

American Individualism, Rightly Understood

Samuel Gregg

Americans have always prided themselves on their individualism. The distinctly American understanding of individuality is, however, under threat from an ideology of diversity and a widespread emphasis on self-expression. Rehabilitating American individualism rightly understood requires understanding the origins of diversity ideology and emphases on self-expression. It also involves recovering the distinct philosophical and historical roots of American individualism, and reconnecting it to the habit of free association, a strong civil society, and the idea of self-government.

For many, the words “American” and “individualism” are synonymous. In some cases, this translates into admiration of the robust, self-confident figures in 1950s Westerns portrayed by actors such as Gary Cooper and John Wayne. In other instances, however, American individualism is associated with the legitimization of greed and a willingness to use and abuse others, as epitomized by the character Gordon Gekko in the film *Wall Street*.

Two more recent developments have further complicated discussion about individualism in America. The first concerns the rise of the ideology of diversity. Organizations ranging from government agencies to major corporations have embraced diversity ideology and sought to adopt it as a matter of policy. The second, older development is the association of individualism

with expressive individualism: an understanding of the individual that prioritizes the satisfaction of a person's desires, which are, in turn, understood to be a realization of one's true self.

At first glance, commitment to boosting diversity and celebrating expressive individualism would seem to emphasize the differences between human beings and, to that extent, enhance awareness of our individuality. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Diversity ideology has little interest in people as individuals. Instead, it prioritizes group identity, typically based on race and sex, and is concerned with dissolving our individuality into such identities. Expressive individualism creates a different set of problems: It breaks down the associative and communal responsibilities that integrate individuals into society and undermines the vital connection of rights to the idea that there are truths, knowable by human reason, that transcend emotions.

Resisting diversity ideology and expressive individualism means that Americans must rediscover American individualism *rightly understood*. That means resisting tendencies to define individuals primarily by artificial or surface group identities and having a proper understanding of how Americans ought to live out their liberties while fulfilling their concrete responsibilities to others. The purpose of this *First Principles* paper is to show that American individualism rightly understood reflects a particular constellation of ideas that stress the uniqueness of each human being, our capacity to act freely, and the rights that protect our ability to do so. It also illustrates how American individualism integrates this concern for each person's uniqueness and liberty with specific understandings of human nature and sociability.

In an American context, these ideas were first given expression during the Founding era. Since then, they have been further formulated by several important commentators on America and its experiment in ordered liberty. Those intellectuals—most notably, the nineteenth-century French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville and the American economic thinker Michael Novak—understood the distinctiveness of American individualism, and their explanation of its nature provide us with guidance as to how we might reinvigorate it today.

What Is Wrong with Diversity?

In the twentieth century, the strongest forces opposing American individualism were explicitly collectivist ideologies and enterprises, the most virulent being the totalitarianisms of communism, national socialism, and fascism. What might be called “soft” challengers to American individualism from the 1930s onwards included President Franklin Roosevelt's New

Deal and President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs. These programs prioritized state action over what political theorists call "civil society": that vast sphere of private and voluntary associations that exist between the individual and the state, many of which are instantiated and maintained through individuals acting under their own initiative.

Diversity ideology falls into the category of being a soft opponent of American individualism. In one sense, America is a naturally "small-d" diverse society. Successive waves of immigration have considerably changed America's ethnic and religious makeup since the Anglo-Celtic Protestant makeup that dominated in 1776. The effects of this can be seen in any major American city today, in neighborhoods associated with different ethnic groups, or the proliferation of synagogues, churches, temples, and mosques, often in proximity.

This small-d diversity in America was not forced. And it has been accompanied by two sets of expectations. The first is that those coming to America should adapt to and accept American ideals and constitutional norms as well as the expectations and responsibilities associated with American citizenship. The second is that people are free to strike out on their own—that their ethnic background, for example, is not something that effectively imprisons a person into a destiny or even viewpoint.

The fact that a woman is a Vietnamese immigrant or of Vietnamese heritage, for instance, does not mean that she must think and act in a particular way. Her ethnicity and sex are not understood as inhibiting her liberty to carve out her own path, form her own views, and even express opinions contrary to what might be perceived orthodoxies associated with being female or Vietnamese. In this way, she is as much an American individual as she is Vietnamese and female.

There have, of course, been instances in which specific groups were excluded by government policies and legal structures from this process. The most obvious case is slavery, which kept generations of African Americans bound to the whims of their masters and unable to exercise the liberties of enterprise and association that would have enabled them to change their destinies in lasting and significant ways. Other examples include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as well as the decision by the Supreme Court in *Korematsu v. United States* (1944) to exclude Japanese Americans from the West Coast Military Area during World War II.¹

Despite these problems, the growth and spread of small-d diversity has been a central part of the American story. The commitments underlying diversity ideology stand in opposition to that natural pluralism. While appearing to stress the importance of difference, "capital-D" diversity prioritizes group identities, primarily those of race and sex, over human individuality.

In his book, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (2003), the anthropologist Peter W. Wood illustrates that diversity as an ideology is about ordering society into different groups, setting rules about how you should think and act as a member of that group, and enforcing certain assumptions about the political dynamics that benefit or inhibit such groups. In this scenario, your membership in a group and your association with its history (however real or manufactured) is more important than, for example, your talents, ideas, aptitudes, interests, and individual history.

In contrast to the conception of America as a melting pot in which there is a constant blending of cultures and backgrounds, diversity ideology seeks to box individuals into groups defined by specific categories and then to use the state to engineer social and economic outcomes based on those categories.² Simply being Latino or Anglo, male or female, black or white, or some combination of these (Latina woman, black man, etc.) is more important than your individual accomplishments or character. The worth that you bring to the classroom, or the boardroom, *is* your skin color or sex rather than, say, your grades or your business successes.

Diversity ideology is also very selective about what types of diversity it considers to be legitimate. It is especially hostile to intellectual variety. As the political philosopher Joshua Mitchell writes, “Diversity claims to make visible those persons who heretofore have been invisible. It does that—at the cost of making invisible those persons who *cannot in principle exist* within the groups it purports to make visible: traditional women, black conservatives, etc.”³ This means that women and African Americans *must* be progressive in their politics. To be otherwise means that you “aren’t really” a woman or “ain’t black” (to use then–presidential candidate Joe Biden’s expression). It follows that, in Mitchell’s words, “Women who mock the contention that traditional motherhood is an artifact of patriarchal oppression [or] Black men with sober hope who believe in America notwithstanding its several-hundred-year history of slavery” are to be stigmatized and silenced.⁴

Diversity ideology, Wood notes, thus “offers a closed loop of thought and experience. Once one enters this loop and accepts the main propositions of *diversity*, it is difficult to see out of it.”⁵ For example, diversity ideology holds that membership in a particular group means that you either enjoy certain privileges (white, male, etc.) or you labor under certain burdens (black, female, etc.). State action, it follows, must be taken to redress the imbalances.

If, however, you question the rationale of diversity ideology by suggesting, for instance, that such policies may produce significant injustices (such as holding people to a lesser standard because of their skin color or promoting

someone primarily because she is a woman or Hispanic), you are ipso facto prejudiced. There now exists an entire industry of occupational categories (e.g., chief diversity officers) and organized endeavors (e.g., diversity, equity, and inclusion programs) designed to reinforce these nostrums in the private and public sectors.

This is not to deny that people who were not white, Anglo-Saxon, male, or Protestant Christian experienced various forms of unjust discrimination in different periods of American history. Acknowledgment of those genuine injustices, however, is different from subjecting everyone to diversity ideology. Moreover, once you insist that society *must* be understood in terms of group identity, this implies “un-mixing” the melting pot, and then adjusting every level of society to realize an (impossible to achieve) equilibrium of expression of all these set identities in every sphere of social and economic life via state intervention. There is no place for the individual in this understanding of the world, because individuality (say, a black woman who adheres to conservative social positions or who thinks that the Great Society of the 1960s was a step backwards for African Americans) undermines any attempt to establish the equilibrium.

Expressive Individualism as Nihilism

Diversity ideology is a new phenomenon. “Expressive individualism,” an older idea, also stands in opposition to American individualism.

Expressive individualism has several sources ranging from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau to nineteenth-century romantic thinkers as well as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the psychologist Sigmund Freud, and the French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir.⁶

A key proposition of expressive individualism is that what matters in life is “authenticity.” For people to be authentic individuals, they must be free to pursue and realize their deepest desires, for our essence as individuals concerns what we desire. Older expectations about right and wrong as expressed through, say, Judaism and Christianity and classical philosophers such as Aristotle and Cicero, are seen as unjustly inhibiting individuals’ abilities to express and live out their desires. To that extent, society is regarded as corrupting and undermining people’s authenticity as individuals.

Rectifying that situation means that society should make as much space as possible for individuals to pursue their desires, and, in many cases, explicitly affirm individuals for living their lives in this manner. The primary standard by which one assesses the rightness or wrongness of an

individual's free choice is no longer whether it is a virtuous decision. What matters is being genuine.

The extent to which expressive individualism has become part of everyday American life can be judged by the prevalence of the language of “authenticity.” Whether the words are articulated by pop psychologists, media pundits, or political leaders, Americans are regularly told to “be true to yourself” or that everyone “has their own truth.”

This has consequences for how the idea of rights, as expressed during the Founding period, is understood in America. Expressive individualism means that you no longer need to explain why a right's foundation lies in some conception of objective truth and what justice, reason, custom, and religion tell us about what people reasonably owe to each other. It is enough simply to desire something (such as a certain level of income) or to assert something (like a claim to be Native American) to claim that you have a right that flows from that desire or assertion. That, in turn, implies that the state must act to help you realize your desires or claims.

A Republic of Individuals

Diversity ideology and expressive individualism differ in how they understand the individual. Diversity ideology subsumes the individual into group identity, while living out your desires defines the individual in expressive individualism. Nevertheless, they share a willingness to use state power extensively to realize their goals in the social, political, and economic order. They also set themselves in opposition to the tradition of American individualism.

Key ideas that define American individualism are traceable to the American Founding and the constellation of themes that informed it. A number of sources have influenced the concept of American individualism. One such source is the thought of John Locke. Many Founders turned to Locke in the lead-up to the American Revolution, especially his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), because, as the historian Forrest McDonald notes, Locke's thought “was so well adapted for their purposes.”⁷ In a state of nature, Locke argued, everyone was free and equal. This liberty meant that they were free “to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Person as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man.”⁸

Locke was not suggesting that individuals somehow live outside society. His reference to the Law of Nature underscores that individuals are subject to a natural law that all people can know. Moreover, Locke emphasized

repeatedly that humans are social beings. In 1678, Locke wrote in his journal that “God has made...men in a state wherein they cannot subsist without society and has given them judgment to discern what is capable for preserving this society, can he but conclude that he is obliged and that God requires him to follow those rules which conduce to the preserving of society?”⁹

The individualism operating in Locke’s state of nature is not a type of liberty detached from people’s need for others or from the demands of natural law. It is because of the need to secure and preserve what Locke calls people’s “Lives, Liberties, and Estates” from “the corruption and viciousness of degenerate Men” that people entered political society and established a government. Not only must this government conform to the demands of natural law when it establishes “[s]ettled, known law,” but the powers that it acquires enable the government to accomplish this goal of preserving people’s lives, liberties, and properties—and nothing more. This prevents governments from, Locke specifies, acting arbitrarily, contradicting its own laws, handing over its lawmaking powers to others, or stripping people of their property without their consent.¹⁰

It is not difficult to see the connection between these ideas and the Declaration of Independence, which states “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” and that “to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”¹¹

Note that there is no talk here of rights belonging to specific groups but not others, nor of these rights being grounded in feelings. These unalienable rights are understood to be derived from a Creator (“Nature and Nature’s God”) and to belong to individuals who by nature live in society and who have decided to create a political order to protect those individual rights.

We see a similar integration of concern for the individual and attention to the fact of human sociability manifesting itself in the classical republican streams of thought that exerted considerable influence throughout the Founding era.¹² Classical republicanism strongly emphasized the importance of “public virtue” for the life and stability of the republic. By this was meant two things. “Public” implied an individual’s commitment to the *res publica* and the well-being of everyone in society. Virtue was about individuals freely choosing to embrace certain moral habits like courage, justice, and prudence that redounded to society’s benefit.

Another conception of the relationship between individuality and society that was operative during the Founding period was the emphasis

upon individual self-interest and how its workings promoted the general welfare. This set of ideas was associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, especially the economic writings of Adam Smith. His *Wealth of Nations* was widely read by key Founders and Framers after its publication in 1776. Many Americans involved in politics incorporated many of its arguments into their writings and speeches.¹³

Smith famously made the point that economic wealth that benefited everyone over time emerged from individuals having “regard to their own interest.” By pursuing such interests, each individual was “led by an invisible hand to promote an end that was no part of his intention.”¹⁴ That end was society’s well-being, which each individual “frequently promotes” “more effectually than when he really means to promote it.”¹⁵ The prosperity of all, Smith’s argument went, was brought about when individuals pursued what they believed to be in their individual self-interest. This was an essential feature of what Scottish Enlightenment thinkers called “commercial society”: a social and economic order that allows much more room for individual social mobility than a society in which a person is largely defined by the happenstance of birth.

For Smith, an individual pursuing his self-interest is not narrowly self-interested. Humans who pursue their self-interest, he wrote, are also capable of feeling “much for others, and little for ourselves” and recognize “that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature.”¹⁶

Certainly, Smith thought that “[e]very man is no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself, than is any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so.”¹⁷ But he immediately added two caveats.

One was that such individuals must take a step back and think how an impartial spectator might judge their conduct and thus “humble the arrogance of his self-love.”¹⁸ The second was that individualism was not a warrant for trampling upon others: “In the race for wealth, and honors, and preferment, he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip his competitors. But if he should jostle or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play, which they cannot admit of.”¹⁹

Lastly, we should note that the American colonies were characterized by a religious culture in which Christianity, primarily its Protestant expressions, was deeply woven into everyday life. From this religious context was derived the Christian emphasis, inherited from the Jewish people, on the uniqueness of every individual human being as being made in the image of God, or *imago Dei*.

To be sure, people are understood by Christianity to be as much social beings as they are individual beings. Christian teaching also holds that there are many occasions in which Christians must prioritize their neighbor's well-being over their own personal interests. Also, most Christians insist upon the necessity of belonging to some type of religious body or congregation. Nonetheless, Christianity teaches that only individuals have souls, only individuals are saved, and that every individual is unique. Groups and governments, by contrast, do not have immortal souls.

The emphasis on religious liberty in the Founding period made the Christian conception of the individual especially important in the formation of American individualism. Religious liberty and religious toleration were not the norm in the European world throughout these decades. The idea that freedom from coercion in religious matters is essential was foreign to most people and governments.

The gradual establishment of religious liberty as a principle of law throughout America²⁰ kept government officials from unreasonably interfering in the practices of religious groups and from interfering in cases of individual conscience. This was not understood as an invitation to nihilism, not least because conscience was understood by virtually all religious groups as being intimately bound up with the idea that there is truth, including religious truth. Truth—not mere personal feelings or predilections or a desire to be authentic—was widely understood as the source from which conscience gained its authority.

The formal commitment to religious liberty and the consequent limitation on state power vis-à-vis religion meant that individuals could embrace a different faith, or even declare themselves to be of no religion, and not be punished by the state for doing so. Certainly, immense social and cultural pressures could be exerted upon an individual to remain a member of the faith in which he was raised. But the fact that individuals could make free choices about religion and religious belief gave a boost to individuality that would take many other Western countries considerably longer to realize.

Obviously, there were differences in the ways in which ideas associated with Christianity, Lockean natural rights philosophy, classical republicanism, and Scottish Enlightenment sources conceptualized human nature and the relationship between human individuality and sociability. Taken together, however, they constitute a powerful set of influences that underscored the individual's importance while simultaneously stressing that individuality did not imply radical autonomy.

This conception of individualism clashes with the idea that a person's identity is primarily constituted by the group or groups to which he or

she belongs, as diversity ideology holds. An American individual could be simultaneously Pennsylvanian by birth or residence; a mixture of Dutch and German ethnicity; successively a merchant, farmer, and trapper by dint of choice; and Anglican, and then Roman Catholic by conversion. Yet not one of these exhaustively defines who that individual is. Nor does the Founding's conception of individualism regard people as radically autonomous and driven primarily by feelings and desires (as articulated by the expressive individuality associated at the time with figures like Rousseau). Rather, it grounds ideas like rights in certain universal truths known via reason and what Jews and Christians regard as Revelation.

The Habit of Free Association

The individuality described here did not emerge overnight. The establishment of religious liberty, for example, took time. There were also tensions between some Founders' desire for the mobility of commercial society in which individual self-interest was prioritized and other Founders' preference for the stability and relative stasis of agricultural society.

By the 1830s, however, people visiting America immediately noticed that Americans were highly individualistic, especially in the realm of commerce. One French observer in the 1830s went so far as to say that “[a]lmost all [Americans]” were “entrepreneurs.”²¹ A “spirit of enterprise,”²² the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville stated, author of one of the best books about American society, *Democracy in America*, dominated American culture and was underpinned by a deep restlessness that permeated the republic. Yet this individualism did not, Tocqueville noted, lend itself to anarchy or widespread social disorder.

In his reflections about America, Tocqueville more precisely defined American individualism and explained how it worked in practice. Tocqueville noted in America the relative fluidity of social conditions. In societies marked by long traditions of aristocracy like his native France, Tocqueville observed, people were bound together by the fact of what position they occupied in a set hierarchy. “In aristocratic countries,” he wrote, “men are bound tightly together by their very inequalities.”²³ Families and groups would “remain in centuries in the same condition, and often in the same place,” so much so that each class in aristocratic societies “becomes for the one who is part of it a kind of small country, more visible and dearer than the large one.”²⁴ To the extent that individuality represented a break from these pre-modern conditions, individualism was, for Tocqueville, a feature of modernity.

In American society, people were not locked into fixed social positions. Instead, Tocqueville commented, “new families emerge constantly out of nothing, others constantly fall back into nothing, and all those that remain face change; the thread of time is broken at every moment, and the trace of the generations fades. You easily forget those who preceded you, and you have no idea about those who will follow you.”²⁵

The institution of slavery was an important exception to this spirit of individualism. Slavery, Tocqueville observed, locked whites and their slaves into social arrangements that legally denied mobility to several million black slaves and treated them as objects to be used rather than individuals made in the *imago Dei*. It was no coincidence that much of the South of Tocqueville’s time was characterized by a type of corrupt aristocracy: “[L]iving in idle comfort, he has the tastes of idle men,” wrote Tocqueville of the white American Southerner. Such Americans scorned “not only work, but all the enterprises that work brings to success.”²⁶

In the rest of America, the absence of European-like social constraints, the relatively small presence of government, and a bustling commercial society in which Americans pursued their self-interest meant, according to Tocqueville, that America contained “a great number of independent citizens.” It was “filled daily with men who, having reached independence...are intoxicated with their new power; these men conceive a presumptuous confidence in their strength, and not imagining that from then on they might need to ask for the help of their fellows, they have no difficulty showing that they think only of themselves.”²⁷

The risk associated with a society in which there was so much mobility was that the individualism driving it would degenerate into what Tocqueville called “egoism.” He defined this as “a passionate and exaggerated love of oneself, which leads man to view everything only in terms of himself alone and to prefer himself to everything.” It was a “vice” born of “depraved sentiment.”²⁸ What Tocqueville had in mind here is a version of expressive individualism.

In the conditions of democracy, Tocqueville worried (and expressed at length in the second volume of *Democracy in America*) that the egalitarianism fostered by democracy over and against aristocracy had its own way of undermining freedom. “Democratic peoples,” he states, “have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion for equality; they want equality in liberty, and if they cannot obtain that, they still want equality in slavery. They will suffer poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not suffer aristocracy.”²⁹

The problem, Tocqueville saw, was that the equality of conditions encouraged by democracy grated against the liberty associated with individualism—not least because when individuals act freely, it leads to inequality

in outcomes in realms such as the economy. Moreover, individualism also led to differences of opinion in areas ranging from politics to culture. Again, this sat uneasily with democracy's stress on equality of conditions. Indeed, Tocqueville noted that the strength of public opinion in the American democracy was far more effective in suppressing dissenting opinions than outright state censorship, which was still operative in many European nations in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁰

Another feature of individualism in America that troubled Tocqueville was its potential to weaken the type of social bonds that encouraged people to work with and assist others. It disposed, he maintained, "each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and friends; so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself."³¹

Should these conditions become widespread and go unchecked by a countervailing social force, there was a serious risk that the state and politics would fill the gap. Moreover, being alone, people would welcome this expansion of the bonds forged by the state in fields ranging from the economy to education. This insidious process, Tocqueville believed, would result in a type of soft despotism to which people slowly became accustomed—even welcoming it as relief from the responsibility that accompanies liberty.³²

However, Tocqueville believed that there were other features of American life, compared to France, that helped prevent expressive individualism from flourishing in America and established social bonds that replaced those of the pre-democratic world in a manner that drew upon and complemented liberty rather than undermining it. For one thing, Tocqueville saw that "the Americans did not claim that, in a free country, a man had the right to do everything." Instead, personal freedom was linked to the performance of "social obligations."³³

There was also something about American individualism that Tocqueville saw as facilitating this sense of responsibility. Individualism in America, Tocqueville comments, went together with the habit of free association:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, they associate.

Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.

In America I encountered sorts of associations of which, I confess, I had no idea, and I often admired the infinite art with which the inhabitants of the United States managed to fix a common goal to the efforts of many men and to get them to advance to it freely.³⁴

These conditions were utterly different from Tocqueville's France. There, he lamented, a highly centralized state went together with a deeply atomized society in which individuals, whatever their politics, tended to look to the state to address social and economic problems. American associationism did not mean that the state had no role whatsoever. But, as Tocqueville put it, there was a sense that "the government, even when it lends its support to individuals, must never discharge them entirely from the trouble of helping themselves by uniting; often it must deny them its help in order to let them find the secret of being self-sufficient, and it must withdraw its hand as they better understand the art of doing so."³⁵

Where, then, did Americans derive this ability to retain their individuality and direct it in associational ways towards the realization of worthwhile common goals? On the one hand, the small size of government in America necessitated such behavior. This helped individuals understand that they were not as autonomous as they imagined: "[E]ach man notices that he is not as independent of his fellows as he first imagined, and that, to gain their support, he must often lend them his help."³⁶

Practicality and enlightened self-interest thus played a role. Indeed, what Tocqueville called "interest well-understood" and "enlightened love of themselves" led Americans "constantly to help each other and dispose[d] them willingly to sacrifice for the good of the state a portion of their time and wealth."³⁷ Self-interest properly understood consequently formed "a multitude of steady, temperate, moderate, fair-sighted citizens who have self-control; and, if it does not lead directly to virtue by will, it imperceptibly draws closer to virtue by habit."³⁸

Tocqueville also believed that associationism reflected habits inherited from early American colonists, especially in the New England region, in which there was a tremendous emphasis placed upon being freely involved in the affairs of your locality or town.³⁹ Another factor at work was the fact that, in Tocqueville's words, "The Revolution in the United States was produced by a mature and thoughtful taste for liberty, and not by a vague and

undefined instinct for independence. It was not based upon passions for disorder; on the contrary, it proceeded with love of order and of legality.”⁴⁰

This reflects the background influences previously mentioned: Lockean ideas about liberty, classical republican notions of public virtue, and Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of freedom and self-interest. But of particular interest to Tocqueville was the role played by religion in drawing individuals out of themselves without forcing people to dissolve themselves into a collective.

To Tocqueville’s mind, religion’s avoidance in America of continental European throne-and-altar arrangements meant that religion in America was not viewed as an arm of the government or a political faction. Hence, while religion was less institutionally powerful in America, “its influence is more durable.”⁴¹ This meant that “the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty” were “intimately joined the one to the other; they reigned together over the same soil.”⁴² Christianity in America, Tocqueville noticed, drew individuals out of themselves and motivated people to serve others, but generally refrained from trying to invoke state power to coerce people to act in particular ways. Rather, it primarily relied instead on moral suasion.

Pluralism and Individualism

Within a decade of Tocqueville’s visit to America, the United States began undergoing enormous social and cultural changes. A wave of German and Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s began a process of making the United States less Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. The Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves changed social and economic dynamics in the South and resulted in the migration of millions of African Americans to Northern and Midwestern states. Successive waves of migration of Catholics and Jews from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe in the later decades of the nineteenth century further altered the ethnic and religious make-up of the United States. America’s population has also multiplied many times over. Alongside those changes, there has been another series of developments, most notably the causes propelled by the social movements of the 1960s. These gave considerable space both to the type of identity politics that preceded the rise of diversity ideology and to the expressive individualism that Tocqueville associated with depraved sentiment.

These movements and ideas presented new challenges to the distinctiveness of American individualism. This was addressed by the theologian and economic thinker Michael Novak. Most known for his philosophical and theological defense of market economies, especially in his book *The Spirit of*

Democratic Capitalism (1982), Novak also reflected on the changes shaping American society in works like *Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in American Life* (1971).

While Novak's initial focus concerned issues of ethnicity, his interest gradually shifted towards the question of pluralism and, through that topic, to the distinctive nature of American individualism and how to prevent it from morphing into expressive individualism.

By "pluralism," Novak has in mind more than simply people from different backgrounds living in the United States. For him, pluralism involves individuals, associations, and communities in a society exercising their liberties in varying ways while being bound together by some common commitments and obligations. American pluralism, Novak stated, made American social order different from both traditionalist and collectivist societies. These, he argued, "offer unitary vision,"⁴³ often directly enforced by state power. American pluralism represented an effort to avoid tyranny and absolutism, while also ensuring that individuality does not collapse into individual desire trumping all.

What made American pluralism distinct, according to Novak, was that it was as much associative as it was communal in its orientation. There were many communities in America that bound individuals together by virtue of common ethnicity, kinship networks, language, religious belief, and so on. But the social and economic mobility in America associated with individualism, Novak noted, had made these communities far less cohesive than they were in the Old World. The very decision to migrate to the United States often reflected a willingness to break away from these communities in these settings. Even groups bound together by strong claims of religious doctrine experienced the effects of this mobility and restlessness. Polish and German Jews, for instance, found themselves mixing in ways that occurred far less often in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴⁴ Likewise, Catholics from Polish, Irish, German, French, and Italian backgrounds often mixed together in parishes in a manner not found in Europe.⁴⁵

Alongside this, Novak noted something similar to Tocqueville: that there was a strong associative dimension to American society that reflected the workings of individual choice. While Americans manifested loyalty to family and various forms of community, they were also willing to uproot themselves, move elsewhere, and enter and even form new associations. American life was "thick with activism, voluntarism, and mutual association."⁴⁶ This individualism is thus not at all that of "a rugged individual, isolated and alone."⁴⁷

Instead, America was full of associations that were “task-orientated, goal-directed, freely entered into, and freely left. Its members have much respect for each other, learn much from each other, come to expect truth from each other, and treat each other fairly.” Certainly, Novak added, members of these associations “may not have much emotional attachment to each other, spend much time looking into each other’s eyes for moral support, or be particularly intimate with each other.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, American individualism also recognized “allegiance to values that transcend historical eras or cultural boundaries, ideals like personal dignity, liberty [and] justice for all.”⁴⁹ Yes, it means “[t]o be independent...and also self-reliant,” Novak states. But American individualism also involved being “an active member of many communities, to be open to appeals from the needy, to be informed about the world at large, and to care about its problems.”⁵⁰ American individualism is therefore attentive to things that encompass wide spectrums of social life. “Its manifold activities, charities, and voluntary endeavors,” Novak wrote, “can be explained in no other way.”⁵¹

American individualism, from Novak’s standpoint, was the driving force behind the pluralism that characterized American society. He noted, however, that a major criticism of American pluralism is that it lacked a coherent center. “Many,” according to Novak, regarded “the emptiness of pluralism as a flaw. Its consequences among individuals are looked upon as illnesses: anomie, alienation, loneliness, despair, loss of meaning, etc.”⁵²

Religious organizations have creeds to which its members are expected to adhere. Ethnic groups often share a common language and historical memories. What, then, does American pluralism have at its heart? If it is difference for the sake of difference, that would be a very shallow core indeed, and would likely facilitate expressive individualism and the widespread social dysfunctionality that goes along with that.

Novak’s answer was that pluralism in America did not lack a core as many supposed. In the first place, all Americans emerge from “lived social worlds. We are born into families. The moral and aesthetic traditions in which our sensibilities and our minds are nourished are first given us by traditions, institutions, a people, which we did not choose for ourselves.”⁵³ It is only later, he added, that our individuality emerges, as we begin to develop our own ideas, critique others, and make free choices that define the content of our individual character, for better or worse. In short, Americans were no more “rootless beings” than people living in other societies.

Second, Novak argued that American pluralism at its best embodied the idea that “[t]he real interests of individuals...are seldom merely self-regarding. To most persons, their families mean more than their own interests;

they frequently subordinate the latter to the former.”⁵⁴ Here, Novak drew partly upon Tocqueville’s insight that Americans were exceptionally good at integrating other people’s interests into their own. But Novak also reflected here the Scottish Enlightenment’s understanding of humans’ “capacity to see themselves as others see them, and to hold themselves to standards that transcend their own selfish inclinations.” It followed, Novak maintained, that American individualism recognized, like Adam Smith, “that the ‘self’ in self-interest is complex, at once familial and communitarian as well as individual, other-regarding as well as self-regarding, cooperative as well as independent, and self-judging as well as self-loving.”⁵⁵

This individualism was also shaped by the demands of certain social entities that, Novak observed, inculcated certain habits and virtues that required individuals to look beyond their immediate concerns.⁵⁶ Everyday family life in America, he pointed out, demanded deferred gratification and forced people to consider others’ needs and to sacrifice for others. So, too, did other forms of American community that were more associative in character. Businesses, for example, cannot consist of radical individualists. They need people to embody and live out a range of virtues that require them to be other regarding. “Managers and workers,” he noted, “must show up on time, with regularity and attentiveness.”⁵⁷

So, too, did the exercise by Americans of their individual rights demand that people pay attention to others. “Free speech, a free press, and free intellectual inquiry, for example, permit enormous diversity to flourish. But each of these values imposes its own disciplines on all. Each demands of every participant much restraint, tolerance, and willingness to be patient with arduous democratic procedures.”⁵⁸ American pluralism was thus understood as being dependent on self-restraint. Novak describes adherence to such “principles of practice” as a type of “a civic faith”⁵⁹ to which all Americans, whatever their ethnicity or religion, needed to adhere.

Moreover, the rights that characterized American individualism, Novak observed, were grounded in a decidedly non-relativistic framework. Like Tocqueville, Novak saw that American individualism existed in a context highly influenced by religious belief and practice. Novak also pointed out that the American Founding and its defining documents, which sought to secure certain rights for every individual, relied explicitly and implicitly upon acceptance of certain beliefs. One such belief, he wrote, is that “[h]uman beings, according to the Declaration of Independence, are endowed with inalienable rights by the Creator.”⁶⁰

Certainly, Novak stated, it was not the responsibility of government to formally define the nature of this Creator—as the God of the Bible or the

God of deists. But these texts do express the idea that the rights of individuals ultimately come from an authoritative source that is given rather than chosen. The truth of these rights is not therefore subordinate to individual preference.

Conclusion

Given the influence of diversity ideology and expressive individualism, Americans are confronted by a crucial question: How can American individualism, rightly understood, be made more operative in those large swaths of American society in which it appears to have declined? One way forward is to realize that the preservation and promotion of American individualism requires a serious embrace of the idea of self-government.

Self-government, as understood at the beginnings of America, was never about liberty unhinged from reason or, for believing Jews and Christians, Revelation. Michael Novak often pointed out that the distinct way of individualism in America depended heavily upon people's understanding of and willingness to embrace the axiom that "[i]n personal life, rule by one's passions and liberation from the disciplines of reasoned judgment are the opposite of what is meant by self-government."⁶¹

"Self-government" does not mean doing whatever one wants whenever one wants, subject only to the requirement that you do not harm others. Instead, Novak comments, "From the Declaration of Independence through the *Federalist Papers* and in every wise document of our realist revolutionary tradition, it is confidently asserted that the possibility of self-government rests upon the virtue of its citizens."⁶² And virtue implied consistent choices by individuals for certain forms of behavior that are always good—the classical virtues like prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, or distinctly biblical virtues such as faith, hope, and love. That, in turn, requires two prerequisites to be in place.

The first prerequisite is an acknowledgement that virtues and vices are not a matter of taste or personal preferences. They operate on the assumption that there are objectively right and wrong forms of action that humans can know. In short, the self-government upon which American individualism rightly understood is premised is itself reliant on a decidedly non-relativist view of morality.

The second is that individuals habitually reject the vices that are the opposite of such virtues, including, for example, recklessness, unfairness, excess, and cowardice. When individuals choose these virtues, they cannot help but contribute to the general welfare of their fellow Americans.

Conversely, when they choose vice, they damage not only themselves but others around them as well as social, political, and economic life more generally. As Novak wrote: “As individuals live beyond their means, so will the state. As individuals liberate themselves from costs, responsibilities, and a prudent concern for the future, so will their political leaders. When self-government is no longer an ideal for individuals, it cannot be credible for the republic.”⁶³

Self-government is difficult at the best of times. Human individuals are capable of great acts, but they are also fallible, weak, and often tempted to do what they should not. Our minds are easily distracted from undertaking the hard work of knowing the moral truths that we should allow to govern our choices. Yes, good and wise laws can help, but primarily by way of supplementing—and never supplanting—those schools for human formation that exist in families, the free associations created by individuals in civil society and economic life, and organizations based on specific religious traditions. For the modern state has a remarkable capacity to crowd out communities and associations and thereby undermine their capacity to form individuals capable of self-government.

Rehabilitating the American way of self-government will be difficult in an America awash with diversity ideology and expressive individualism. It is, however, the *sine qua non* of American individualism rightly understood. We lose sight of that connection at America’s peril.

Samuel Gregg is Distinguished Fellow in Political Economy at the American Institute for Economic Research and a Visiting Scholar in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

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