

Evolution and the American Myth of the Individual

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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.

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