

Evolution and the American Myth of the Individual **By John Edward Terrell**

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We will certainly hear it said many times between now and the 2016 elections that the country's two main political parties have "fundamental philosophical differences." But what exactly does that mean?

At least part of the schism between Republicans and Democrats is based in differing conceptions of the role of the individual. We find these differences expressed in the frequent heated arguments about crucial issues like health care and immigration. In a broad sense, Democrats, particularly the more liberal among them, are more likely to embrace the communal nature of individual lives and to strive for policies that emphasize that understanding. Republicans, especially libertarians and Tea Party members on the ideological fringe, however, often trace their ideas about freedom and liberty back to Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries, who argued that the individual is the true measure of human value, and each of us is naturally entitled to act in our own best interests free of interference by others. Self-described libertarians generally also pride themselves on their high valuation of logic and reasoning over emotion.

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Philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel have emphasized that human beings are essentially social creatures, that the idea of an isolated individual is a misleading abstraction. So it is not just ironic but instructive that modern evolutionary research, anthropology, cognitive psychology and neuroscience have come down on the side of the philosophers who have argued that the basic unit of human social life is not and never has been the selfish, self-serving individual. Contrary to libertarian and Tea Party rhetoric, evolution has made us a powerfully social species, so much so that the essential precondition of human survival is and always has been the individual plus his or her relationships with others.

This conclusion is unlikely to startle anyone who is at all religious or spiritual. When I was a boy I was taught that the Old Testament is about our relationship with God and the New Testament is about our responsibilities to one another. I now know this division of biblical wisdom is too simple. I have also learned that in the eyes of many conservative Americans today, religion and evolution do not mix. You either accept what the Bible tells us or what Charles Darwin wrote, but not both. The irony here is that when it comes to our responsibilities to one another as human beings, religion and evolution nowadays are not necessarily on opposite sides of the fence. And as Matthew D. Lieberman, a social neuroscience researcher at the University of California, Los

Angeles, has written: “we think people are built to maximize their own pleasure and minimize their own pain. In reality, we are actually built to overcome our own pleasure and increase our own pain in the service of following society’s norms.”

While I do not entirely accept the norms clause of Lieberman’s claim, his observation strikes me as evocatively religious. Consequently I find it more than ironic that American individualism today — which many link closely with Christian fundamentalism — is self-consciously founded on 17th- and 18th-century ideas about human beings as inherently self-interested and self-centered individuals despite the fact that what essayists like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau wrote back then about the “natural state” of humankind at the beginning of history was arguably never meant to be taken as the gospel truth.

Case in point, Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously declared in “The Social Contract” (1762) that each of us is born free and yet everywhere we are in chains. He did not mean physical chains. He meant social ones. We now know he was dead wrong. Human evolution has made us obligate social creatures. Even if some of us may choose sooner or later to disappear into the woods or sit on a mountaintop in deep meditation, we humans are able to do so only if before such individualistic anti-social resolve we have first been socially nurtured and socially taught survival arts by others. The distinction Rousseau and others tried to draw between “natural liberty, which is bounded only by the strength of the individual” and “civil liberty, which is limited by the general will” is fanciful, not factual.

This is decidedly not what Enlightenment philosophers wanted to hear. According to Rousseau and others, our responsibilities and duties to one another as members of society do not come from nature, but instead from our social conventions. Their speculations about the origins of the latter generally asserted that the most ancient of all societies was the family. Yet in their eyes, even the family as a social unit was seen as ephemeral. As Rousseau wrote: “children remain attached to the father only so long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved.” When released from obedience to their father, the next generation is free to assume a life of singular freedom and independence. Should any child elect to remain united with the family of his birth, he did so “no longer naturally, but voluntarily; and the family itself is then maintained only by convention.”

In fairness to Rousseau it should be noted, as I observed earlier, that he may not have meant such claims to be taken literally. As he remarked in his discourse “On the Origin of Inequality,” “philosophers, who have inquired into the foundations of society, have all felt the necessity of going back to a state of nature; but not one of them has got there.” Why then did Rousseau and others make up stories about human history if they didn’t really believe them? The simple answer, at least during the Enlightenment, was that they wanted people to accept their claim that civilized life is based on social conventions, or contracts, drawn up at least figuratively speaking by free, sane and equal human beings — contracts that could and should be extended to cover the moral

and working relationships that ought to pertain between rulers and the ruled. In short, their aims were political, not historical, scientific or religious.

However pragmatic their motivations and goals, what Rousseau and others crafted as arguments in favor of their ideas all had the earmarks of primitive mythology. As the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argued almost a century ago: "Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief, it safeguards and enforces morality, it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man." Myths achieve this social function, he observed, by serving as guides, or charters, for moral values, social order and magical belief. "Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom."

While as an anthropologist I largely agree with Malinowski, I would add that not all myths make good charters for faith and wisdom. The sanctification of the rights of individuals and their liberties today by libertarians and Tea Party conservatives is contrary to our evolved human nature as social animals. There was never a time in history before civil society when we were each totally free to do whatever we elected to do. We have always been social and caring creatures. The thought that it is both rational and natural for each of us to care only for ourselves, our own preservation, and our own achievements is a treacherous fabrication. This is not how we got to be the kind of species we are today. Nor is this what the world's religions would ask us to believe. Or at any rate, so I was told as a child, and so I still believe.

John Terrell

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Socrates Verona, N.J.

We are all socialists - it's simply a matter of degree and and hypocrisy whether one has the intellectual clarity and courage to admit it.

We'd all be marooned without the contributions of others.

I'm thrilled to be able to pay taxes for the cost of roads, bridges, schools, libraries, parks, sidewalks, police and fire forces, a standing army, a judiciary system, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the CDC, and the NIH as well as the cost of all those red welfare states trying their nihilistic best to sink the nation's IQ and common sense into a cognitive dissonance toilet.

I accept that I'm part of a larger society that often suffers self-destructive delusions of self-sufficiency, narcissism and self-worship.

Socialism has a tremendous global, historic and American record of success.

Too bad most Americans don't speak enough English and basic logic to recognize that indisputable truth.

Mark Thomason Clawson, MI

Individualism is not the same as selfishness.

What the Republicans call individual is just selfishness.

The difference is that personal responsibility is not just for one's own wants. It is responsibility, not self indulgence.

Michael Sherrell Forestville, Ca

Government is our only protection against the depredations of capital, far and away the more dangerous force in society. The danger from government comes when it's co-opted by the rich.

Otto Winter Park, Florida

Why focus on Cuba as a society that recognizes our social natures? A better example would be Sweden, a country that re-elects democratic socialists year after year, and that enjoys one of the world's highest standards of living, along with low crime rates (albeit high taxes).

What strikes me about libertarians is that they are almost invariably well off individuals who have enjoyed, since childhood, the advantages of middle class (or better) economic security and, being largely white, have not faced racial prejudice. I have yet to meet a libertarian who had to grow up in a Texas barrio or in an African-American neighborhood like the ones we see on television in Ferguson, Missouri. In places like these, the idea that individuals make their own fates and society is a mere backdrop doesn't hold water.

Phillip Wynn Beer Sheva, Israel

I wonder whether all expressions of individuality have a fun-house mirror quality to them, meaning that such expressions are meaningless absent a social context; also, that properly seen, they're a bit funny. So, Tea Party "individualists" are concentrated in the South, a part of the country that, despite its white cultural assertions of stubborn rebelliousness against authority, is, as I witness from having grown up there, also the most rigidly socially conforming part of the U.S. Southern "individualism" as practiced also illustrates the fictive nature of the beast, as well as how paradoxically destructive of individuals it can be. For it can only be expressed via a few socially approved roles and attitudes; anything outside those norms, such as most notoriously concern for "outsiders" like African-Americans and homosexuals, is stigmatized as deviant from the dominant social narrative or myth. Some rebels! Some individuals!

Amboycharlie Nagoya, Japan

What you actually mean by that is that employers should be free to offer less than minimum wage and the job seeker should be free to accept it, if he has no better prospects. Either that or take a hike.

This from a portion of society that still waxes nostalgic about slavery.

The reason Democrats believe that minimum wages, mandated benefits medical leave max number of hours work without overtime pay ets should all be enforced with coercive laws is that no employer (since the frontier was closed) would offer any of it voluntarily, and no employee would have been able to negotiate such a package individually, unless his skills were extraordinary and essential to the firm.

The reason we have assembly lines and capital intensive production is to deskill the work so that skilled employees can't hold the firm's profits hostage to payment for skills. The Conservative belief is works only at the micro level of the self-interested capitalist, but disastrous at the macro level in which aggregate demand must equal supply. As evidence I offer you what happened when we instituted supply economics. We shifted the supply curve, but not the demand curve. To raise demand we extended more credit rather than increased wages. The result is the mess we are in now.

Gus Hallin Durango

This is one of the best articles I have seen in The Stone. Libertarians are natural born bullies, and they know that if there are no rules or regulations, the biggest bully on the block always wins.

I really like the part about mythologies. In America, we have outlawed slavery but the myth of racial superiority, necessary for the moral justification of slavery, is still alive and well, just look at places like Ferguson right now. We need more research about how mythologies are indoctrinated into group and individual identities, and why they are so difficult to eradicate even when they are obviously wrong.

Andrew Goldstein Portland

Myths serve many important roles for humanity but, whether true or false, myths are what humans substitute for scientific information when none exists as was the case before humans developed science-based inquiry. Libertarian and Tea Party types nurture the myth (conveniently dismissing science) that maximal autonomy goes hand in hand with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But as this article states, cooperation including a social policy that promotes distribution of wealth and assuring the common good is the hallmark of surviving human cultures.