The Moral Realism of Irving Kristol

Eric Cohen

In one of his great essays on the problem of modern utopianism, Irving Kristol offers a description of Saint Thomas More that can help us understand Kristol himself:

He simply thought that, as a political philosopher with a superior vision of the ideal, he might prudently influence the politics of his time toward somewhat more humane ends. He failed utterly, as we know, and paid for his failure with his life. But he was not at all surprised that he failed, nor was he shocked to discover the price of his failure. A less utopian statesman than the author of Utopia is hard to find. And yet there was not an ounce of cynicism in him. His nobility of character consisted precisely in the fact that, even as he could imagine the world as it might be, he could also live and work in the world as it was, trying to edge the latter ever so slightly toward the former, but experiencing no sour disillusionment at his ultimate lack of success. Such a perfect combination of detachment from the world and simultaneous attachment to it is as exemplary as it is rare.

Of course, the differences between More and Kristol are hardly trivial. Irving Kristol lived a long, happy, fortunate life, and he was never put to the ultimate test of choosing between betraying his principles and death by execution. Kristol never served in any official capacity in the government of his time, and yet he did not “fail utterly” at all in influencing the politics of his age: He was the “intellectual godfather” of a new governing

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conservatism, one that combined sobriety about the limits of politics and man with a reasonable faith in the American future. Yet like More, Kristol had no delusions about radically transforming the human condition in general or the imperfect society in which he lived. Like More, he was a man without cynicism, though he possessed (as thoughtful men and women typically do) a deep sense of irony, paradox, and contradiction. And like More, he was a man of noble character whose life and thought instructed the generations that followed him in the nature of intellectual statesmanship. If there is, in the end, a profound difference from More, it is that Kristol was never inclined to write his own *Utopia*. He focused instead on trying to describe the problems and crises of the modern American age, without giving in to either apocalyptic despair or apocalyptic solutions.

The age of Obama and Iran and Alzheimer’s disease and Paris Hilton surely has many problems that we could better understand and ameliorate if Irving Kristol were still writing essays, founding magazines, and counseling politicians. Of course, much has changed since the 1960s and ’70s, when Kristol was most prolific and most influential. The counterculture seems at once less threatening and more mainstream. The nuclear-armed Soviet Union is gone, though the dangers of nuclear proliferation and high-tech bloodshed seem as horrifying as ever. Communism is no longer the great ideological rival of American democratic capitalism, though a new anti-American ideology—radical Islam—has emerged to rally the passions of millions against us. And while some of the most destructive welfare-state illusions have been shattered (at least for now), the size of government still threatens to grow ever faster than the American economy, due in large part to the public costs of supporting an aging society.

While Irving Kristol has sadly left us forever, and while many of the concerns that most deeply moved him differ from those of our day, he was remarkably prescient in thinking about the gravest challenges that lie before us—including the problems (and possibilities) of democratic capitalism, the dangers (and necessities) of modern technology, the burdens (and blessings) of American power, and the enduring need for answers to man’s ultimate questions. Those who want to think clearly about the present and the future could hardly do better than re-reading Irving Kristol.

**The Spirit of Capitalism**

Growing up as a working-class kid during the Great Depression, Kristol was never tempted to romanticize poverty, or pre-modern economic life,
or the simple Rousseauian pleasures of being that are supposedly corrupted by modern industry. The economics of socialism appealed to Kristol in his early years only because he saw firsthand the dysfunctions of modern capitalism amid its worst crisis of the 20th century, and he briefly believed a centrally planned economy might work better. But he was never drawn to the utopian metaphysics—and certainly not the anti-religious spirit—of modern socialism. He always seemed to know that life would never work perfectly and that men—rich and poor alike—were radically imperfect creatures. And so while much has been made of Kristol’s move from the left to the right, what is more striking, from his earliest writings in the 1940s until his death in 2009, is the remarkable consistency that informs his views of man and society, ethics and economics, politics and religion. As he writes in the preface to *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, “it is the homogeneity of approach, the consistency of a certain cast of mind, that impresses (and even surprises) me, as I look over this collection. I think it is fair to say that what might be called a ‘neoconservative imagination’ is something that I have always possessed, long before the very term itself was invented, and long before there was any kind of neoconservative movement.”

When it comes to economics, this cast of mind took shape in a series of essays that Kristol wrote in the 1970s—including “‘When Virtue Loses All Her Loveliness’ — Some Reflections on Capitalism and ‘the Free Society’” (1970), “Capitalism, Socialism, and Nihilism” (1973), and “Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1976). The titles of these essays all signal what Kristol cared about most—namely, the moral meaning of modern capitalism, and especially how the modern capitalist order influenced the moral prospects of American democracy, and how the cultural condition of America affected the economic prospects of the world’s most important nation. He was, in his era, probably the most gifted defender of capitalism against its collectivist and countercultural enemies, and the most serious critic of capitalism when it came to its own cultural contradictions and moral degradations.

Modern democratic capitalism, as Kristol explains, made three large promises:

First of all, it promised continued improvement in the material conditions of all its citizens, a promise without precedent in human history. Secondly, it promised an equally unprecedented measure
of individual freedom for all of these same citizens. And lastly, it held out the promise that, amidst this prosperity and liberty, the individual could satisfy his instinct for self-perfection—for leading a virtuous life that satisfied the demands of his spirit (or, as one used to say, his soul)—and that the free exercise of such individual virtue would aggregate into a just society.

The capitalist ideal, as envisioned by Adam Smith and his various successors, sees these three promises—affluence, liberty, and virtue—as mutually reinforcing. The capitalist reality, as experienced during the last half-century, is, alas, far more complicated. For the most part, capitalism’s record at creating ever more wealth for ever more people is quite impressive, if obviously not perfect. And in Kristol’s mind, economic growth was a moral necessity in the modern age—since without it modern democracies would collapse from within, and modern families would face terrible hardships, which modern men and women are uniquely ill-equipped to endure. The backward-looking conservatisms of various agrarians and churchmen were unrealistic and undesirable; the radical anti-capitalism of the student revolutionaries was perverse and destructive; and the collectivist economics of modern socialists and left-liberals was both metaphysically misguided and economically disastrous. “Two cheers for capitalism,” as Kristol famously declared, since the alternatives are poverty, tyranny, or a quietist flight from reality that is simply not an option for the most powerful and important nation in the world.

When it comes to advancing and promoting the liberty of its citizens, democratic capitalism has a similarly impressive record—all the more so when seen against the backdrop of the last century’s collectivist totalitarianisms. Freedom from the grand, brutal schemes of utopia-promising kleptocracies is no small achievement in the long history of man’s quest for a dignified private life. Yet the modern economy of free men and women is also an economy “of decadence and tennis flannels,” as Kristol once titled a parody of the modern businessman at one of his “retreats.” Penicillin and pornography trade in the same free market, which has now turned the moral radicalism of yesterday’s counterculture into the product lines and advertising campaigns of the modern media-fashion-entertainment corporation.

One is tempted to believe that the decadence of post-modern capitalism is a trivial sideshow, and perhaps it is. And one would be
deluded in thinking that life before the 1950s was an era of universal Victorian morality — surely not. But the decadence that has so easily and so readily taken root in modern capitalist culture (and not in the shadows, but in the headlines) is a sign of deeper moral problems and inadequacies — which is to say, capitalism’s inability to deliver on its third promise: “that, amidst this prosperity and liberty, the individual could satisfy his instinct for self-perfection — for leading a virtuous life that satisfied the demands of his spirit … and that the free exercise of such individual virtue would aggregate into a just society.” In guiding man’s pursuit of perfection, the culture of capitalism alone is naked, and deficient, and even at times more than merely complicit in the corrosion of virtue, which has lost all its loveliness. It contains within itself no moral ideal of the family, no capacity to elevate mundane work into a calling, and no reason to undertake the difficult work of raising the young and caring for the elderly.

**Our Poverty of Spirit**

In the immediate aftermath of America’s victory in the Cold War, there was good reason to celebrate and even deify American capitalism. To be sure, we still had our own economic woes, from which critics on the left and the right drew their own opposite conclusions about how to reform American economic policy. But it was a moment of capitalist celebration and self-congratulation, one that defined the “bourgeois bohemian” decade of the 1990s. Yet Kristol, who played a central role (arguably the central role) in advancing the supply-side economic principles that were so crucial to the political and economic successes of the Reagan era and beyond, was in no mood for excessive self-congratulation. In a 1991 speech before the American Enterprise Institute, he offered a diagnosis and a warning about our moral and cultural condition. It is worth quoting at length, especially given the current economic breakdown:

This cultural nihilism will have, in the short term, only a limited political effect — unless we have a massive, enduring economic crisis. The reason cultural nihilism will not prevail — this is still the good news — is that a bourgeois, property-owning democracy tends to breed its own antibodies. These antibodies immunize it, in large degree, against the lunacies of its intellectuals and artists. The common people in such a democracy are not uncommonly
wise, but their experience tends to make them uncommonly sensible. They learn their economics by taking out a mortgage, they learn their politics by watching the local school board in action, and they learn the impossibility of “social engineering” by trying to raise their children to be decent human beings. These people are the bedrock of bourgeois capitalism, and it is on this rock that our modern democracies have been built.

But a society needs more than sensible men and women if it is to prosper: It needs the energies of the creative imagination as expressed in religion and the arts. It is crucial to the lives of all our citizens, as it is to all human beings at all times, that they encounter a world that possesses a transcendent meaning, in which the human experience makes sense. Nothing is more dehumanizing, more certain to generate a crisis, than experiencing one’s life as a meaningless event in a meaningless world.

In a sense, it is all Adam Smith’s fault. That amiable, decent genius simply could not imagine a world in which traditional moral certainties could be effectively challenged and repudiated. Bourgeois society is his legacy, for good and ill. For good, in that it has produced through the market economy a world prosperous beyond all previous imaginings—even socialist imaginings. For ill, in that this world, with every passing decade, has become ever more spiritually impoverished. That war on poverty is the great unfinished task before us. The collapse of socialism, along with the vindication of a market economy, offers us a wonderful opportunity to think seriously about such an enterprise. Only such an enterprise can ensure a capitalist future.

At present, it seems unlikely that the current economic downturn will become a “massive, enduring economic crisis.” But we should not grow too sanguine. If years pass when recent college graduates cannot find the work they believe they deserve, and when men and women in their sixties and seventies cannot afford the retirement they have truly earned, then it is hardly impossible that democratic capitalism might again be shaken to its foundations. A new generation of embittered nihilists could arise with its own destructive program to remake American society, and a new generation of collectivists might be emboldened to use the market’s temporary failures to advance vast new government
takeovers of the private economy. Indeed, we may already be seeing just that. Even in America, economic history may not be at an end.

More likely, however, is the prospect that the young and the old will place more modest—but, over time, not inconsequential—demands on the welfare state: for student-loan forgiveness and housing subsidies and government-guaranteed health-care benefits. The state will grow incrementally, as it has done for many decades, yet the coming demographic shift toward an older, more needy society will make those incremental increases exponentially significant. We will avert the reckoning for a while with make-believe accounting and political happy talk. But eventually we will face real choices, and in the end, as Kristol argued, our destiny will depend far more on our cultural and spiritual lives than on our regulatory and tax policies.

In this regard, Europe and Asia may offer cautionary tales. In simple (one might even say reductionist) economic terms, societies and cultures that do not produce and nurture the next generation of wealth-creators and taxpayers will stagnate and decline. Spiritual impoverishment leads to demographic impoverishment, and eventually demographic impoverishment leads to economic and political impoverishment. Birth rates in Europe and Japan have already dropped to historic lows, far below replacement levels. And as their populations continue to age even faster than our own—becoming the first mass geriatric societies in human history—these nations will face two unpleasant prospects: welfare states they cannot afford, or the normalization of euthanasia in a brutal effort to balance the books. We can imagine what China will do, rationally and coercively sacrificing the old in pursuit of its own idea of national greatness. And whatever Japan and the nations of Europe decide to do, there is little doubt that they will face decades of political paralysis.

The problem, as Kristol realized, is that the culture of capitalism alone provides no reason for men and women in their twenties and thirties to raise up the next generation of democratic capitalists (aka children)—a very expensive task indeed, in terms of time and money and lost personal freedom. Children may fulfill certain natural needs, as the evolutionary biologists have long assured us, seeing human beings as no different from all the other sex-seeking and gene-spreading animals. But in reality, it turns out that when having children competes in the marketplace against other desires—for sexual freedom, for career advancement, for an elegant studio apartment—child-rearing
loses. And when men and women of child-rearing age question the ultimate meaning of their own lives, they feel little impetus or urgency to create another self-doubting generation. Building a family requires precisely the virtues and spiritual purpose that the capitalist order fails to nourish, while the future of the capitalist order—and, more significantly, the future of a morally decent, democratic, and prosperous modern civilization—requires flourishing families.

Kristol saw all this clearly, which is why he believed, in the end, that the greatest hope for modern civilization and for democratic capitalism was a return to, or rediscovery of, religious (i.e., Jewish and Christian) neo-orthodoxy. For it is the old traditions that give men and women an ideal to live toward, a heritage to sustain, and solace in the face of life’s inevitable calamities. And even if the economy can still flourish, for a time, in the age of post-modern “values,” democratic culture and democratic capitalism cannot survive, over time, if the current generation takes no interest in the generation that follows. This is why Kristol believed that America, a nation in which religious values and religious communities still flourish alongside the sterile secularisms of modern culture, still had a future. And it is why he believed that America—the “exceptional nation” of the modern age—could still shoulder the burdens of a great democratic power, which requires wealth and armies and courage and confidence, especially in the face of our radical, zealous, and (coming soon) nuclear-armed ideological enemies.

**IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN**

In 2006, Princeton University held a conference to honor the 40-year run of *The Public Interest*, which had just ceased publication. Kristol wrote a little essay for the occasion, offering his own recollection of why, in the late 1950s, he left the editorship of the London-based magazine *Encounter* and started a new magazine in America—and how he saw the years ahead. In a few hundred words, he tied the whole story together:

I was happy to be in London—it was easy to be happy in London in those days—but I was also increasingly restless. Britain, and by extension Europe, had its charms, but it was clear that the United States, in all its gracelessness, was where the future of the West would be determined. Our NATO allies were turning in on themselves. This was accompanied by an increasing anti-Americanism,
a recognition of the fact that we were pushing them into the world while their strong inclination was to stay at home and nurse the wounds that two world wars had inflicted. And as their national politics focused on one universal welfare program after another, the trivialization of European politics proceeded apace, regardless of which political party was in office. When it came to budgeting priorities, they were all social democrats now. World War I had ended with the famous promise of returning soldiers to “a world fit for heroes.” It is only a slight exaggeration to say that World War II ended with a commitment to “a world fit for victims.”

I knew there was an important lesson for the United States in this development. There was clearly a growing American opinion that believed a European-type welfare state was the correct and inevitable model for the United States. Against this, there was a party on the right with a radical individualist ethos that opposed the very idea of a welfare state. As a child of the Great Depression, I found this attitude preposterous. Could there not be another option — a welfare state that could be reconciled with a world role for the United States? It was with this question in mind that, in 1958, I returned home. . . .

We have seen in the case of Europe how a social democratic welfare state discourages population growth as well as economic growth, and suppresses the virtues traditionally associated with “manliness” in foreign policy. Europe is now paying a terrible price, to the point where it is in the process of losing its historic identity, because of the sovereignty it has accorded the social democratic ethos over both domestic and foreign policy. That the two are inseparably intertwined has never been more convincingly demonstrated.

True, the American version of “national greatness” has recently run into some local difficulties out there in the Middle East, and I suppose that the idea itself will be muted for some time ahead. But I note that the American population has just reached 300 million, with 400 million pretty firmly projected for 2040. So my grandchildren will be living in a country with the world’s third largest population, the strongest economy, and the most powerful military establishment. Our critics may demand ever-greater
humility from our ever-greater power; that would be a historic first were it ever to happen. So, for better or worse, “national greatness” is being thrust upon us.

The question America now faces is whether we are prepared to accept the burdens that have indeed been “thrust upon us,” and what kind of reformation — cultural, political, and economic — will be required in order to do so even tolerably well. Almost certainly, we will need to cut taxes on families and raise taxes on men and women who choose not to have children; we will need to control the costs of welfare-state benefits for the elderly while enacting policies that make it easier for middle-aged people to care for their declining elders; we will need to expand the size of the military and perhaps go to war against well-armed enemies who seek our destruction; and we will need to invest more money in technological self-defense, including missile defense, pre-emptive intelligence-gathering, and emergency antidotes.

We will need to do all this while still believing that we are a free people largely devoted to the pursuit of happiness, and while believing that we are morally worthy of our own self-defense. Perhaps the most important work before us — which Kristol, a Jew in largely Christian America, could not do — is to reform and re-invigorate Christian political theology, for it is on this that the spiritual vitality and moral-political sanity of American civilization likely now depends, both for better and for worse.

Perhaps the most famous of Kristol’s aphorisms is that a “neo-conservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality.” And in large part, Kristol’s intellectual project was to diagnose various flights from reality: utopian socialism, which promised an economic heaven on earth; the counterculture, which promised life without sin and libertinism without consequences; secular humanism, which promised moral freedom and a peaceful social order without the need for or guidance of religious tradition; American isolationism, which promised freedom from all the nasty entanglements of the world; and techno-utopianism, which promised the perfection of man through our growing control over nature and human nature. The “ism” he offered instead — neoconservatism — was not really an “ism” at all; it provided no recipe, no blueprint, no manifesto describing how to build a new paradise on earth or achieve an Epicurean escape from the hellish side of life.
Neoconservatism was, as Kristol always described it, merely a “persuasion” that tried to “imagine the world as it might be,” but also to “live and work in the world as it was, trying to edge the latter ever so slightly toward the former, but experiencing no sour disillusionment at [our] ultimate lack of success.” Yet such a realistic view of politics and of the human condition, especially in America, did not mean living always with a sense of grim futility. Neoconservatism, Kristol said, was “the first variant of American conservatism in the past century that is in the ‘American grain.’ It is hopeful, not lugubrious; forward-looking, not nostalgic; and its general tone is cheerful, not grim or dyspeptic.” And while neoconservatism is surely a phenomenon of a particular time and place, the disposition toward reality that animates it is how wise and moderate men will always see the world— even in the most immoderate of ages.