
In a book as long as this one, which is itself only the final third of an even longer project amounting to some 2600 pages in total, the impatient reader might find themselves flicking to the last paragraph, to see where it all ends up – much as people sometimes do when faced with a fat novel with an exciting plot. This is what they will find, on p. 961 of this volume:

We should therefore conclude that Rawls is committed more than he believes he is to acceptance of two positions that he tends to contrast with Kantian constructivism. In so far as his claims about the right fit with a conception of the good as the fulfillment of the capacities of rational agents, they are best defended within a naturalist outlook. And in so far as this naturalist outlook is objectivist, claiming to rely on facts about human nature and rational agency, the most plausible defence of Rawls's Kantian views should incline us not to constructivism, but the objectivist view that the right is what is fitting to rational nature.

Not quite as good as the conclusion to *A Tale of Two Cities*, or *Gone with the Wind*, perhaps. But what Irwin says here does tell the reader a fair bit about what to expect from the book, nonetheless.

For, a major part of what Irwin sets out to achieve in his history, both in this volume and the two previous ones, is to defend both objectivism and naturalism, and thus a position that should be thought of in broadly Aristotelian terms. His claim throughout is that while frequently under siege, and while it has gone through periods of deep decline as well as periods when it was in the ascendant, this position is resilient and resourceful, and if given a fair hearing, can usually be expected to do enough to see off its competitors – including its latest competitor, which is Rawls's Kantian constructivism. This volume, therefore, traces the story of this position through its highs and lows from the later part of the eighteenth century through to today, where some philosophers are credited with too hastily rejecting it, some with being closer to it than they might care to think, and some with reviving it after periods of decline. In the first camp, of course, fall a number of twentieth-century philosophers, from the non-naturalism of Moore and Ross and Stevenson's non-cognitivism, through to figures such as Hare, Gibbard and Blackburn. In the second camp (in what is maybe the most controversial discussion in the book) is Kant himself, and also (as we have seen) Rawls. And in the third camp is a list of philosophers who are not usually treated as heroes in books on ethics these days, namely in part Hegel, Marx, Mill, F. H. Bradley and C. I. Lewis, but mainly also T. H. Green, who was steeped in the Aristotelian approach to ethics that Irwin so much approves of, but who also tried to combine it with elements of Kantianism, in the kind of syncretic manner that is also proposed by Irwin himself. In addition, the book contains an extensive discussion of Sidgwick, and shorter discussions of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and ‘existentialism’, which is largely an account of Heidegger.

In somewhat more detail, Irwin tells us what he means by ‘Aristotelian naturalism’ at the start of volume 1: ‘[Aristotle] defends an account of the human good as happiness (*eudaimonia*), consisting in the fulfillment of human nature, expressed in the various
human virtues. His position is teleological, in so far as he seeks the basic guide for action in an ultimate end, eudaemonist, in so far as he identifies the ultimate end with happiness, and naturalist, in so far as it identifies virtue and happiness in a life that fulfills the nature and capacities of rational human nature’ (p. 4). Given this conception of the relation between morality and the human good, Irwin also conceives of this position as objectivist. In two chapters at the end of volume 3, prior to his concluding discussion of Rawls, Irwin presents an overview of the current state of both objectivism and naturalism, in the light of the criticisms that have been thrown up over the course of the historical debate, and the varieties of each position that have emerged, concluding with an optimistic assessment of the future prospects for the Aristotelian view.

Despite the vast range of his enterprise, therefore, Irwin has a clear focus for his discussion, in a way that gives it a definite shape. This focus also makes it a distinctive kind of history of philosophy, in three ways.

First, it is a selective history, both in what it includes (Bradley and Green, for example) and in what it excludes (most notably many major ‘continental’ thinkers on ethics in the twentieth century, such as Adorno, Habermas and Levinas). Secondly, it focuses mostly on philosophical issues and debates, and hardly at all on the historical context of the thinkers it discusses (making it markedly different from J. B. Schneewind’s *The Invention of Autonomy*, for example). Thirdly, Irwin’s concern with Aristotelianism guides his interpretative approach to many of the thinkers he discusses, so that, while it will provide the neophyte with a fair-minded outline of their views, this is no mere ‘textbook’ survey of the positions on offer.

On the first issue, Irwin raises it explicitly at the outset of the project, in warning the reader not to expect a comprehensive history. Indeed, as he amusingly notes, had the book appeared in the 17th or 18th century, where there was a taste for more descriptive titles, it might have been called: ‘The Development of Ethics, being a selective historical and critical study of moral philosophy in the Socratic tradition with special attention to Aristotelian naturalism, its formation, elaboration, and defence’. It is, I think, a pity that there is not more discussion in a work of this sort of the contribution of ‘continental’ figures; but given the enormous scope of his undertaking, it would be churlish to expect him to cover much more than he does.

On the second issue, Irwin again raises it at the outset, advising us not to expect a ‘Cantabridgian’ history, modeled on the ‘Cambridge’ approach to the history of ideas that came to the fore with Quentin Skinner, John Pocock, Richard Tuck and others. Irwin’s claim here is not that his less historical and contextualist approach is to be preferred, but that there is room for both: ‘The Cantabridgian approach and my approach are not competitors; they should supplement each other and offer some mutual illumination’ (vol 1, p. 10). I suspect, however, that Irwin is overly sanguine here, in so far as contextualists will often claim to be able to overturn readings of historical texts and figures that have been arrived at by less historically sensitive methods – as in Jon Stewart’s recent claims that is wrong to interpret Kierkegaard’s writings as directed against Hegel, for example, and better to see them as directed against a motley crew of his followers in Denmark, in a way that is designed to re-orientate the standard picture.

On the third issue, while much in this volume is original and distinctive, it is thanks to his Aristotelian perspective that Irwin arrives at an account of Kant that challenges many current orthodoxies. Thus, while it has been common for a while to seek a rapprochement