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Egoism and Empathy in the Era of Neocons and Neoliberals

By RP Burnham
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Because they are they are polar opposites, the hot and cold of human nature, empathy and egoism are human traits that cannot be discussed separately. Empathy is as old as humanity and probably even older since chimpanzees and apes live in bands, which is a kind of embryonic society. Egoism likewise probably has a long lineage, for before full human consciousness arrived our primate ancestors most likely worked in the might-makes-right side of the ethical scale—witness male gorillas fighting to be the big bopper who gets the harem. Now these modern gorillas and supposed alpha males wear swanky suits and use manipulation, money and political power to get their way.

As to their effects in the world, and to make an astronomical comparison, egoism is a black hole that swallows up everything that has the misfortune to stray too close, while empathy is a life-giving sun that gives to everyone and everything it benignly shines upon life-sustaining warmth and energy. There are two causes of over-weening egoism: either an abusive childhood or an entitled, privileged childhood. Of the two, the latter is most dangerous. The egoist at the extreme end of the scale is a psychopath; in these extreme cases the abused and unloved individual might become a psychopathic killer and claim a few victims, but many of those egoists sprung from elite, privileged childhoods are also psychopathic in their complete disregard for others (the libertarians of these neocon neoliberal days) and are responsible for the death of millions and the misery and desperation of millions more.

In fine, egoism is the most dangerous force in the world and is responsible for most of the evil and suffering in the world. People full of themselves and displaying in all sorts of ways how they think everything they do is better are merely annoying, but when it comes to the boys and girls in government, industry and finance, their self-love is crushing the whole world.

These powerful elites always have a justification for their obsessions. In the past emperors, kings, and aristocrats claimed they were God's chosen. The plutocrats of the modern world have dispensed with God, but they have a philosophy that justifies in their minds the evil they do and the misery they cause: it's called libertarianism, and Ayn Rand is their prophet.

Objectivism is the name she gives to this philosophy. One thing about this pseudo-philosophy is that it is accurately named in that she objectifies people who are not entrepreneurs. She means us to understand the term in the sense that she is looking at the world objectively with no wishy-washy, goodie-two-shoes wishes and hopes obscuring her vision. She thinks human nature is purely selfish, and that any interference in the selfish quest for money, power and success is wrong. She divides humanity into creators and slaves. In other words, she sees a Darwinian world where the strong devour the weak. That's her objective reality. It does describe capitalism, but capitalist reality is not the whole of human reality. It takes one aspect of the human psyche, selfishness, and in general the human instinct of self-preservation and looking out for oneself, and inshrines as the single necessary virtue. But what is missing from this narrow view of reality is reality itself. No man is an island is not just a memorable phrase that John Donne came up with. It is the essence of human reality.

Rand is also very much aware that she is challenging 2500 years of the western cultural tradition. She also despises Christianity, calling it a slave religion (Jesus's compassion for the poor, his anger at the money lenders in the temple, St. Paul saying that the highest virtue is charity—the Elizabethan word for empathy— and all that). I've read that she was solipsistic even at a very young age, and when she came to America she worked in Hollywood's dream factory where heroes are lionized as larger than life. That as well could contribute to her dichotomy of humanity into slaves and parasites.

She thinks she's being Aristotelean, but again I've read that it is pseudo-Aristotelianism and largely derived from secondary sources. Her thinking is crude, rather like high-school kids who garbles their sources in Wikipedia, and she misses Aristotle's real ethical message. It is Aristotle, after all, who defined human beings as social animals, implying that we are all part of a larger whole. I've also seen in a book review or elsewhere that she is really far more indebted to Nietzsche and his hatred of Christianity and his contempt for the weak. (In this case she is a fellow-spirit with Hitler.)

So we have a high-school level of thinking that throws out the golden rule, Kant's practical imperative (never treat a human being as a means to an end but also as an end in him- or herself), and such stirring slogans as Gerard Winstanley's Diggers' creed: "Work together, eat bread together." She also misses the progress human beings have made toward a better world and a deeper humanity where the law of the jungle is replaced by cooperation and decency (so have way too many leaders in our world today). But the libertarians, many of them highly educated (like Milton Friedman) remain blinded by their egoism and greed. The belief that you are only

responsible for yourself and that other people are either cogs in your machinery (workers, customers, etc.) or barriers to your success and are only important to the degree they interfere with the capitalist's quest for money and power is a fascist ideology. I once even saw a remark by a libertarian who maintained that not being selfish was immoral. It is easy to see that Libertarianism is a doctrine that appeals to people without any conscience, social or otherwise. If politics and power is a fetid watery garbage barrel, then Libertarians are the scum that rises to the top.

Empathy is a danger to the power elite: that's why they objectify ordinary people to make them less real. But objectifying people and making them a thing, not a fellow human being, which is now the usual way that the power elite think, is to miss the higher reality beyond capitalism. I am but stating the obvious when I say inter-dependence, both sociological and ecological, is the real reality. The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the streets you drive on, the electricity that powers your house and all your devices, and thousands of other things are made by other people. The air you breathe, the rain that falls upon the earth and the sun that warms the earth are nature's gift to all. Even the capitalists' profit and success depends upon other people—the workers and staffs of companies, the very government itself that is responsible for infrastructure—roads, bridges, flood control, providing water and police and fire protection—all those things and a millions other environmental and social things are needed by all, and only those puffed up with ego and pride cannot see this. Only misinformed citizens, stupid or otherwise, can support plutocracy.

Question: can people change from being an egoist to a balanced human being with full humanity? Self-preservation and caring for others are both inborn, and as people grow older the weight of their inherited backgrounds and their experiences tend to calcify. Of course most people are probably a mixture of these two extremes of human nature, but can people at both ends of the scale change? While the extremes are often a permanent condition, it is not impossible to grow beyond egoism. An empathic person might experience horrific conditions (such as having his life destroyed by war) that change him into a misanthrope. The same is true for egomaniacs. We all start life as babies who are pure ego, but most of us learn that we share the world with others. So, yes, people do change, and change is always possible even for those set in their ways. Especially important in this process is education. The libertarians seem to realize this, for in their manic drive to privatize education (Bill Gates, et. al) they clearly reveal the fear they have that public education might or will open up minds to other ways of thinking besides selfishness. Already they have influenced education policy enough (teaching to the tests etc.) that shows that they fear the “sheeple” might cease to be good little servants of the rich and powerful. The plutocracy already controls the press and media that helps indoctrinate the people to accept as the only reality that the rich and powerful know what is best, but colleges and high schools are dangerously still teaching too many students how to think clearly. Even so, it is still a minority. The majority of U.S. politicians, journalists and ordinary Americans demonstrate how scarce and thin compassion and empathy are, especially in the public sphere. Of course when a tragedy such as the death of a child occurs next door, most people feel bad, and when natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, famines and so forth happen, most people display or at least pretend to display some sympathy, but these same people cannot understand Moslem anger at what the U.S. has done in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and other places. Your ordinary citizen has been conditioned to think of Arabs as uncivilized, murderous beasts—

cowardly curs who toppled the twin towers, and are responsible for numerous terrorist attacks around Europe and the U.S.A.

These acts are despicable, but are they really caused by Arab hatred of our freedom and/or various other inane explanations given by the media? Or is it a failure of imagination? For over the past twenty-five years we have been invading Arab and Moslem countries, killing millions and destroying the lives of millions more. We have bombed hospitals, water treatment plants, food warehouses, millions of homes and apartment buildings. In almost totally destroying Fallujah, Iraq, we also used nuclear-tipped weapons that already have caused birth effects in children born after the attack. In the first Iraqi war we killed thousands of retreating soldiers trying to escape to Bagdad. Before that our embargo of medicines killed half a million children from lack of proper care. We have murdered thousands of innocent Arabs and Afghans and others with our cowardly drones. When a westerner is accidentally killed by one of these drones, we apologize, but not when the innocent victims are members of a wedding party and those unfortunate enough to nearly when a drone murders a so-called militant. Given all this murder and mayhem we have visited on these third world people, it should not be difficult to imagine the bitterness and anger these victims feel. It should also not be difficult to understand that certain young men, filled with rage and testosterone and who are of pugnacious dispositions will want to fight back and get revenge for this evil. If the terrorist attacks on the twin towers made your typical America angry and chomping for revenge at this blowback response of Arabs, how about multiplying that by a thousand to start to understand Arab and Moslem anger?

Obviously it is not the fault of “ordinary citizens” that they do not understand Arab and Moslem anger. Nowhere in the mainstream media, the servant of the rich and powerful, will one ever see any empathic understanding of our victims’ anger. We have done to the Arabs what the neocons and neoliberals have been trying to do to ordinary citizens: we have made them other.

But American blindness to the effects of our evil mania for oil and power is still a failure of imagination. Good citizens have a duty to look into the deeds their government do in their name. So while the ability to get outside of yourself and see the world as it is experienced by other people, to see and feel as they see and feel, is almost totally lacking in America, there are ways to correct this blindness.

One place where young people can be trained to see life from a wider perspective than themselves and their worldly goals is education, particularly verbal education. Why verbal? Because the lies and misinformation that the government and elites use to bamboozle the people are verbal lies and manipulation. The most common is an appeal to patriotism, spoken in a tone of deep passion that implies we are in this together. False analogies are also as common as dirt. Think of Hilary Clinton inanely calling Putin a new “Hitler.” Many a plutocrat or government hack makes statements along the lines of heads I win, tails you lose, as when they pontificate on the wondrous benefits of these trade bills (NAFTA, the TTP), implying that they will bring great prosperity to us all when the reality is that the common folks will get shafted with losses of jobs while the rich boys will add a couple more billion to their hoard.

Great literature is one place where changing perceptions of what is proper behavior for a sentient creature that can look before and after can happen. Literature allows the reader to enter into the

lives of other people and see the world through different eyes. Of course, good movies also offer this opportunity, but with Hollywood being a commercial enterprise (the “Hollywood dream machine”) most of their offerings are manipulative drivel.

But to repeat, since the lies of the plutocrats and their hacks are verbal lies, the art form that is verbal and which exposes us to all kinds of people and their motives is the best training in the world. One simple example: Iago in Othello. All through the play he pretends to be Othello’s dear friend who only wants what’s best for him while of course (as his soliloquies show) he is plotting Othello’s destruction. The way Iago speaks to Othello is the way U.S. politicians speak to the people. Another good example of the way elites manipulate language to suggest that they share equality and have mutual goals with the common people while actually exploiting them is a line from one of Bertoldt Brecht’s Plays (I forget which one): Laß uns fischen gehen, sagte der Angler zum Wurm” (Let’s go fishing, said the angler to the worm).