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How Expressive Individualism Threatens Civil Society

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The modern notion of "self," expressive individualism, which prioritizes individual rights, lies at the heart of many of our current cultural conflicts and issues.

Default relationships to others in a world of expressive individualism are potentially adversarial since others exist to fulfill myself in the way I choose.

When expressive individualism becomes normative, the implications for society are profound; the first step to rebuilding is acknowledgment.

In the current political and social climate, with its rapid changes and apparent volatility, numerous issues are particularly potent and divisive: abortion rights, the rise of pornography, the growing acceptance of euthanasia and reproductive technologies, the resurgence of radical racial politics, and issues such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Far from being discrete phenomena, connected, if at all, by some nebulous notion of social unrest or widespread cultural anxiety, there is an underlying unity to these different issues arising from the way in which people intuitively understand themselves and their relationship to others. In short, at the heart of our current cultural conflicts lies a shared notion of the self that is transforming our world, from our institutions to our understanding of morality.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **http://report.heritage.org/bg3615**

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By "self" I am referring *not* to the commonsense use of the term meaning our basic consciousness of being individuals, but rather to the way in which I understand my identity, how I relate to wider society, and how I understand happiness and flourishing. This understanding is set within an intuitive framework established by society; we might say that society encourages individuals instinctively to think of their selves in particular ways. Our understanding of selfhood is not, therefore, the result of conscious reflection but rather a function of the intuitions that society cultivates in us. This is what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls the social imaginary:

> I speak of "imaginary" (i) because I'm talking about the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc. But it is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense or legitimacy.[1]

The social imaginary cannot be reduced to a set of conscious ideas or principles. Rather it is a combination of ideas, intuitions, and social practices that serve to reinforce a sense of the self.

As to the specific nature of the modern self, this is what Robert Bellah terms "expressive individualism":

> Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized.[2]

Charles Taylor, too, sees this expressive individualism as the normative modern notion of selfhood in the west. He specifically connects it to what he dubs "the culture of 'authenticity,'" which he describes as follows:

> [The culture of authenticity is one where] each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.[3]

Expressive individualism assumes the authority of inner feelings in what it means to be an individual, which has a number of implications:

- To be truly oneself requires behaving outwardly in a manner consistent with those inner feelings;

- The notion of authenticity has risen in prominence as a result since outward behavior that does not match inner feelings indicates that the outward, social self is not a true reflection of the real, inward self;

- Expressive individualism carries with it a set of moral priorities that serves to shape the individual's moral imagination and therefore the nature of a society composed of such individuals; and

- Happiness and human flourishing tend to be identified with the individual's inner sense of psychological well-being or peace.

In his discussion of American public bioethics, Director of the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture and Professor of Law and Politics at Notre Dame Carter Snead summarizes the implications of expressive individualism for the moral imagination of society by arguing that it furthers an atomization of society:

Within the anthropological framework of American public bioethics, it seems that human relationships and social arrangements are likewise judged in light of how well or poorly they serve the self-defining projects of the individual will. Under this account, individuals encounter one another as atomized wills. These individuals come together in collaboration to pursue mutually beneficial ends and separate when such goals are reached or abandoned. Or perhaps they encounter one another as adversaries, who must struggle to overbear one another in order to achieve their self-defined and self-defining objectives. Accordingly, the anthropology of expressive individualism elevates the principles of autonomy and self-determination above other competing values in the hierarchy of ethical goods, such as beneficence, justice, dignity, and equality.[4]

In sum, expressive individualism has far-reaching implications for the way in which societies think about social relationships, ethics, and law.

The Origins and History of Expressive Individualism

Intellectual History. The rise of expressive individualism is intimately connected to the inward turn to which Western thinking has been subject since the Reformation, when questions of religious faith and epistemological certainty combined with the collapse of traditional

ecclesiastical authority. The most famous example of this inward turn is perhaps the thought of René Descartes, with his principle of radical doubt and proposal of psychological self-awareness as the ground of certainty, although the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau may be of more significance. Rousseau's basic ideas—that human beings are born free and innocent but have their moral senses distorted by society—have proved influential in both political and educational theory. Also, his focus on sentiments, or what we might call "emotional instincts," as vital to a proper moral sense grants significant authority to feelings in terms of how human beings understand their own identity. His appeal to listen to the unspoiled inner voice of nature is an appeal to allow our instincts to define who we are. This anticipates in significant ways the modern expressive individual.

Rousseau's authorizing of inner feelings found powerful cultural advocates in the various figures associated with Romanticism. The Romantic movement was particularly prominent in the German- and English-speaking worlds of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Through poetry, painting, and music, Romanticism was marked by an emphasis on the individual, emotions, the power of nature, and on a preference for the medieval over the classical and the rural over the urban.

It is noteworthy that certain radical figures of the Romantic period also directly attacked organized religion (i.e., institutional Christianity) and the idea of lifelong, monogamous marriage. For Romantics such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake, organized religion and marriage represent heteronomous hindrances to the happiness of the spontaneous individual; this theme of cultural protest connects Romanticism to the politics of the present day.

What saved Romanticism from pure ethical subjectivism was the belief that nature had an intrinsic moral structure. The inner, unspoiled voice of nature was the same for all and involved empathy and sympathy for others. As Rousseau commented, all ethical principles— justice, equity, etc.—were merely formalized expressions of these underlying human sentiments.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the notion that human nature has an intrinsic moral structure came under vigorous philosophical assault. Three prominent examples are Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin. Nietzsche argued that the practical elimination of God and metaphysics by Immanuel Kant rendered morality groundless. Morality was a confidence trick played by one group in society to disempower another. Marx, drawing on Georg Hegel's historicism, saw morality as the means

by which the dominant class preserved the social and economic status quo and thus its own power. And Darwin, by relativizing the distinction between human beings and other animals, denied that human beings exist for a specific cosmological purpose or end, and turned morality into the rationalization of behaviors that serve the preservation of the species. The effect of each was to shatter the Romantics' confidence that human beings could be characterized as innately good.

Sigmund Freud made a further key move at the start of the twentieth century. Freud saw the inner psychological space as rooted in the dark and irrational forces of human sexual desire, which began not at puberty but in infancy. This was a remarkable shift from sex being something that human beings *do* to something that human beings *are*. This shift laid the conceptual foundation for sexual identity, and thus for sexual identity politics. While it was the appropriation of Freud by figures of the New Left such as Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich that provided the sharpest theoretical expressions of this, it is clear that once sexual desire is deemed central to human identity, it would occupy a key place in political discourse. The modern expressive individual is also the modern sexualized individual, with both self-expression and notions of human happiness and flourishing defined in terms that give a significant place to sex.

Technological and Cultural Factors. For expressive individualism to become normative, the intellectual narrative had to have both an intrinsic plausibility and the means to profoundly shape the intuitions of the culture. Various factors play into this. Perhaps most important has been the collapse of traditional, external institutional authority such as that of the nation, religion, and the family, which each provided a broader, objective framework by which individuals could define their identity. As each has been significantly challenged over the past fifty years—by internal corruption, changes in economic behavior, the promotion of subversive narratives by media and entertainment elites, and by the impact of information technology—they have become increasingly weak as primary sources of personal identity. This has strengthened the plausibility of the idea that we can—to a significant degree—choose who we are. With the promotion of the narrative of expressive individualism in movies and on television (including commercials), the loss of the old narratives of identity has been easily met with new ones rooted in sexual identity, gender, race, etc. The story of exactly how this has come about is complicated and beyond the scope of this paper. But the pervasive nature of expressive individualism is now an undeniable reality.

Political Manifestations of Expressive Individualism

Individual Rights. The most obvious implication of the rise of expressive individualism as the normative self in the west is that it leads to a prioritization of individual rights over responsibilities and duties toward others. If the individual is the basic unit of social reality, and personal happiness is the goal, then all other social relations come to be seen as contractual, and their purpose (ideally) is to serve this goal. For Rousseau and his cultural heirs, man is born free, yet everywhere is in chains because of the social relationships in which he finds himself.

The default relationship to others in a world of expressive individuals thus tilts toward a potentially adversarial one. When "the pursuit of happiness" is detached from a broader social framework and comes rather to mean "the pursuit of personal happiness as understood by the individual," the notion of social obligations is dramatically attenuated since what comprises happiness depends on subjective preference. Other people exist for the purpose of enabling me to fulfill myself in the way that I choose. To the extent that they do not do that, they are problems to be overcome or—in the case of the unborn or the elderly—to be eliminated. We see this in the advent of no-fault divorce, in which obligations to children, for example, are to be subordinated to, or interpreted through the lens of, a view of marriage that places the personal happiness of the contracting parties at the center of its purpose. The union can, even should, simply be dissolved once the spouses no longer find it to be personally satisfying.

Transformation of Victimhood. In classical Marxism, oppression is understood in economic terms: People are oppressed when they are unable to find employment, do not earn a living wage, or are unable to provide for their basic physical needs. These forms of oppression have a materiality to them such that they can be publicly assessed and addressed. Expressive individualism, however, with its accent on the psychologized self and inner feelings, transforms the notions of oppression and victimhood.

When human flourishing is defined in terms of expressive individualism as being the outward unfolding of the inner core of feelings that constitute who we are, anything that prevents this unfolding—that is, that prevents us from being "authentic"—becomes potentially highly problematic. Oppression shifts from the material, economic sphere into that of psychology. Institutions and cultures can be deemed oppressive simply by not positively affirming certain groups or identities in the terms such groups consider legitimate. Words become weapons, and even silence can be characterized as a form of violence when communities or individuals demand explicit

affirmation of an identity or denunciation of a particular perceived evil. When expressive individualism combines with the idioms of identity politics, the stage is set for social conflict.

This conception of victimhood has in fact fueled the current rise of identity politics, whereby socially constructed categories of identity (e.g., race, disability, and gender detached from sexed bodies) are connected to a psychological core. This allows for a very wide-ranging, fluid, and arguably subjective notion of what is and is not oppressive, with the discussion often focusing on language and representation in the media, education, and the arts. This helps to explain assaults on traditional notions of academic freedom, literary canons, and the general shape and content of class curricula, all of which are now often seen as means by which marginal identities are excluded from the mainstream.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer + (LGBTQ+) Movement. The most obvious political manifestation of expressive individualism in the past two decades has been the rise to prominence of the LGBTQ+ movement. This movement has certain characteristics that flow from the notion of expressive individualism. First, its emphasis on sexual desire as determinative of personal identity assumes the authority of inner psychology, and that in a sexualized form. Second, the coalition is itself the product of the expressive individualist culture that posits victimhood and marginalization as virtues.

This second characteristic is evident from the internal incoherence of the alliance. Gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals assume the reality of a gender binary grounded in biological sex, while queer and transgender people deny that binary, which raises the obvious question as to how the movement emerged. Although it is a complicated story, what follows is the basic outline: Lesbians and gay men were drawn into an alliance by the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which placed gay men in the position of victims, a status long held by lesbians as women in a male-dominated society. Queer and transgender-identifying people, given their shared narrative of marginalization in a heteronormative society, were later accommodated. The alliance is predicated on the old principle that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The fragility of the alliance has become evident in recent years in the acrimonious debates within feminism concerning the status of men who now present as women.

The radical separation of gender from biological sex that transgender ideology assumes is perhaps the most dramatic example to date of the authorizing of the psychological over the physical. Gender theory, upon which transgender ideology depends, sees historic differences of sex as

functions of the socially conditioned mapping of a set of cultural norms onto biological differences. The concepts of male and female are thus social constructs. As such, they are vulnerable to a further critical step: the demolition of the male/female binary in its entirety. This is what queer theory has done, advocating a fluid notion of gender with no stable core and thus a potentially infinite number of "genders."

Much can be said in response to the assumptions of gender theory, but for this paper, it is important merely to note that this authorizing of inward feelings over physical reality, and the political demand that this psychologically grounded identity be recognized in the public square, are consonant with a society whose normative self is that of expressive individualism. Indeed, the language often associated with the testimonies of transgender-identifying people ("I have lived a lie"; "Society made me play a role that was not me"; "I am finally free to be who I always have been inside") is indicative of this. It also points to the remarkable plasticity of identity in our current culture, which makes determining exactly what binds society together highly problematic. If not even our bodies provide a point of stability for social relations and engagement, then individual identity is rendered arcane and unstable, as are any relationships built thereupon.

Moral Consequences of Expressive Individualism

Sex and Pornography. Given the understanding of flourishing that lies at the heart of expressive individualism—personal, psychological happiness—and the sexualized way in which selfhood has been understood after Freud, it is not surprising that expressive individualism has transformed sexual ethics. With an emphasis on individual happiness, sexual acts themselves are now seen to have no intrinsic moral significance; what moral significance they do possess is a function simply of whether they occur in the context of the mutual consent of the parties involved. Thus, traditional codes that saw sexual acts as possessing moral significance in themselves and thus as only to occur in certain wider contexts, typically that of lifelong, monogamous marriage, have come to be seen as obstructive and repressive.

One extreme example of this is the philosophy that underlies pornography. Pornography is scarcely an innovation of the modern age, yet both its widespread availability and use, along with growing social acceptance by the cultural mainstream, mark an unprecedented moment in its history. Putting aside the numerous criticisms of pornography that can be made (most obviously its connection to the sex trafficking industry, portrayal of women, and increasingly well-documented physiological effects), what is

interesting from the perspective of this paper is that the philosophy that pornography promotes is an example of expressive individualism. Sex acts have significance only for the one watching. The sexual satisfaction of the audience is the purpose of the sex acts on the screen, and therefore the bodies of those involved are simply instruments for the satisfaction of another. Detached from any larger context of personal relationship or history, pornography presents sex as an end in itself, with that end being the pleasure of the consumer and the acts themselves having no intrinsic moral significance. The "other" becomes merely instrumental to the consumer's happiness. Pornography is the sexual philosophy of expressive individualism taken to its logical conclusion.

Ethics of Life and Death. Expressive individualism has a profound impact on matters of life and death for at least two reasons. First, it tends toward the view that personhood requires a degree of self-consciousness. This is clear in the work of Peter Singer, the Princeton University ethicist who holds that although embryos possess life, they are not persons. To be a person is to be self-conscious and able to express oneself, to act intentionally toward the future, and to further one's own happiness. Both newborn babies and adults with advanced dementia, among others, lack these qualities; and, lacking personhood, they therefore do not enjoy the rights possessed by persons.

This leads to the second implication: Ethics of life and death in a world of expressive individualism tend to default to a form of utilitarianism in which the morally defensible position is the one that gives the most happiness to the most people. Thus, if a child in the womb, or even a newborn baby, has Down syndrome or a birth defect that is likely to have an adverse effect upon the parents' happiness, then it can be aborted or euthanized. Not being a person, it has no personal rights, its happiness is not an issue, and its fate is entirely in the hands of the relevant persons involved, i.e., the parents. The same applies to those with advanced dementia: The continued existence of a person with dementia becomes a matter of the happiness of the healthy family members responsible for his care. Further, the rising acceptance, even legalization, of assisted suicide in western countries is another example of this: When a person decides that life is no longer worth living, whether because of physical illness or mental distress, life can be terminated, and the state is expected to support that decision. The only criterion by which the morality of such a decision can be assessed is the personal desire of the individual concerned.

In Vitro Fertilization and Surrogacy. The issue of in vitro fertilization (IVF) is tricky because the child desired by an infertile couple is a good and, indeed, children are one of the primary traditional reasons for marriage. IVF

is thus clearly in a different category from abortion or euthanasia. Yet there is a risk that even here expressive individualism can distort moral thinking. As noted above, its focus on personal happiness as the central criteria for the moral status of an action gives it a strong utilitarian bent, and in the matter of IVF this can mean that the sole focus of ethical concern is the happiness that a child will bring to the couple. Other issues—such as the creation of life that will never be allowed to mature, as in the fate of fertilized embryos that are not implanted; the means by which egg and sperm are harvested; and (in the case of surrogacy) the significance of physically carrying the baby in the womb for the relationship of mother and child, as well as the problem of children becoming a commodity—are thereby dramatically relativized or even considered irrelevant.

Other factors may emerge as significant as well. IVF arguably leads to a vision of reproduction in which children are made, not begotten. The creator of an object always holds a position of superiority, control, and power relative to the object created. Thus, when conception becomes a matter of technological control (and as the power of technology increases with such procedures as gene editing) the possibility—and thus the problem—of designing babies with particular traits will become significant and will inevitably be shaped by the personal preferences of the parents. Again, this connects to the notion of expressive individualism and putting the individual's desires and happiness at the center of moral decision-making.

Legal and Political Implications

Freedom of Speech. Western liberal democracies have typically regarded freedom of speech as a central virtue of free societies. Much of the anti-Soviet rhetoric of the Cold War contrasted the United States' position on this issue, as enshrined in the First Amendment, with that of the Soviet Union (USSR), using the issue to demonstrate the moral superiority of the U.S. I noted above that expressive individualism, through its psychologizing of identity, has led to a transformative expansion of the notion of oppression from a concern primarily with material conditions (economic, legal) to the inclusion, and even prioritizing, of the psychological. To speak in a manner that makes another feel disturbed, unhappy, or, to use the favored terminology of our cultural moment, "unsafe," is subject to increasing social disapproval. The reason is obvious: When identity is psychologized, and the pursuit of happiness becomes a subjective, psychological matter, anything that challenges that paradigm is deemed damaging and oppressive. In such a world, words can be characterized as

weapons, and the language of violence can be applied to speech. Thomas Jefferson considered disagreements over religion to be harmless because they "neither picked his pocket nor broke his leg," but those criteria are now not the only ones that apply in this new world of expressive individualism in which feelings, and not just bodies and property, are central to identity. In such a world, freedom of speech becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution; a cover for what Herbert Marcuse dubbed "repressive tolerance"; and a trigger for the kind of campus protests we are now witnessing across America.[5]

Freedom of Religion. Freedom of religious exercise faces the same kind of challenge as freedom of speech, though perhaps in a more clearly defined form. For example, in our current cultural climate, the traditional Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teaching against homosexual acts amounts to a denial of the identity of LGBTQ+ people and is, therefore, an act of oppression and even psychological violence. In such a context, freedom of religion, as freedom of speech, is likely to be seen as a problem and an obstacle to human flourishing, not as a presupposition of the same. And this is a problem that religious conservatives simply cannot avoid. However much they might apologize for alleged past mistreatment of LGBTQ+ people, and however much they might claim to treat them in accordance with their inherent dignity, as long as religious conservatives maintain traditional teaching on sexual behavior, they will be regarded as refusing to recognize certain people as possessing legitimate identities. Thus, religious conservatives will inevitably be accused of acting in a bigoted and even dangerous manner toward those who identify as LGBTQ+.

Parental Rights. Expressive individualism, especially as refracted through the post-Freudian sexual lens, inevitably encroaches on parental rights, a point made with some pleasure by Wilhelm Reich, who argued that the State should directly intervene to prevent parents from acting in a manner that would repress their children's sexual instincts.[6] Indeed, the sexual dimension of expressive individualism is the area in which parental rights have been most eroded. Medical provision of contraceptives without parental consent or even knowledge is one long-standing example of this, but the advent of transgenderism has opened a whole new arena of contention between parents, schools, medical professionals, and government regarding the respective rights of these various parties with reference to children. Further, given the increasing legitimation of assisted suicide, this could easily become another area in which children's rights and parental rights are set in opposition to each other.

Pressures on freedom of speech and religion may have an impact here. It is not hard to imagine that male circumcision, for example, might come to be regarded as genital mutilation imposed on a helpless child by Jewish or Muslim parents and thus outlawed as a form of physical abuse. And as harm is increasingly psychologized, parents who teach their children traditional sexual morality might find themselves subject to opposition. A recent proposed law in Scotland sought to police speech inside someone's private residence; and an act of the Victoria legislature in Australia has outlawed public prayer for someone to change their sexual orientation or be cured of gender dysphoria, even when such prayer is requested by the person involved. These examples are consistent with normative expressive individualism, inimical to traditional freedoms, and potential harbingers of wider shifts in Western attitudes and laws that will have obvious implications for parental rights.

Conclusion

The above survey makes it clear that when expressive individualism becomes the normative type of self in a society, the cultural, moral, and political implications are comprehensive and dramatic. Its fundamental commitment to the idea that human persons are defined by their individual psychological core means that the purpose of life is allowing that core to find social expression in the relationships that the self enters into with others. This has at least three important and mutually reinforcing implications: It tilts morality toward a pragmatic utilitarianism, it favors a definition of personhood that is grounded in self-consciousness, and it shifts notions of oppression in a strongly psychological direction. This helps us to see the common thread that connects identity politics, the ethics of life and death, the transformation of sexual morality, and the current battles over such things as parental rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion.

The solution is more complicated than we might imagine, and the most acute challenge comes from the fact that we are all to some deep extent expressive individualists now. Self-realization based upon choice is the way in which we are all inclined intuitively to think. It is easy to imagine, for example, someone arguing that religious conservatives choose their religious communities and commitments as others aspire to choose their sexual identities or gender. A religious conservative might respond by rejecting the analogy of belief in religious truth to a confected lifestyle choice, but the challenge is not entirely without merit: People do choose religious commitments today in a manner unknown in, say, the Middle

Ages, as Charles Taylor has argued in great detail.[7] And that means that there is no simple and straightforward response to expressive individualism. While it is built on a myth—that we are born free rather than the obvious fact that we are born utterly dependent and spend our lives being dependent upon others to lesser and greater degrees—it is a myth built into the core of our social imaginary. How we can begin to rebuild something so intuitive and unreflective is hard to see. But rebuilding must begin with an acknowledgment of the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves and the identification of the various ways in which expressive individualism is both reinforced by and reflected in our cultural institutions, thinking, and practices. I hope that this paper makes some modest contribution to helping us to begin that process.

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Endnotes

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 2007), pp. 171–172.
2. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 333–334.
3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 475.
4. Carter Snead, *What It Means To Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), pp. 70–71.
5. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss, eds., *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), pp. 32–59.
6. Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Regulating Character Structure*, trans. Therese Pol (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), p. 23.
7. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, passim.