the light of their immediate aim—to await the Lord with girded loins and burning lamps, ‘that when he cometh and knocketh, they may straightaway open unto him.’”<sup>11</sup> Jesus’s own words are themselves “full of resentment against the rich.”<sup>12</sup> Mises concluded that “[a] living Christianity cannot, it seems, exist side by side with Capitalism. Just as in the case of Eastern religions, Christianity must either overcome Capitalism or go under.”<sup>13</sup>

Mises’s perspective on the compatibility of Christianity and capitalism softened to some degree after emigrating to the United States, though his personal agnosticism did not.<sup>14</sup> Opitz’s personal correspondence with Mises offers a window into critical conversations occurring between Mises and libertarians he encountered in the 1950s and 1960s who not only perceived no conflict between Christianity and capitalism but who believed capitalism to be the economic system most compatible with the tenets of Christian faith. In June 1960, Opitz wrote privately to Mises referencing an argument between them that began at a Foundation for Economic Education Trustees’ meeting the prior year.<sup>15</sup> With his letter Opitz included a 9-page single-spaced manuscript of an unpublished paper entitled “The Doctrine of Self-Interest.”<sup>16</sup> In this paper Opitz directly critiques views expressed by Mises in Mises’s magnum opus, *Human Action*. “I have tried to think through my own position as

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Jörg Guido Hülsmann, *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 2007) for this observation.

<sup>15</sup> Opitz letter to Mises, June 9, 1960, series 1, box 25, folder 7, Ludwig von Mises Collection.

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Opitz, “The Doctrine of Self-Interest,” n.d., series 1, box 25, folder 7, Ludwig von Mises Collection. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the content summary of this paper are drawn from this unpublished manuscript.

clearly as possible,” says Opitz, “and this meant, in part, securing a statement of the opposite point of view which was without equivocation. That is why I have used, although with some trepidation, a quotation from *Human Action*, and discussed it at length.”<sup>17</sup> While Mises’s views are the primary subject of Opitz’s critique, Opitz observes that Mises’s views are widely shared in libertarian circles. Opitz identifies fellow libertarians as the primary audience of his paper.

Opitz’s disagreement with Mises concerned their differing answers to a foundational question in ethics: what is it that motivates human action? Mises defends a version of what is called *psychological egoism*, a theory that asserts that all human action—even actions that seem to be motivated by a regard for others-- is fundamentally motivated by self-interest (i.e., all human action is “selfish.”). Opitz identifies several examples of libertarian voices that elevate self-interest as the sole basis for all human action, but for Opitz the clearest articulation of this view is founded in Mises’s book *Human Action*:

What a man does is always aimed at the improvement of his own state of satisfaction. In this sense--and in no other--we are free to use the term selfishness and to emphasize that action is necessarily always selfish. Even an action directly aiming at the improvement of other people’s conditions is selfish. The actor considers it as more satisfactory for himself to make other people eat than to eat himself. His uneasiness is caused by the awareness of the fact that other people are in want.<sup>18</sup>

Opitz argues that this view of human motivation had “inherent weaknesses” and worried that tying libertarianism so closely to such a flawed view gives critics of libertarianism more reason to dismiss the strengths of Mises’s economic and political views.

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<sup>17</sup> Opitz letter to Mises, June 9, 1960.

<sup>18</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 1998), 243.

In his reply to Mises, Opitz poses three primary criticisms. First, Opitz asserts that Mises's view is logically self-defeating. The proposition Mises is asserting is that there is no such thing as disinterested action; all human action is selfish. But, says Opitz, thinking is itself a form of human action. If all action is self-interested, this means that all thinking must be self-interested (i.e., "selfish") too. This would imply that even the claim "there is no such thing as disinterested action" is itself merely a claim born from one's pursuit of self-interest, not a conclusion born out of a commitment to external criteria such as "the canons of rationality and logic." Such a view renders libertarian thought itself morally suspect, with expressions thereof little more than self-interested attempts to maximize one's sense of wellbeing.

Second, Opitz expresses concern about the moral conclusions stemming from Mises's reductive account of human action. Psychological egoism—an empirical theory that roots all human action in self-interest—denies the very possibility that actions can be motivated by moral values external to the self. While Mises himself is not making a moral claim about why humans ought to act as such, his empirical theory suggests that the moral assessment of human action can be measured purely on the basis of whether or not the action helps realize the self-interest of the actor. Mises's view encourages us to conflate actions that have diametrically opposed consequences. Actions aimed at improving the condition of others from this vantage point are "selfish" in the same way that actions that cause harm to others are "selfish." Such a theory encourages us to treat the significance of human action as something that can be tied narrowly to the psychological impact that actions have on the internal state of the actor. In elevating self-interest as the sole basis for human action, this view "center[s] attention on the acting agent's state of satisfaction while ignoring or minimizing the actual effects of our actions, as well as the qualitative distinctions they exhibit." By contrast, Opitz argues that human action may be "inspired by some ethical value" that stands outside of the self. This external source of human motivation is what makes it

possible for us to distinguish altruistic actions that are motivated by such concern from those selfish actions that cause harm to others.

Third, and most important to the religious concerns that motivated his own libertarian commitments, Opitz argues that Mises's view depends on a flawed set of metaphysical assumptions about the nature of our moral universe. Reducing all human action to the pursuit of self-interest participates in the modern denial of transcendent "objects of value" that provide an external standard for measuring ethical behavior. "If such objects are denied," says Opitz, "behavior can hardly be called either ethical or unethical and conduct may be judged only in terms of the satisfaction it gives the acting agent—'it is selfish.'" Mises's reduction of all human action to the pursuit of self-interest participates in this nihilistic denial of external moral norms. The denial of such norms encourages us to reduce our focus to improving "the acting agent's sense of well being." In such a moral universe, moral relativism is in the inevitable consequence. Mises's view epitomizes the culmination of a moral devolution in society, where belief in objective moral truth has given way to a moral outlook in which the satisfaction of individual preferences is the standard for measuring the right and the good:

Then came the change which resulted in the denial of the existence or reality of any exterior ethical norms, objective good, or moral law. The moral life was not the conduct which conformed to an external standard; the point of reference shifted from without to within. The moral life was that which yielded the maximum satisfaction or happiness or pleasure; and of this each man was necessarily his own judge. Feelings are as private as a toothache; and if feeling states become the only point of reference for ethical endeavor each man furnishes his own yardstick, peculiar to himself alone. This yardstick cannot be used for measuring the rightness or wrongness of other man's conduct, nor, in the premises is any such device conceivable. Objective standards have been obliterated, so it's each man for himself, seeking ways of maximizing his satisfactions.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "The Doctrine of Self-Interest."



In contrast to Mises's view, Opitz argues that the metaphysical account of the world offered by religions such as Christianity treat moral behavior as action grounded in "a transaction between the individual person and the universe." Opitz agrees with Mises that self-interest has a role to play in our moral lives. "The quarrel," he says, "is with those [i.e., with people like Mises] who assert that nothing else has a place."

Around the same time that he was writing his critique of Mises, Opitz also authored an introductory essay to R.J. Rushdoony's 1961 book *Intellectual Schizophrenia*. In his essay, Opitz goes even farther in making the cases for the essential role that Christian metaphysics plays in providing moral foundations for the free society.<sup>20</sup> In his book Christian reconstructionist Rushdoony challenged the secularization of the American education system, arguing in support of the re-Christianization of American culture and public schools. In his introduction, Opitz admits that while he does not see eye to eye with Rushdoony on every facet of the book that they both "speak the same language" and were in basic agreement. Opitz applauds Rushdoony's "trenchant criticism" of "contemporary educational theory and practice," framing these as part of a larger "cultural crisis." The moral crisis of modernity is a battle between the Christian worldview of the past and those "pagan" alternatives of the present. Says Opitz, the positive things in our culture today are "Christian things," and Christianity's "chief antagonist for the past two centuries has been the secular faith of the Enlightenment."<sup>21</sup> Opitz describes the plight of modern humanity as a fateful emptying of human life of its metaphysical substance:

[M]ultitudes of people no longer feel a sense of life as participation in a cosmic adventure. They have come to believe that the world of things which can be seen,

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<sup>20</sup> Edmund Opitz, preface to Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia: Culture, Crisis, and Education* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1961).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

felt, measured, and tested is man's sole habitat. Belief in the reality of things not seen has dimmed or disappeared and we are living... in "the first agnostic civilization." This charge, or description, is true. It is a fundamental assumption, unconsciously presupposed in our time—and thus more a mood than a premise—that man is a creature of the natural order only.<sup>22</sup>

The moral consequences of this loss, says Opitz, are dire. "Our outlook," says Opitz, "is, in general, man-centered, secularist, and utopian. It is materialistic and rationalistic. It uses majority decision as its criterion of right."<sup>23</sup> While Marxism is the culmination of these distortions, secular libertarianism—in its own way, man-centered, materialistic, and rationalistic—likewise participates in and perpetuates the moral crisis of modernity.

### III. WHY LIBERTARIANS NEED CHRISTIANITY

"The Doctrine of Self-Interest" and Opitz's introductory essay in *Intellectual Schizophrenia* serve as an early preface to a larger argument about the religious ground of libertarian ethics that Opitz developed over the course of his career. To get at the heart of what Opitz believes is wrong with secular libertarianism, it will help to consider first what secular libertarians get right. Libertarians of every persuasion share a common commitment to a basic set of moral values that have defined Western civilization. Individual liberty is essential. Each human is inviolable, possessing a right to pursue a way of life compatible with their personal belief. The right to private property flows from these commitments. Secular-minded and Christian libertarians share a common commitment to these moral values.

Furthermore, secular and Christian libertarians agree that at present the moral ideals of the libertarian cause are at risk. Twentieth-century

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

libertarianism was a reactionary movement that sought to counter prevalent trends in western society. “We sense that all is not well with our society, nor with our world,” says Opitz. “Our traditional rights and liberties, once taken for granted, are in jeopardy; they are undermined by dubious theories, and often overridden in practice.”<sup>24</sup>

While Opitz shared with other libertarians the feeling that all was not right in the world, his explanation of what has gone wrong frames the crisis of modernity within a larger story in which the threats to liberty flow out of a cultural abandonment of truths that are fundamentally religious. This crisis was manifest in the cultural mainstream that libertarians sought to counter, a social world in which political leaders sought solace in the utopian promises of socialism, ignoring the practical obstacles to realizing socialist aims and denying the moral pitfalls inherent in their mission. The crisis was not theirs alone; Opitz believed that the crisis of modernity was also manifest within the work of his secular libertarian allies such as Mises. Libertarians need some way of accounting for their own moral commitments. Why does individual liberty matter? On what grounds can the free society be justified over and against the collectivist alternatives posed by advocates of the welfare state? For Opitz, the moral commitment to individual liberty and the free society could ultimately be justified only on religious grounds, and more specifically *Christian* grounds. Secular libertarians embraced the correct moral conclusions, but from Opitz’s perspective secularists could offer only paltry explanations for their commitment to libertarian ideals.

“Religion,” says Opitz, “at its fundamental level, offers a set of postulates about the universe and man’s place therein, including a theory of human nature, its origin, its potentials, and its destination. Religion deals with the meaning and purpose of life, with man’s chief good, and the meaning of right and wrong. Thus, religious axioms and premises

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<sup>24</sup> *Religion: Foundation of the Free Society*, 111.

provide the basic materials political philosophy works with.”<sup>25</sup> Opitz describes Christianity as a religion that transformed ancient teaching by insisting that “only part of man is social, that man’s essence belongs to God.”<sup>26</sup> In Christianity, “[e]ach man has an individual destiny which enables him to emerge out of society and propels him beyond it; he has a soul, for whose proper ordering he is responsible to his Creator.” This individual destiny is the theological ground for the free society, wherein each person is enabled to pursue their divinely ordained purpose: “the inner and spiritual liberty of man proclaimed in the Gospels implies the outer and social freedom needed for its completion.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, individual freedom is not a freestanding moral value, says Opitz, but one that flows from a larger Christian narrative in which freedom resides at the heart of humanity’s relationship with the Creator:

Man’s fall, according to theology, resulted from an act of choice—an act of disobedience, as it turned out. The kernel of this story as related in Genesis is the conviction that the God who created man gave him at the same time sufficient freedom to deny his Maker. It is but a short deduction from this belief to the conclusion that the God who gave us inwardly such complete freedom that we could either accept or reject Him wills that the relationships between men should be voluntary... Outer and social liberty, in other words, is the necessary completion of inner and spiritual liberty; the free society is implicit in this reading of man’s nature.<sup>28</sup>

God’s creation is good, and God gives humanity the responsibility for its “proper ordering.” “When this outlook comes to prevail,” says Opitz,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies*, 92.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

“the groundwork is laid for a free and prosperous commonwealth such as was aspired to on this continent.”<sup>29</sup>

Opitz argues that the Christian tradition played a central role in the emergence of free societies, providing a metaphysical starting point that recognizes the moral values essential to such a society as part of the fabric of the universe. The moral norms of the free society “are as much a part of the ultimate nature of things as the fact of the specific gravity of water.... Moral values are said to be objective in the sense that their validity is part of the system and order of the universe, of that same universe which is manifested also in persons.”<sup>30</sup>

But in modernity the metaphysical truths toward which Christianity points are no longer widely embraced. Many have come to question the rationality or the relevance of religious belief. Appeals to the religious outlook of the past are often ridiculed or dismissed as archaic relics. Modern humanity finds itself adrift, striving to make sense of moral commitments borne out of a past that has been left behind. Opitz observes that some libertarians dismiss the relevance of the God idea while retaining the idea of individual rights: “They think we can have the idea of rights all by itself without going into the question of where men get their rights.”<sup>31</sup> In the place of religion, secularists offer up a version of morality that is a faint shadow of the past. In Opitz’s view, the skeptical posture inevitably weakens the moral case for libertarianism.

The modern attempt to find a moral framework without God culminates in the ascendancy of utilitarianism as a dominant mode of moral philosophy. Utilitarianism is a failed moral system, argues Opitz, because it “has little or nothing to say about the spiritual, ethical, or cultural framework” within which it resides: “[Utilitarianism] minimizes or denies life’s spiritual dimension, it uses the word “good” in a nonethical

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 93.

sense, i.e., equivalent to “happiness-producing,” and it asserts that men are bound together in societies solely on the basis of a rational calculation of the private advantage to be gained by social cooperation under the division of labor.”<sup>32</sup> Echoing his 1960 critique of Mises, late in his career Opitz once again criticized those who assert that “all human action is selfish, or that everyone should aim at promoting his own self-interest.” Says Opitz, such a view renders us “lost in ambiguity”:

Every action is selfish in this sense — that a self is the subject. But it is the freely chosen object of human action which sorts out the men from the boys, and these objects are to be measured against moral norms. In other words, there are two sides to every human action; there is the self which initiates the action, and there is the objective which the self seeks to accomplish by the action. And as to self-interest, it makes all the difference in the world whether a man promotes his seeming self-interest at the expense of other people, or promotes the genuine interest of the self by conformed his actions to the rules.<sup>33</sup>

Having dispensed with transcendence, utilitarianism argues that morality can be grounded rationally as individuals rationally weigh those actions that provide the greatest satisfaction of individual preferences. From Opitz’s perspective this quixotic quest is doomed to fail. The equality of individual interests presumed by utilitarians grows out of a moral commitment that is itself religious in origin:

[T]he idea that every person in society has the right to be treated just like every other person is a fragment of the much larger idea of the mystery and sacredness of persons.... In short, the idea of equal rights for all men within society implies convictions about the sacredness of persons, and the idea of the sacred implies some convictions about the relevance of the idea of God to the life of man.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 94.

The diminished view of morality presupposed by secular libertarians offers no stable foundation for justifying individual liberty as a moral value that just societies must protect. Humanity today continues to use the language and moral precepts borne out of the Christian past while neglecting the transcendent basis that renders these precepts something more than wishful thinking.

In summary, the root moral problem of the modern world, says Opitz, is the denial of transcendence—a rejection of the belief that human life is connected to a metaphysical order that is beyond nature. This rejection manifests itself in a reductive view of human life in which humanity is little more than a product of nature, bound to and determined by the physical world. The political manifestation of this rejection is found in Marxist materialism, where humans are mere products of their environment. The Christian tradition, by contrast, asserts that there is a transcendent reality that gives rise to moral obligations and truths, that humans are capable of transcendence and participants in a grand cosmic drama that gives life coherence. Secular denials—including those milder denials of agnostic skeptics such as Mises—can lead only to a stunted view of the human self in which human motivation is determined wholly by self-interest, not a deep and abiding awareness of a transcendent reality that lifts us beyond mere impulse and desire.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: THE SECULAR LIBERTARIAN RESPONSE**

Considering the paucity of feedback Opitz received from his critique of Mises and other secular libertarians, it seems clear that his efforts to push his libertarian allies toward a more robust embrace of Christian ideals were no more successful than his attempts to convince Christian socialists to abandon welfare state social policies. In his personal response to Opitz, Mises avoided altogether any discussion of metaphysics. In the short memorandum he sent as a reply to Opitz, Mises did little more than rehash statements he had made nearly 40 years prior in his book *Socialism*.

Mises clarifies that the “logical and praxeological notion of self-interest” is much narrower than the traditional ethical use of the term. Self-interest from the praxeological perspective pertains simply to the desired end of the actor himself, “what makes him uneasy if he does not attain it; what makes him more content than he was before if he attains it.”<sup>35</sup> While traditional ethics presumes a natural conflict between the pursuit of individual self-interest and the interests of society, Mises argues that the reality of the world is one in which the pursuit of self-interest and societal interest are mutually reinforcing facets of our nature. In society the pursuit of individual self-interest, rightly understood, serves the interests of society. Social cooperation is a prerequisite for the realization of each individual’s ends. “Here,” says Mises, “the traditional distinction between selfishness (egoism) and unselfishness (altruism) is inappropriate.”<sup>36</sup>

Mises also observes that religious thought presumes the essential role of self-interest in human action. When a person acts “in order to be awarded in the beyond,” he is acting in pursuit of his own self-interest. Here, charity is itself simply “a means to the attainment of an end.” Mises cites Thomas Aquinas, who “declared that for everybody his own blessedness has to be the supreme end.” The moral norms that discourage individuals from pursuing self-interest at the expense of society stem from the understanding that individual self-interest can *only* be realized in social cooperation; “Such is the essence of an autonomous moral code as distinguished from a heteronomous moral code.”<sup>37</sup> Mises concludes that autonomous ethics is *compatible* with religious belief. In this respect, Mises remained open to the constructive role that religious faith could play in motivating a commitment to libertarian ideals, though it would be going too far to suggest that Mises embraced Opitz’s own conclusion that libertarian ethics was dependent on the verities of the Christian religion.

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<sup>35</sup> Ludwig von Mises, “On Self-Interest,” n.d., series 1, box 25, folder 7, Ludwig von Mises Collection.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



Other libertarians were more scathing in their assessment of Opitz's argument. In his 1961 review of Rushdoony's *Intellectual Schizophrenia*, Murray Rothbard sharply criticized the book's qualities in a private letter to the William Volker Fund.<sup>38</sup> Rothbard described the book as "one of the poorest books that I have read in quite a while," calling it "a turgid miasma, a patchwork of repetition, miscellaneous harangue, irrelevant biblical quotation, a passage or two on jazz or on Senator Kefauver, etc." Of Opitz's introductory essay, Rothbard says, "[W]e might set down as the worst piece of writing I have come across since R.J. Rushdoony's *Intellectual Schizophrenia*." His reply to the thrust of Opitz's essay speaks directly to his own assessment of the merits of the religious argument Opitz was making:

The Rev. Opitz hammers away at the theme that our civilization, our knowledge, our culture, is necessarily and purely Christian. Everything that is good in our civilization and culture comes from Christianity; everything bad emerged from the Enlightenment. Without attempting to denigrate the positive contributions of Christianity, I must remind the Rev. Opitz that Christians slaughtered each other for many centuries in the name of Christianity, until the Enlightenment came along with its ideals and principles of peace and freedom for all.<sup>39</sup>

For his part, Opitz remained unflinching in his assertion of the constructive grounding that Christianity offers the libertarian cause. While Opitz offered no written rebuttal to Mises's memorandum on self-interest, and betrays no knowledge of Rothbard's skewering of *Intellectual Schizophrenia*, in one of his last published essays, Opitz concludes with words that seem directed toward Mises and other secular libertarian allies. Acknowledging those able defenders of liberty who defend free markets

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<sup>38</sup> Murray Rothbard, "A Review of R.J. Rushdoony's *Intellectual Schizophrenia: Culture, Crisis, and Education*." <https://www.libertarianism.org/essays/Rothbard-against-the-Christian-Reconstructionists> [link accessed June 3, 2022]

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

and libertarian ideals on economic or political grounds, Opitz remained true to the religious sensibilities that motivated him throughout his career:

The argument from liberty to Christianity has now been sketched in outline. Those who would limit the defense of liberty to a discussion of free market economics, with an assist from political theory, have a genuine role to perform, as far as they go. And if they cannot bring themselves to accept the truth of ethics and religion, integrity demands that they refuse to pretend otherwise. Their economic arguments are much needed, and thus they are invaluable allies in this sector. But liberty has not been lost on this level alone, and it cannot be won back on this level alone.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies*, 126.