

WILLIAM IRWIN

THE FREE MARKET EXISTENTIALIST

CAPITALISM
WITHOUT
CONSUMERISM

WILEY Blackwell

Praise for *The Free Market Existentialist*

"Ever since the Enlightenment the long arc of moral progress that has created the modern world has had at its core the central tenet of individual freedom and autonomy against the collectivist and authoritarian dogmas of church and state. The two most extreme defenders of this individualism are libertarians and existentialists, two groups one never finds discussed in the same sentence. Until now. William Irwin has transcended ideology and tribalism to unite a set of ideas that, for the first time, could end the rancor between the Left and the Right by reminding each of their shared values. This book will change the thinking of everyone interested in politics, economics, or religion—a game-changing work."

—**Michael Shermer**, *Publisher of Skeptic magazine, Presidential Fellow, Chapman University, and author of The Moral Arc*

"Irwin offers a defense of free market existentialism that is very readable and refreshingly humble. He is not trying to prove that we all ought to be free market existentialists. Instead he is simply presenting us with various considerations, first to show that existentialism in a plausible interpretation is compatible with favoring a capitalist regime, and then to make their pairing seem attractive to us. But in the end, he acknowledges, it is a matter of preference."

—**Joel Marks**, *Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of New Haven and author of Ethics without Morals: In Defence of Amoralism and Bad Faith: A Philosophical Memoir*

"In *The Free Market Existentialist*, William Irwin skillfully rescues existentialism from the specter of collectivism, with which it never sat easily. He highlights the affirmative individualism within existentialism that aligns it more closely with minimal-state capitalism, and explores the responsibilities we all have to choose for ourselves who we want to be and to resist our conformist mass culture of consumerism."

—**Mark D. White**, *chair of the Department of Philosophy, College of Staten Island/CUNY and author of Kantian Ethics and Economics: Autonomy, Dignity, and Character*

"This is a first-rate book; gutsy and charmingly written, with a genuinely exciting central argument. Amoral-atheist-existentialist capitalism is compelling and ahead of its time. Irwin has crystallized our forbidden thoughts, articulating them in an accessible way, showing why we should no longer keep quiet about them."

—**Sharon M. Kaye**, *Professor of Philosophy, John Carroll University and author of Philosophy: A Complete Introduction*

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Capitalism without Consumerism

William Irwin

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Introduction

Philosophies of Individualism

I am all alone, not in a despairing existentialist place, though sometimes I go there. No, I am all alone in the intersection of circles in a Venn diagram. The first circle represents the set of free market philosophers and the second circle represents the set of existentialist philosophers. Free market existentialism? The very idea makes some people cringe. Academic philosophy in the English-speaking world is dominated by the analytic school, which is often openly hostile to continental philosophy in general and existentialism in particular. There is, though, at least one thing that the vast majority of academic philosophers of both the analytic and continental schools agree on: the free market is bad. The few defenders of the free market in academic philosophy are all analytic. Indeed, to my knowledge, I am the only existentialist defender of the free market. So this book is an attempt to synthesize views that don't often relate. It aims to show that existentialism and free market thinking can not only associate but can do so very well.

By the free market I do not mean the crony capitalism or "crapitalism" one finds in the United States, but rather an economic system

in which the government plays no role aside from providing rule of law and protecting property rights. I also use the term “free market” more broadly as shorthand for libertarian political philosophy: briefly, the view that the proper role of government is limited to the prevention of force, fraud, and theft. Though I think the free market has many advantages, it is not the purpose of this book to argue for the superiority of the free market. Rather, the purpose of the book is to show that capitalism and existentialism are compatible and to argue modestly that a minimal state with a truly free market would be a worthwhile option among liberal states.

The main link between existentialism and libertarianism is individualism. The individual is primary and the individual is responsible. Granted, the sense of individualism characteristic of existentialism is not exactly the same as the sense of individualism characteristic of libertarianism, but they are not foreign to each other, inasmuch as both strive for genuine autonomy. Libertarians have long recognized the importance of strong property rights in securing autonomy, and existentialists have long recognized the importance of choosing meaning and subjective values for oneself in developing authenticity. One sense does not necessarily imply the other, but they do fit together well. Existentialists emphasize the importance of subjectively choosing one’s values and making one’s meaning, and libertarians champion the individual’s prerogative to live in any way that does not cause harm to others.

Existentialism and libertarianism both value freedom and responsibility. As with individualism, the sense of freedom characteristic of existentialism is not exactly the same as the sense of freedom characteristic of libertarianism, but they are not foreign to each other. The entrepreneurs whom libertarians celebrate are risk takers and often rebels who feel a sense of exhilaration in taking chances. Existentialists, though, because of their largely negative view of capitalism, have typically ignored or dismissed such entrepreneurs as not genuine examples of individuals exercising their freedom. Sartre and the French existentialists were tenderhearted, with great care and concern for oppressed groups, and thus did not extend their concern for freedom into the economic realm as a concern for freedom from government interference. Instead, they championed freedom in the economic realm in terms of improving equality of opportunity.

One of the great fears of the political left is that capitalism deprives us of freedom, that, among other things, it makes us into mindless drones who simply buy and consume. Of course capitalism provides circumstances that make it easier for a person to live that way, but capitalism can't make you do anything. It is possible to have capitalism without consumerism. Existentialism is actually the ideal balancing agent, the perfect accompaniment to capitalism, allowing us to reap the benefits of a free market while encouraging us to resist crass consumerism.

Existentialism highlights the individual's ontological freedom. The individual is never compelled to do anything she does not want to do; and she is urged to make and create herself. Just as the individual is ill-advised to let family, church, or government dictate who she is, so too she is ill-advised to let the economic system dictate who she is. Family, church, and government may provide good resources and worthwhile pieces of identity as long as they are reflectively chosen. Likewise, the capitalist system not only brings benefits in terms of wealth but in terms of opportunities for free expression. This is all desirable, and with the existentialist imperative to define oneself, the negative of crass consumerism can be avoided. As I say, this is desirable, but it is not strictly necessary. The argument of this book is not that all libertarians should become existentialists or that all existentialists should become libertarians. The argument is simply that the two fit together well, better than either libertarians or existentialists might have realized. Indeed, free market existentialism is a view worthy of consideration in the marketplace of ideas.

The Free Market Existentialist is divided into seven chapters and addresses three main issues. Chapters 1–3 address the nature of existentialism, its relationship to Marxism, and the way existentialism can be reconciled with capitalism. Chapters 4 and 5 make a case for an existentialist moral anti-realism. And chapters 6 and 7 argue, on the basis of existentialist moral anti-realism, for strong property rights and a minimal state.

Chapter 1 "Out, out, Brief Candle!": What Do You Mean by Existentialism?" addresses its subtitle's question. Because existentialism has regularly been associated with Marxism, the reaction to combining existentialism and free market thinking may be one of disbelief. Once the disbelief fades, though, the admission follows that "it depends on what you mean by existentialism." I agree. In this