

BOOK REVIEW: *THE FREE MARKET EXISTENTIALIST:
CAPITALISM WITHOUT CONSUMERISM*

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William Irwin: *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2015. ISBN: 978-1119121282.

THE FREE MARKET EXISTENTIALIST begins unobjectionably. William Irwin starts by defining existentialism as follows: “Existentialism is a philosophy that reacts to an apparently absurd or meaningless world by urging the individual to overcome alienation, oppression, and despair through freedom and self-creation in order to become a genuine person.”¹ For Irwin, it naturally follows from this definition that, in existentialism, there is no such thing as God, meaning in life, or objective morality.

Those interested in existentialism might quibble with Irwin’s definition. (Isn’t it freedom that causes the despair and self-creation that overcomes?) But for this review, I will focus on how he manages to take a broad definition of existentialism and narrow it into dogma. Such narrowing limits the appeal

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¹ William Irwin, *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism* (Wiley 2015) p. 12.

of this book and causes an interesting discussion to fall short of its promised goal: a demonstration that libertarianism is compatible, and perhaps a natural fit, with existentialism.

Irwin begins the book by suggesting that “existentialism is best understood as a family resemblance concept.”² Existentialism, in his view, is broadly about responding to alienation with self-creation, rather than finding meaning in collectives.³ Existentialism is methodologically individualist and recognizes the “gulf[s] of subjectivity” between human beings that keep us from ever experiencing the world in quite the same way as others do.⁴

So far, so good. The above are broad ideas most existentialists share. But Irwin does not establish these generalities and then go on to derive principles sympathetic to libertarian views. Instead, he proceeds to develop a very particular kind of existentialism, further alienating the already few readers interested in the existentialist-libertarian niche.

The problem begins with the concept of God. Irwin does not argue for or against the existence of God: he simply assumes nonexistence.⁵ Worse still, he appears to dismiss the role of faith. This obscures his discussion of the existentialist concepts of uncertainty and subjectivity. Irwin discusses God especially in the context of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s Christian faith. Kierkegaard, sometimes called the father of existentialism, wrote through various pseudonyms about the despair and uncertainty that all individuals must confront in their search for meaning. Kierkegaard’s works suggest that the solution to these problems is the leap of faith: despite a logical, reality-based uncertainty, the individual acts as though he is perfectly sure.

Irwin repeats the common but misguided idea that Kierkegaard eschewed reason. He states that he must depart from Kierkegaard’s view on God and faith because subjective belief, though important, cannot trump the value provided by objective knowledge:

So while I agree that it is often important to find something that one can be deeply, personally committed to, I think it is even more important to be committed to the objective *what of truth*. Without an objective orientation we will not make decisions based on accurate information. And though some objective information may seem

² *Id.* at 4.

³ *See id.* at 13.

⁴ *Id.* at 14.

⁵ *Id.* at 16.

trivial and mundane, it is crucial for making bigger, more profound decisions. That is why I part company with Kierkegaard on God.⁶

However, this is a mistaken understanding of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist; he values reason, logic, and science. As M.G. Piety notes in her excellent work on Kierkegaard's epistemology, he does not object to scientific inquiry or fail to see its value.⁷ Rather, "What he objects to is the failure of scholars and scientists, as well as people more generally, to appreciate that these disciplines lack certainty."⁸

For example, Kierkegaard, through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, writes that "with regard to historical issues, it is of course impossible to reach an objective decision of such a nature that no doubt would be able to insinuate itself."⁹ He further claims "it is indeed a misunderstanding to want to assure oneself objectively and thereby avoid the risk [of choice]."¹⁰ In other words, for Kierkegaard, it is simply impossible to make Irwin's "profound decisions" based on objective knowledge. Kierkegaard therefore did not disparage reason; he recognized its inherent limits.¹¹

This epistemological point applies to everyday life. When we pull open a door, we expect the doorknob to remain attached as we do so. We never have complete assurance it will remain attached, and we have likely seen others pull a loose knob off of a door. Yet we take the leap anyway, because we must act. It does not do to stay objective or scientific about the matter. We must decide: pull or do not pull.

A possible response to this point is to claim that our personal experience, and that of others, provides us reason to trust the doorknob. Further, scientific principles suggest certain doorknobs are more trustworthy than others. (Does it look sturdy? Does it appear to be well-fastened to the door?) Yet no matter how sure we are, we are essentially trusting the doorknob not to break off and send us falling to the ground. We also trust the ground not to give way when we put one foot in front of the other. We

⁶ *Id.* at 17; emphasis in original.

⁷ M.G. Piety, *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology* 80 (Baylor Univ. Press 2010).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ 1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Hong ed., Princeton Univ. Press 1992) p. 42.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ See C. S. Evans, *Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith*, 25 *Religious Studies* (No. 3) 347, 360 (1989): "Kierkegaard saw it as necessary to see the individual as retaining some natural, intellectual ability, namely the ability to recognize its inability."

trust the sun will rise tomorrow morning. Our calculations might give us 99.9% certainty. Yet the .1% lingers.

Why does this matter? After all, we seem to get by on 99.9% certainty in our daily lives. Yet Kierkegaard writes that, when it comes to decisions of eternal significance, we need more than an approximate answer—we need perfect certainty. He argues that basing our most profound life decisions on scientific approximations makes us comical: “[T]he individual finds himself... wanting to tie his eternal happiness to [the historical] and not being able to do so because the approximation is never finished... The individual is tragic because of his passion and comic because of staking it on an approximation.”¹²

What does it mean to believe in something if that something is contingent upon the newest scientific discovery? Witness the endless studies back and forth about whether some foodstuffs are harmful. If one waited for certainty before eating, one would die hungry. As an existing individual, it would seem I have two choices: first, I can remain scholarly and objective, refrain from basing my happiness on anything at all (lest another scholar come along to prove my current beliefs wrong), and die while the grass grows.¹³ Second, I can become the ludicrous zealot who is infinitely passionate about some scientific position that could very well be proven wrong in the future.¹⁴

For Kierkegaard, faith is the solution to this conundrum: by faith, we subjectively appropriate what is objectively uncertain.¹⁵ In other words, we are able to become passionately certain, even as we recognize that we have no objective reasons for that certainty. Hence, we could never conclusively prove to others that our beliefs are correct. We base our faith on personal experience, revelations from God, and our own (potentially flawed) reasoning. We are not objective scholars who refuse to believe in anything because scientific progress might disprove it tomorrow. Yet neither are we zealots who falsely believe they possess objective certainty and try to force their beliefs on others. We are simply human, and we must make decisions about how to live our one life, despite limited knowledge and imperfect reasoning.

¹² Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, *supra* note 9, at 43.

¹³ *Id.* at 32.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 35-36.

¹⁵ *See id.* at 203: “*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person*” (emphasis in original).

Strangely, Irwin seems to accept Kierkegaard's points about subjectivity and passion when discussing Sartre's thoughts on the subjectivity of experience and the necessity of choice. Irwin writes "many choices must be made in the midst of deep uncertainty... It is partly for this reason that existentialism puts a premium on the subjective quality of one's beliefs. *It's not that truth is subjective, but that things worth believing, choosing, and risking require some passion.*"¹⁶ Yet he does not grasp the greater implications of this point. If we must sometimes choose to believe despite deep uncertainty about the truth, is not that where faith comes in? Existentialist scholar John Macquarrie argues that Sartre's and Camus's political beliefs were no less paradoxical than Kierkegaard's Christian faith.¹⁷ Anyone with values must, in some form, have faith—that is, have certainty in the uncertain.

Before continuing I want to return to a point made earlier, that existentialism is not irrationalism. Macquarrie points out that even existentialists give reasons for their faith.¹⁸ "To allow the reasons of the heart to have their say is not to abandon all rational judgment..."¹⁹ Rational people can disagree and argue, even when some of their reasons are internal or personal. But we must nevertheless recognize the limits of reason: "[E]xistentialism offers no shortcuts towards the solution of metaphysical or ontological problems."²⁰

Irwin's discussion of existentialism takes an odd turn in the middle of his book. Instead of developing a conception of existentialist libertarianism, he makes an extended argument for moral anti-realism, which he says follows from existentialism's rejection of objective values.²¹ Moral anti-realism is the position that there are no objective moral facts, that is, facts that command certain morals and that exist independent of human thought.²² Irwin believes that "without God there is no real or objective morality."²³ He proposes instead an evolutionary theory of morality: human morals evolved because

¹⁶ Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 26 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An introduction, guide and assessment* (Penguin Books 1973) p. 21.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 89.

²² *Id.*; Richard Joyce, *Moral Anti-Realism*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at § 1 (Stanford Univ. 2015), available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism/>.

²³ Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 92.

they have survival value, not because they are objectively true.²⁴ In addition, precisely which morals are pro-survival can change with time.

Irwin's implicit rejection of the Christian God appears to have also blinded him to other, less deistic universals. I am no expert on the moral realism debate. But a reasonable response to Irwin, which he does not address, would be to ask why "survival," human flourishing, or various other sociobiological standards cannot be objective moral facts. The fact that precise rules of human morality change, or that the survival-value of a rule changes, does not negate the existence of the over-arching moral standard. Indeed, in true existentialist form, such changes might reveal that our flawed, human interpretations of overarching moral values were imperfect to begin with. Limited knowledge might negatively impact our implementation of any moral standards.

Perhaps the larger problem with Irwin's anti-realism is simply that it is unnecessary. As the earlier discussion of Kierkegaard showed, existentialism does not depend on a rejection of objective truth. What is important is human ignorance of absolute truth (if any exists) and the reality of subjective human experience. Likewise, libertarianism does not depend on an evolutionary morality. Some libertarians believe in objective morality. Other libertarians do not; some are utilitarians, others deontologists, and still others some mix of the two. Irwin believes natural rights are nonsense.²⁵ Yet libertarian John Hasnas discusses the possibility of "empirical natural rights," which emerge from an evolutionary morality similar to the one Irwin suggests.²⁶

It is one of classical liberalism's most admirable features that it evolved precisely to overcome the problem of ideological diversity. European liberalism emerged out of the Enlightenment as a solution to widespread religious conflict. Some of the best classical liberal scholarship today focuses on the ideals of toleration, multiculturalism, and public reason—all of which admit value-diversity as a basic fact of humanity, and one to which liberalism can provide a solution.²⁷

²⁴ *Id.* at 99.

²⁵ *Id.* at 133.

²⁶ See generally John Hasnas, *Toward A Theory of Empirical Natural Rights*, 22 J. Social Phil. & Pol. (No. 1) 111 (2005).

²⁷ See generally Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2011); Chandran Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago* (Oxford Univ. Press 2003); Kevin Vallier, *Liberal Politics and Public Faith: Beyond Separation*, (Routledge 2014).

Irwin spends two chapters applying moral anti-realism to ideas about property rights and the market system, but the reader is left wondering why. Irwin declares that “moral anti-realist existentialism is compatible with a libertarian approach to property rights and a minimal state.”²⁸ I suppose this is a good thing for the moral anti-realist existentialists, though I doubt I will ever have the chance to ask so rare a person how he feels about it.

Rather than take this approach, Irwin should have focused on the features of libertarian philosophy that dovetail with the broader conceptions of existentialism he provides early in the book. His narrow “atheist moral anti-realist” existentialism precludes many broader tie-ins to libertarianism. I will provide one example, regarding humility.

For F.A. Hayek, liberalism embodies humility.²⁹ Only those who know everything may morally plan someone else’s life.³⁰ Indeed, he says that the liberal tradition is closer to the Christian tradition of the fallibility and sinfulness of man, while the perfectionism of socialism is in irreconcilable conflict with Christianity.³¹ No matter how profound the liberal believes his spiritual beliefs are, says Hayek, he will never regard himself as entitled to impose them on others.³² Because of this humility, it would require an extremely high degree of certainty to prevent the experimentation that would occur in an ideal society.³³

Kierkegaard views his exposition of the limits of reason in a similar way, urging epistemic humility. It is a Socratic task, intent on showing people they do not know as much as they think they do. For Kierkegaard, uncertainty is a persistent problem; it is one overcome only by faith.³⁴ Professor Piety argues that, for Kierkegaard, “[f]aith is the knower’s confidence that reality is known to him—that his subjective senses are objectively real.”³⁵ But this faith is a subjective task, not an objective one.³⁶ C.

²⁸ Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 132

²⁹ F.A. Hayek, *Road to Serfdom* (Univ. of Chi. Press 2007) p. 180.

³⁰ *Id.* at 106.

³¹ F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Amazon Kindle ed., Univ. of Chi. Press 2011) at locations 2810-11.

³² *Id.* at locations 13940-41.

³³ *See id.* at locations 2964-68.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Swenson & Hong trans., 1st ed., Princeton Univ. Press 1967) p. 103.

³⁵ Piety, *supra* note 7, at 90.

³⁶ Nathan P. Carson, *Passionate Epistemology: Kierkegaard on Skepticism, approximate knowledge, and Higher Existential Truth*, 40 J. of Chinese Phil. (No. 1) 29, 34 (2013).

Stephen Evans has written that, for Kierkegaard, “faith must not be grounded in reasons.”³⁷ But this is incomplete. For Kierkegaard, faith must not be grounded in *public*, objective reasons: it cannot be. Objectivity leads to uncertain approximations, not certainty. It is only by epistemic humility that human understanding can properly find itself.³⁸ Only by understanding that the reasons are not objective can the individual develop subjective certainty of the revelation personally made known to her.

Both Hayek’s and Kierkegaard’s writings imply one person should not dictate the beliefs of another. For Kierkegaard, objective reasons, which can be publicly communicated to others, are no good because faith is a subjective matter. No human can be certain enough to demand that another believe in Christianity or any other religion. God can, because He can meet the infinitely high bar of justification by providing the objective certainty humans lack. But no other human can. Of course, Hayek is concerned with political theory—he does not require an infinitely high bar of justification to justify a law against murder. But he is concerned with laws that would preclude individuals’ free experimentation with different modes of life. There is a high standard that must be met to justify such laws. Classical liberals have long struggled over this justifying principle, as famously displayed in John Stuart Mill’s “harm principle,” Herbert Spencer’s “law of equal liberty,” and Murray Rothbard’s “non-aggression principle,” to name a few. Without such justification, we ought to humbly let others experiment as they wish.

This kind of first-principles discussion is lacking in *The Free Market Existentialist*. If existentialism is concerned with the alienation of the individual, or the value of subjectivity, or methodological individualism, or humility, Irwin could have discussed libertarian approaches to sociology, epistemology, and economics that comment on or dovetail with those issues. He does this to an extent with some cultural issues, tying libertarianism’s focus on creative destruction and entrepreneurial risk-taking to an existentialist ethic of individual action and risk.³⁹ More such discussions would have been welcome. Yet I for one was unsatisfied with his development of a narrow existentialism focused on moral anti-realism, and his attempts to relate it to libertarianism.

My mostly negative review of the book should not mask the fact that it is an interesting read. I especially appreciated Irwin’s deconstruction of

³⁷ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Subjective Truth: Is God an Ethical Fiction?*, 7 Int’l J. for Phil. of Religion (No. 1) 288, 293 (1976).

³⁸ Carson, *supra* note 36, at 45.

³⁹ See Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 84-85.

Sartre's Marxism, which provides insight into Sartre's internal philosophical struggles with his own political positions. Perhaps the problem is simply that the book does not come as advertised. I appreciated Irwin's ever-readable discussions. At times, I felt that he and I were pontificating over pints in a pub—my favorite alliterative pastime. But his arguments had little to do with either libertarianism or existentialism broadly conceived. That is unfortunate, as the book's title promised so much more.