

Altruism Versus Self-Interest

The 2008 election is over, and on January 20 a guy named Barack Obama will be sworn in as the 44th President of the United States. Few people know much about him; mostly they have bought into the image that he himself created. He's been called a Democrat, a messiah, a savior, a socialist, a leftist, a progressive, a communist, a Muslim, a Christian, an atheist, a racist, a typical Chicago politician, a con-man, a flim-flam man, and, of course, a liberal. (A small percentage of the public even considers him a conservative, which makes one wonder about the state of education in America.)

Obama won the election the way Democrats usually do, by engaging in class warfare. Typically that means convincing the voters that anyone who has more wealth than they have, got it only because they stole it from someone else – so it needs to be taxed and returned to the federal treasury. The concept of earning or creating wealth generally never makes it into the mind of the Democrat candidate, let alone his vocabulary.

Of course, Obama also won the election because, justifiably or not, the vast majority of Americans came to dislike President George W. Bush, and somehow felt that electing Obama would punish him – even though Bush was not on the ballot. Further, conservative voters, rightly so, felt betrayed by Bush, who certainly did not govern like a conservative, and they were likewise not thrilled with John “Democrat-lite” McCain, whose conservative credentials left a lot to be desired.

So America will find itself with a new President on January 20, regardless of what he has been or will be called, and many Americans believe he will save them from economic misery and right the wrongs of society by raising taxes to punish those nasty, evil capitalists for their sin of greed.

Somewhere along the line a majority of Americans bought into the concept of capitalism as something evil, and a powerful government as something good. In truth, of course, wherever it has been followed capitalism has created unimaginable wealth and reduced human miseries by overwhelming degrees, while governments have brought miseries to billions of people and death to tens of millions. Where governments have limited power and capitalism is allowed to flourish, people are much better off. Where governments are powerful and capitalism is restricted or even prevented, people are much worse off. That is an indisputable fact of history.

Yet, despite staring wealth and good fortune in the face almost every day of their lives, many Americans think they will be better off if they have less capitalism and more government. They are either incredibly ignorant, or incredibly evil. For the average American, let us assume the former. For the average politician, let us assume the latter.

Why is it that Americans believe capitalism is evil, when it is capitalism that allows them lifestyles that are the envy of the world? The answer lies in the distortion of words, specifically *altruism* and *self-interest*. People have been taught that altruism is good, and self-interest is bad. If you don't go further than your first impression from reading that

sentence you will probably have no quarrel with it. After all, altruism means “being nice, and sharing” while self-interest means “being greedy and selfish.” Right?

Wrong. Altruism means total devotion to the welfare of others. Self-Interest means a concern for one's own well-being.

Self-interest is most definitely *not* the same as selfishness, which means being concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself, usually without regard for others.

For you to eat food every day is an act of self-interest; it is concern for your well-being. Eating is *not* an act of selfishness, however – unless you have stolen the food from others, or are such a glutton that you eat everything in sight while your own children starve.

Altruism doesn't mean “being kind” to others, it means sacrificing oneself for others. Living for someone else is altruism, as would be the case if you were a slave. Helping an elderly lady to cross the street is not altruism, it is simply an expected act of kindness to a fellow human being. Voluntarily donating money to the Salvation Army is generosity, not altruism. Having a portion of your income forcibly confiscated by the government and given to strangers is forced altruism.

Politicians, especially Democrats, have succeeded in confusing the words self-interest and selfishness, and the words generosity and altruism. In the process, they have made people feel guilty for acting in their own self-interest and not placing the interests of others first. Thus the Democrats can more easily direct voter anger to anyone who has wealth: the greedy, evil capitalists and businessmen who are responsible for all the misery in the world and who, if only they weren't so selfish, could share their wealth for the benefit of all. It is all lies and nonsense... but it gets them elected.

Every human being must act in his or her own best interests to survive. There is nothing selfish about doing what is necessary to survive. If you were alone on a desert island it would not be “selfish” of you to seek food or shelter. On the contrary, it would mean your own death sentence if you did *not*. Living in a civilized society does not relieve you of the need to seek food and shelter, it simply makes it easier to accomplish by trading your work for money and, in turn, trading your money for food and shelter. The benefit of capitalism is that you can choose the type of work you wish to perform, and you are able to enjoy many things beyond food and shelter – like books, music, movies, automobiles, vacations, and anything else you choose out of billions of possibilities.

Wanting to keep as much of your hard-earned money as possible is not selfish. If you earned your paycheck honestly, what right does anyone else have to claim a portion of it? It is in your self-interest to keep your money. It is, after all, *your money*. It is what you received in exchange for your labor; it was *not* a “gift” from a government agency. Similarly, a tax refund is *not* a gift of money from the government to you, it is simply a reduced confiscation of your wealth.

Note that politicians use the phrase, “*giving* a person a tax cut,” rather than “*taking* less of a person’s paycheck.” If the government had been taxing \$100,000 of someone’s income at a rate of 35 per cent (to collect \$35,000 in tax revenue) and then reduces his tax rate to 34 per cent (to collect \$34,000 in tax revenue, the government is certainly *not* “giving” that person \$1,000 - it is merely *taking \$1,000 less* from him. Democrats have been able to convince many voters that reducing someone’s taxes means giving him “free money” at their expense. Nothing could be further from the truth – but that doesn’t stop people from believing it.

Politicians have led you to believe that looking out for your own self-interest is selfishness, and that your wanting to keep as much of your income as possible is being greedy. You are made to feel guilty for refusing to share more of what you earned. You are taught that it is *virtuous* to relinquish a large portion of your paycheck to others. You have been taught that it is good to sacrifice yourself for others.

Of course, everyone else has been taught the same thing. Eventually the government convinces enough people that what they have earned doesn’t really belong to them. They are greedy and selfish to want to keep it, and they would be virtuous to sacrifice it for the sake of everyone else.

Obama’s plans to “spread the wealth around” could not have succeeded without decades-long efforts to convince people that what they have belongs to “society” and not to them. No, Obama didn’t brainwash the millions of people who voted for him overnight, but his successful campaign hinged on decades of persuasion by other politicians and educators and members of the media who paved the way for him. He owes his election to many.

In truth, no one should ever have to “sacrifice” for others. *To sacrifice is to give up a greater value for a lesser value.* To sacrifice a greater value for a lesser value is, on its surface, foolish and against one’s self-interest. An example will make that point clear.

Assume you have enough cash to spend on a new Cadillac or on your college education. You cannot afford both, and must choose between the two. If you decide to spend your money on your education, you have *not* sacrificed a new Cadillac for your education. You simply, and logically, value your education more than you value an automobile. You recognize that it is in your self-interest to get a good education, while the car is not. The education and the car may have the same *price tag*, but they do not have the same *value*.

Of course, no one can possibly have everything. Even if you were incredibly wealthy, you wouldn’t have the time to enjoy everything you could buy. But whether you have great wealth or a modest income, you make choices based on values. Ultimately, if you make rational decisions based on reasonably-defined morals and values, you need never sacrifice. Again, to sacrifice is to give up a greater value for a lesser value. To do that would be foolish.

To choose the greater value is neither a sacrifice nor an act of selfishness, it is simply acting in one’s self-interest. To choose food for over a new plasma television is not to

“sacrifice” a television, it is a logical act of self-interest. (To choose the television over food *would* be a sacrifice – because it would represent an illogical sacrifice of one’s health and well-being over short-term entertainment.)

What about the American soldier who “sacrifices” his life in war? Arguably, the word sacrifice should not be used, because the soldier did *not* give up a greater value for a lesser value. But is not life a greater value than death? *Not if one values a life of freedom over a life without freedom.* That is, a life without freedom is not worth living, and that is what justifies the act of war in the first place. To the soldier fighting for his freedom, the greatest value is not mere life, but a life of liberty. It is therefore not a sacrifice to give one’s life in the fight for freedom, it is to recognize that life with liberty is the greatest possible value.

Thus a rational person would not sacrifice a greater value for a lesser value. The government, however, expects the taxpayer to sacrifice a portion of his life (a percentage of his income) for the “greater good of society.” But the taxpayer is not allowed to define that greater good or even choose where his tax dollars will be spent. He is thus not only being forced to sacrifice his income for a lesser value, he does not even know what that lesser value is! Is “hope” or “change” a greater value or a lesser value? What is its value? Could you not do something more productive with your income than trust it to politicians to use to re-pay political favors? Will the government spend your money on values you support? Will it be sent in your self-interest? If your tax dollars are being spent against your self-interest, why should you have to pay them? If your tax dollars are being spent in your best interest, could you not do that yourself and eliminate the expense of the government middleman?

Altruism means sacrificing oneself for others. It is therefore, by definition, anti-life and against one’s self-interest. If it is logical and in one’s self-interest to eat, then giving all of your food to others is illogical and against one’s self-interest. If person A must live for the sake of person B, and if person B must live for the sake of person C, then exactly who is it that gets to live for himself? What is the point of living if living is only to serve others? If you cannot live for yourself, why must you be forced to live for others? Why do they get priority over you? If you must live for them, mustn’t they then live for you? Isn’t it more logical for all us to live for ourselves and act in our own self-interest? Isn’t it better for everyone to have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? It is not selfish to want to live free and be happy – as long as you are not harming others to help yourself and not interfering with their right to live free and be happy.

Democrat politicians have successfully managed to convince the voters that businesses are evil and have obtained wealth only by exploiting others. They fail to recognize that in a free society all business transactions are voluntary. If you buy a product, it is only because you wanted the product and were willing to pay its price. No one put a gun to your head and forced you to buy a particular brand or product at a particular store. If you spend \$2.00 on a loaf of bread it is because you value that loaf of bread more than you value the \$2.00 – otherwise you would not buy it in the first place. You could perhaps bake bread yourself for less than \$2.00, but your time also has value. You are therefore

exchanging your \$2.00 for the loaf of bread, along with the time you saved by not having to bake it yourself. The store is not taking advantage of you by selling you the loaf of bread; you are voluntarily exchanging your \$2.00 for the store's loaf of bread. In the same way, you are voluntarily exchanging your 40 hours at the office or the factory or the plant for the paycheck your employer gives you.

The Democrats have intentionally confused self-interest with selfishness, and labeled every successful person as selfish. At the same time they have convinced many voters that altruism, sacrificing oneself for others, is a virtue – a virtue that can best be administered by a large government bureaucracy staffed by Democrats. With the help of a willing mass media, the Democrats make the elections a contest between the virtuous Democrat Party, whose only purpose is to serve others altruistically, versus the evil Republican Party, whose only purpose is to defend greedy, selfish businessmen who exploit everyone else. But altruism is not a virtue, it is an immoral practice that can only lead to self-destruction. Acting in your own self-interest is not only virtuous, it is a requirement of life.

Republicans win elections when they govern as conservatives, when they keep taxes low and spending at a minimum, and when they allow Americans the freedom to act in their own best interests, with as little government interference as possible. Republicans lose elections when they neglect those principles, and start governing as Democrats, by overtaxing, over-spending, and over-regulating.

All Americans would be well-served to remind themselves that they are a productive, hard-working people who deserve to keep as much of their income as they can – without guilt or shame. Acting wisely in their own self-interest, they don't need government for anything beyond those few functions which cannot be performed by individuals interacting voluntarily in a free market. No American need be ashamed of acting in his own self-interest, and no American need be sacrificed on the altar of altruism for the sole benefit of a politician.

Don Fredrick

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