

Reply to Walker and White

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One of the main goals I had for my book *The Free Market Existentialist*¹ was to start a conversation. So, I am grateful to Jason Walker and Mark White for accepting the invitation for dialogue about my work.²

I am pleased that both Walker and White find that the book is successful in demonstrating the links between existentialism and free-market thinking, as this is the crucial point I sought to make. I appreciate White's overview of the whole book, particularly his highlighting of Chapter 3, in which I show how existentialism can help with issues of consumerism and alienation connected to capitalism.

White points out that the book is somewhat harsh and demanding in its criticism of moral fictionalism and its call for moral anti-realism. I can only agree with him that my view will not appeal to most people. (As a moral anti-realist, though, I have no moral condemnation for anyone who rejects it.) White and Walker both worry that the chances are not good that the world would work well without belief in objective morality. They may be right, but that remains to be seen. Aside from what I have written in the book, all I can say is that a similar worry about the world without belief in God no longer looks so worrisome to many.

I do not argue that all existentialists should embrace the free market, nor do I argue that all free-market advocates should be existentialists. The definite article in the book's title is not meant to

¹ William Irwin, *The Free Market Existentialist* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

² Jason Walker, "Mere Prudence? Existentialist Ethics, Moral Anti-Realism, and Freedom," *Reason Papers* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2018), pp. 44-58; Mark White, "How to Live a More Authentic Life in Both Markets and Morals," *Reason Papers* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2018), pp. 59-63.

suggest that there is only one way to be a free-market existentialist. Far from it. Rather, the title refers to the fact that at the time of writing the book I was the only free-market existentialist I knew. With tongue in cheek, I depicted myself as all alone (though not in the despairing existentialist sense) in the overlapping section of a Venn diagram, with one circle representing existentialists and another circle representing free-market thinkers. I am happy to report that since the book's publication, I have heard from scholars who have joined me in the overlap.

Despite my newfound company, I still find myself alone in the overlap of another Venn diagram, this one consisting of three circles representing not only existentialists and free-market thinkers but also moral anti-realists. Moral anti-realism regards discourse about morality as akin to discourse about Atlantis, and it regards moral theory as akin to Atlantean cartography. As I make clear, I do not think that one needs to be a moral anti-realist if one is an existentialist or if one is a free-market thinker. I simply happen to be all three—the book presents the case that my position is coherent.

Walker finds moral anti-realism repugnant. He attempts to save me from myself by showing that I am unwittingly engaged in moral talk. However, in *The Free Market Existentialist* I make the following request: “I ask the reader to interpret all moral-sounding language in the preceding and subsequent chapters in non-moral terms” (p. 128). The main reason that I make this request is that “[a]s with religious and theological language, moral language is so deeply embedded in culture that it would be silly to think it could be completely and immediately exterminated” (p. 128). Much of the language that I use resonates with morality, but that is only because the English language itself is infused with moral metaphors. We would not, I hope, accuse an atheist of covert religious belief, just because she responds to a sneeze with “God bless you” or reacts to pain with an exclamation of “Jesus Christ!” I beg similar indulgence for my use of *should* and talk of *prudence* and *authenticity*. While these words understandably sound moral to many ears, no such intention stands behind my use.

As I make clear in the book, I take prudence to be a sufficient guide for action under moral anti-realism. Prudence, as I conceive of it, is a non-moral virtue. Walker recognizes that Aristotelian prudence (*phronesis*) is indeed a non-moral virtue, but he is quick to add that on some interpretations of Aristotle, prudence is inextricably linked to the moral virtues. That is fine for Aristotle, but I see no implication of this

view for the moral anti-realist. Unlike Aristotle, who insists on a purpose (*telos*) for the human being and a conception of *eudaimonia* that applies to human beings in general, my existentialism and moral anti-realism allow for a range of individual choice that is not hemmed in by Aristotelian moral virtues. Walker finds it troubling that I would rely on prudence for normative concerns, so he proposes alternatives. As a moral anti-realist, though, I am not concerned with normative values in the way that Walker is. I commend prudence for its ability pragmatically to coordinate actions, not to satisfy norms in the moral sense.

Let me note that I sympathize with Walker's lack of sympathy for moral anti-realism. Arguing for moral anti-realism these days is akin to arguing for atheism two hundred years ago. By saying this, I do not mean to suggest that I am correct and ahead of my time. Indeed, my atheism may turn out to be wrong, as may my moral anti-realism. However, just as atheism has become more mainstream, I hope that moral anti-realism will become more mainstream. I cannot present the case for it here, but I am grateful that *The Free Market Existentialist* has contributed to a conversation about it.³

³ For discussion of moral anti-realism, see Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006), pp. 109-66; Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Richard Garner, "Abolishing Morality," in Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin, eds., *A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), pp. 217-33; and Joel Marks, *Ethics without Morals: A Defense of Amoralism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

