

How to Live a More Authentic Life in Both Markets and Morals

Mark D. White

College of Staten Island, City University of New York

William Irwin's *The Free Market Existentialist*¹ serves to correct popular accounts of existentialism that connect it with socialism and paint it as intrinsically opposed to markets and economic liberty. Irwin acknowledges the reasons for this presumption and then gets to the core of existentialist thought to explain how the ideal of authenticity can best be expressed in a context of liberty and markets, resulting in a more humane and mutually satisfying capitalism. This is not the only significant argument in the book, however.

The material on existentialism and its compatibility with free-market capitalism takes up just the first three chapters. The next two chapters are devoted to an argument for moral anti-realism and the last two are devoted to a more political libertarianism, both based on existentialism. At first blush these three points can seem disparate, and the last two topics threaten to dilute the focus on existentialism and markets that the title implies. The first part of the book is the strongest and most appealing; it addresses a common, but not deeply ingrained, misperception. As a result, it reads as a fascinating and ultimately positive contribution to both areas. The last two parts are likely to be more controversial, since neither moral anti-realism nor minimal government has broad acceptance. I'm afraid that not only will they convince fewer people, but they will also turn off a few who would have been convinced by the first part.

This is not to say that the three parts are inconsistent or even disconnected. Irwin could have stressed this more, but the three arguments are related through their mutual derivation from his brand of existentialism, with its emphasis on authenticity and individualism. In

¹ William Irwin, *The Free Market Existentialist* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015). All parenthetical citations in the text are to *The Free Market Existentialist* unless otherwise specified.

this sense, the first and second parts of the book are more closely linked. The first part emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to resist the pull of consumerism and make her own choices in the marketplace that express her individuality and values. The second part makes the same point with respect to morality; the individual should refuse to accept evolved or community morals without reflection, and instead make an active choice regarding which rules or principles she will follow. The third part, recommending a minimal “watchman” state, serves to enable the maximal range of individual choices Irwin recommends in the first two parts. In this brief comment, I will focus on the first two parts concerning the responsibilities of the individual based on authenticity, leaving discussion of the third part to my fellow commentators.

Irwin does a fine job in Chapter 1 of presenting existentialism in all of its richness and complexity, admirably avoiding the temptation to provide a canonical definition and instead presenting it as a Wittgensteinian “family” of views. Out of this he crafts his own view based on authenticity and individualism that he uses throughout the book. Chapter 2 confronts the common misperception—largely due to Jean-Paul Sartre’s later turn to Marxism—that existentialism is more sympathetic to socialism and statism than to capitalism and libertarianism. Chapter 3, however, is of the greatest practical value, presenting an assertive existentialist argument against rampant consumerism and corporate greed as the “ugly faces” of capitalism. Irwin quickly dismisses caricatures of the entrepreneur as an oppressive force motivated solely by profit (pp. 66-67). He spends more time on consumers, suggesting that many of us are inauthentic in our market behavior, chasing trends, status, and the elusive promise of happiness through acquisition of more and better stuff.

Irwin is careful to point out that buying things is not necessarily inauthentic, if consumers have reflected on their desires and confirmed that they want these things for the right reasons—that is, reasons that are not the result of relinquishing one’s decision-making autonomy to external sources without adequate reflection and skepticism (pp. 68-70). Irwin prefers a conscious minimalism or “voluntary simplicity” (pp. 71-76), but he recognizes that this is an aesthetic judgment rather than a moral one, stopping short of judging those who indulge in more purchases (pp. 76-78). He has chosen a lifestyle—that of college professor—that suits his values and preferences (and puts him amongst like-minded people, to prevent social contagion effects), while others choose to be stockbrokers based

on different and no less valid ones. What Irwin is critical of are people who do not follow their own inner values, whatever they may be, and instead inauthentically accept the judgments and directions of the crowd. In this way, Irwin argues that an existentialist perspective is not only compatible with free-market capitalism, but it can actually improve it by reorienting the behavior of consumers, workers, and business people closer to their own values and preferences.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Irwin uses existentialism in conjunction with moral anti-realism—the position that ethical rules and values do not have objective existence—to emphasize each person’s responsibility to determine her own values and morals. This is consistent with the meaninglessness (and godlessness) of an existentialist worldview and allows Irwin to emphasize the requirements that authenticity places on our moral beliefs in the same way it does in our economic lives. He highlights work in evolutionary morality (pp. 92-99) that explores and explains our ingrained sentiments toward fairness and altruism, but stresses throughout that this is descriptive work only, not normative, much less objective in the sense that moral realists would claim.

While I agree that, ideally, authenticity demands that we take control of our moral codes and behavior as well as our more routine choices, at times Irwin seems to underestimate how difficult this is. He is particularly harsh on moral fictionalism, a particular kind of “suspension of disbelief” by which we act as if there were objective truth to morality while rationally acknowledging there is none (pp. 112-17). I agree that moral fictionalism is an example of inauthentic self-delusion and that, ideally, we should consciously and deliberately endorse moral values rather than rely on our evolved instincts. At the same time, though, we are human beings of limited cognitive capacities, and moral fictionalism may be a convenient evolved heuristic that has not outlived its usefulness (enhancing survival instincts in primitive societies), even if the reason for that usefulness has changed somewhat (to economize on scarce cognitive resources). Authenticity is a goal that many find difficult to achieve, especially in the areas of life in which it is important; maintaining the fiction of moral realism to fall back on can be a useful (and even mutually beneficial) coping mechanism.

This is an argument partially based on weakness of will, and I agree with Irwin that the best response to weakness of will is to strengthen the will. However, we all have limits, and our efforts toward strengthening our will may be better used elsewhere, such as restricting

the pull of consumerism and conformism in less ethical areas of our lives. Curiously, Irwin seems to recognize the value of fictionalism when it comes to free will (pp. 19-21), acknowledging that we have to believe in our own agency even if deep down we realize it's false, but does not see the same threat here as in moral fictionalism (perhaps due to the metaphysical nature of the former).

Irwin also could have paid more attention to autonomously chosen morality—that is, moral rules that people willingly and consciously adopt in an authentic process that affirms the person they want to be, as opposed to the unreflective acceptance of evolved morality that he opposes. He does acknowledge that individuals may reflectively endorse certain aspects of their evolved morality or the rules of their community (pp. 120-22). However, this is in tension with his falling back on prudence or enlightened self-interest to be sufficient for the operation of a civil society without belief in objective morality (pp. 124-27). This may be a rhetorical strategy akin to Adam Smith's market analysis, in which Smith assumes the self-interested behavior in *The Wealth of Nations* that he decries in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to make the point in the former that the market could operate *even if* participants only looked after their self-interest. I don't get the sense that this is Irwin's strategy, though, and I remain unconvinced that enlightened self-interest, acting in consort with love (amorally) and the law (as enforcement), would be enough to take the place of an externally generated and imposed morality. This type of morality evolved, biologically and socially, for a reason; the burden of proof is on those who argue that society can survive without it.

Of course, in the best-case scenario, most of us would accept that our core morality makes sense, regardless of our feelings about its objective existence, and not much would change. I would suggest that this is the world many of us live in, where the opposite of moral fictionalism is more accurate: many of us make lofty claims about objective morality, but in our lives we pick and choose which rules we follow (much like how many of us treat the law, which has objective reality of a social kind). If this description is correct, then many of us are living in Irwin's world of chosen morality right now. The question is whether these people are more moral, prudent, or authentic than those who sincerely hew to objective morality.

Also, it follows that the greater problem with respect to authenticity (or our lack of it) lies in the areas of our lives covered in the first part of the book, which highlights the role that free markets can play in enhancing it. As many insights as there are in the second

and third parts of the book, I think that the first part will stand as Irwin's most important contribution, as much for stressing our responsibility to live our own lives in the face of incredible pressure to conform to herd behavior as for the more academic points he makes about existentialism and capitalism. Had Irwin chosen to go a different way with this book, he could have penned a fine self-help book rooted in existentialism, helping us regain our authenticity as consumers, workers, and moral agents. As it stands, *The Free Market Existentialist* is much more. I only hope that the more controversial claims in the last two parts of the book do not scare readers away from the clear profundity in the first.

