PREFACE

This is a book about the market, about what the market does for us, and about the limits we ought to place on it. The book addresses long-standing and much debated questions of political economy: How do markets work and what is their social purpose? What sorts of wants are appropriate for us to satisfy through the use of markets? What limits can we legitimately place on property right and the exchange of property? What is the relation between inequality of income and wealth and inequality of persons? How do we reconcile the demands of liberty with those of welfare?

In part, these are questions about the economy and because of this we should expect an important contribution from economics in our search for answers. I was educated to become an economist and little in this book fails to remind me of the strengths and weaknesses of that education. In many ways the contribution of economics (especially the great tradition of the classical economists) to this book has been substantial. Yet, as valuable as that contribution has been, it is also, I think, deeply flawed.

When economists deal with the way the market works, they begin by making assumptions about what motivates people to work together in producing and distributing the things they need. Economics does not as a rule delve deeply into human motivation. Economists concern themselves much more with the implications of assumptions about motives than with the motives themselves. Bearing in mind the limited objectives of economics, I have no argument to make against this approach. We cannot accomplish everything at once. If separating out a part of the problem somewhat in isolation assures that we will make some mistakes it
also assures us the chance that we might make some progress. If our notion of human motivation is sound then an economics resting, however uncritically, upon that notion might serve us well. But if our notion of human motivation is not sound, our understanding of how the economy works based on that notion will serve us poorly. I wrote this book out of a conviction that the ideas economists work with regarding why people do what they do and want what they want are fundamentally unsound. They and the economics based on them have not served us well.

I will not attempt to support this assertion here, or subsequently in this book. I talk about it in the first chapter, but I present no comprehensive arguments. I mainly assert the weakness of the traditional idea and go ahead to interpret economic life on a different basis. This seems to me a sensible procedure, although I know it will annoy many of those wedded to more traditional ways of thinking about the economy. Those more traditionally minded might expect me to deal at length with their ideas and with the relationship those ideas bear to my own. Doing so is not part of my purpose in this book. Better, I think, to get on with the work of testing the power of our ideas against their ability to illuminate the important issues. This is what I do here. I assume, as economists do, a basic underlying framework for thinking about persons and then see how it helps to bring together a range of vital concerns in a meaningful way. I am satisfied that it does.

The fundamental idea that I work with is that individuals have (or attempt to develop) an enduring and coherent sense of themselves and that they try to make this sense of self real to others through a way or mode of life, including a mode of consumption. Sense of self and mode of life exist in a social context and consist of socially meaningful acts and ideas. I explore what this means for the treatment of what economists term "consumer behavior." I then pursue the implications of these ideas about the consumer for our understanding of consumer decisionmaking as that bears on the way markets work. This exploration provides a basis for a discussion of the nature of self-determination, the limits of property right, and the relation of need to right.

Simply put, we can characterize this idea in the following way: For the traditional approach our mode of consumption makes us more or less happy, but it does not really matter to us; it does not have to do with who we are in the world. In the framework of this book, consumption decisions matter. Those decisions implicate our way of life, and our way of life matters. The framework's ability to make individual decisions meaningful gives it strength. This strength
lends conviction to the answers suggested for the questions in political economy posed above.

I am well aware that much of what I say in the following pages about the individual and the market might be said somehow in a more traditional framework—for example, one employing terms such as preference and choice. This strikes me as wholly beside the point. If what I say here can be said using the traditional language, it cannot be well said. The usual language prevents us from placing what I consider most important about the individual at the forefront of our understanding of him. The traditional image of the consumer, while in some ways familiar, strikes me as curiously empty; the closer we look at this image, the less we recognize ourselves in it. I hope that the interpretation put forward in the following pages is one through which we can see ourselves and our economic lives more clearly, one through which, in the words of R. G. Collingwood, we might "come to know better what to some extent we knew already" (An Essay on Philosophical Method, p. 205).

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Between 1981 and 1986, while working on this project, I also headed a small academic experiment at the University of Denver. I would like to dedicate this book to the friends and colleagues who participated in or otherwise supported that experiment.

—David Levine