

Individualism and the Failures of Liberalism in America

By [Dr. Robert P. Abele](#)

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There is a common question being asked today in liberal and activist circles: “Why, in the face of all the deeply immoral actions engaged in by the U.S. government regarding its domestic and foreign actions, can liberals not organize themselves enough to push back against the economic-political managers of the totalitarian surge of the U.S. government?” This essay is an attempt to answer this question, at least in part.

There is a common denominator between traditional liberals and conservatives that engages one camp and immobilizes the other. That common denominator is the philosophy of individualism—i.e. subjective relativism. In its extreme form, it is the adolescent level of narcissism, in which one is concerned with only oneself. When one combines this individualism with the moral relativism of a capitalistic philosophy which denies the objective moral values that would limit individual desires (in this case, the desire for money), one finds a philosophy that is shared by both traditional liberals and conservatives. Both are combined in the philosophy of Ayn Rand, who makes a virtue of selfish individualism, the “all for me and my interests” syndrome. For example, in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Rand says that “the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action” (p. x).

Even more, it is positively irrational for actors not to be selfish/self-interested. Traditional liberals themselves participate in this philosophy when they attempt to stand alone with their own opinions and the philosophy of “this is right for me,” or “I do what I want or think is best for my interests,” or “no one can tell me what is right, true, etc.” Any one of these fits nicely into the traditional Lockean-Libertarian understanding of human nature, in which humans by nature are selfish and desirous (see John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Second Treatise, Chapter IX). In general, liberals follow the Randian philosophy when they put their own self interests ahead of a general principle or general set of principles concerning what is right, true, just, etc. To put it as de Tocqueville did: “in democratic societies, each citizen is habitually busy with the contemplation of a very puny object, which is himself” (*Democracy in America*, Chapter XVIII).

Even worse, some academics and intellectuals support this type of primacy of the individual and/or its accompanying cognitive and ethical relativism by finding ways of justifying it, all with the end-game in mind to deny the importance of the normative dimension of human reason and its relation to ethics, by maintaining the primacy of the non-rational and non-normative dimension to human cognition. This is exemplified today by one such attempt to reduce beliefs to mere metaphors or “frames.” When irrationalism of this type is said to found human reason or morality, it inevitably produces (or at the very least contributes significantly to) an ethical relativism which, when combined with individualism, results in a noteworthy blow to the cause of rational normative thinking, such as the political norms of

“justice for all” (i.e. justice as a universal precept) or “equality barring none,” to say nothing of the notion of community.¹

Some commentators have attempted to pin this development in American individualism at least in part on Freud, with his understanding of the primacy of the id (e.g. see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, for a good early example of this kind of argument). However, Freud’s recognition of primary/animal instincts is complemented by his recognition of the rise of a control mechanism for them (see *The Future of an Illusion*, Chapter II). But whereas Freud’s control mechanism is generated by social taboo, rationalist and Enlightenment understanding of control and corrective for base impulses comes from rational autonomy.

This means that individuals have an intrinsic mechanism for normative, rational moral thinking. But with the American redefinition of autonomy as unconstrained individual liberty, when it is combined with the view of humans as slaves to their base impulses/passions, or whose thoughts are determined by their metaphor, then autonomy as normative, self-conscious self-control is surrendered to in-fighting among groups for social control of what constitutes taboo (that Edward Bernays made a career out of manipulating such social control is by now nearly common knowledge; see his *Propaganda*, Chapter I). But if this view remains the dominant view of how human cognition operates (or worse, the defining characteristic of the human person), then humans are reduced to lower-levels of brain function, which has shown itself to have the potential to take us all the way back(ward) to the adolescent narcissism of self-indulgence and its concomitant suspicion of any corrective challenges made to it. Thus, the individual/internal self-corrective mechanism is replaced by a simple channeling of the fulfillment of self-desire in various socially-acceptable ways, those ways being controlled by the reigning social group. This devaluing of both rational reflection and self-control amounts to the devolution of humans to lower-brained image-based (i.e. metaphorical) maneuvering among and between alternatives for self-fulfillment. This is the “low road” view of humanity and the shutting down of higher-level (i.e. late-developing) brain functions of normative thinking—i.e. ethical and rational.

Contrary to this “freewheeling individualism,” many if not most contemporary philosophers, along with the new field of cognitive science, demonstrates quite convincingly that there are clear rational and moral structures that are implicit in human thought and language. So even though a cognitively and ethically relativistic culture (like California, which I would argue leads the nation in this view) attempts to deny this by reducing human thought to a foundation in images and metaphors, it ultimately is not only a bad philosophy because of its reductionism, but can explain a lot in terms of liberal inability to push back. The reason is that it underscores the selfish desire- fulfillment that liberalism has devolved into, by denying any intrinsically normative dimension to human thought and by rejecting the notion of universally-binding ethical principles, expressed by such norms as “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” When this principle is reduced to an individual ethical preference, as it so often is, it implies “tolerance” of other viewpoints, and that would include “tolerance” of an attitude (not a principle) that says “I’ll do what I feel is best for me (at all times),” or at its worst, “I am my own authority.” It is this relativism that defines liberalism today, and explains in part why liberals can’t unify and thus organize themselves.

Among those who recognize this issue are Chris Hedges (“America is in Need of a Moral Bailout”) and Morris Berman (*Why America Failed*). However, the angle at which they each approach this issue is a bit different from mine. Hedges focuses on America’s moral nihilism,

in particular in post-WWII America and even more specifically as it applies to our elites. Berman argues that the type of individualism discussed here is essentially nothing new in America; that individualism connected particularly with monetary acquisitiveness has been in the American character from the beginning (see Chapter One of his book).

Note that I am not saying that individualism and/or relativism is the sole reason for lack of liberal unity today. There are social and psychological factors involved in answering this question as well, such as a demoralized people, economically strapped, living in fear losing of their jobs, and thus feeling powerless to control their own destinies. But even fear and demoralization must be overcome if there is to be any response to the fascistic direction that our country has taken, a direction that promises to continue under an Obama second-term presidency (e.g. drone warfare; presidential assassinations; attacking government whistleblowers, warrantless electronic surveillance, etc.). Individualism and relativism offer no way forward from this quandary; hence, traditional liberalism has no solution to the issues that plague us today.

There is another possibility for traditional liberal inactivity today, and that is the possibility that liberalism has been institutionalized in the Bill Clinton-Barak Obama regimes as distinctively bourgeois liberalism—i.e. the solidly middle-class liberal with good education and good job who is willing to surrender a firm and activist commitment to universal principles or the common good for a comfortable existence accepted and protected by the very governmental institution composed of bourgeois liberals like him/herself who share their constituents' self-interested desires to be left alone to pursue their individual bliss. Due to their socio-economic position in society, they feel free to pass off the responsibility for a better tomorrow for everyone to the political leader who at least in word espouses the same general values. Even if this is the case, it is still individualism in a significant way: the "leave me alone; I've got mine" attitude by which one absents themselves from society and responsibility for the good of others.

Thus, whatever the situation, it is a change in fundamental philosophy that is required to set liberal values on a new path. This will require self-reflection and rational-moral thinking, not wallowing in human "feeling" or "frames." One approach that I do not think will work in changing philosophical direction, however, is the attempt to reduce human existence to a social dialectic, as has been an approach regularly advocated in attempting produce change for the last ten years. There are several reasons for this. First, individualistic relativism is too enshrined in American culture to simply advocate a dialectical turnaround. It would be more productive to begin with individual cognition, since the individual is the primary base of American cultural philosophy. Second, I believe the reduction of human existence to social interchange is ultimately intellectually hollow and politically short-sighted: intellectually hollow because it gives no consideration of intrinsic and rationally supported normative thinking; politically shallow because its materialism gives humans no legs on which to regain their distinctively human autonomy as a normative and self-conscious choice of action. Without this, there can be no human rights to begin with—something Karl Marx recognized in his rejection of human rights (in Critique of the Gotha Programme).

So the conclusion to our analysis is that traditional liberals can't organize a push-back against the wave of totalitarianism coming at us in America today because they can't unify! To unify, they would have to let go of both prongs of lived liberalism today (i.e. individualism and relativism), and that would entail a revolutionary shift of their positions. But until that happens, one can only expect traditional bourgeois liberals to support center-right presidents like Obama. This is where the Occupy Wall Street movement represents for us a

breath of fresh air: focused on the issues and on collective response to them, it provides a needed corrective to traditional liberal individualism. However, even OWS will not be a solution until they recognize spokespersons and hierarchical organization of some sort. To reject that need is to reject something that is endemic to any organized movement. But at least they are on the right track. So now let us assist the movement by providing needed rational legs to it, and we can follow the lead of the OWS generation as they work to extricate us from the results of our own cultural and philosophical undoing.²

Notes

1 The recognition that this notion of metaphor and “framing” produces a philosophical relativism is a fairly straightforward process. Although the point of this paper is not to demonstrate that, one can see it by means of a quick example. What is the difference between John Boehner and Paul Ryan repeating, ad nauseam, “You’re not going to grow the economy if you raise tax rates (on the top two rates),” and George Lakoff advocating his traditional liberal followers to repeat over and over again that “The private depends on the public”? [This line and the strategy of repetition with the goal of (simply) “changing frames” was advocated by Lakoff at a talk he gave to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco in September, 2012] Unless there is a standard beyond metaphor itself by which to assess these two slogans, the only consequence of this recognition can be that different viewpoints are simply a propaganda battle to hold the dominant metaphor—i.e. a relativistic philosophy. ²

I should add here that this is not an “America-can-be-saved-if-only-we-do-this” argument. Personally, I do not think America can change its current course of spiraling toward the self-destruction of its political-cultural system in a slow-motion death dance. What I am hoping is that we might bring about a better humanity out of the recognition of the vacuous nature of individualism and relativism that America manifests as its national philosophy, both conservative and—as this paper argues—liberal.

Dr. Robert P. Abele holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Marquette University He is the author of three books: *A User’s Guide to the USA PATRIOT Act* (2005); *The Anatomy of a Deception: A Logical and Ethical Analysis of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (2009); *Democracy Gone: A Chronicle of the Last Chapters of the Great American Democratic Experiment* (2009). He contributed eleven chapters to the *Encyclopedia of Global Justice, from The Hague: Springer Press* (October 1, 2011). Dr. Abele is an instructor of philosophy at Diablo Valley College, located in Pleasant Hill, California in the San Francisco Bay area.

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