

## Selfishness, individualism necessary for human flourishing

To address and refute each point in the Sept. 3 Clergy Comment headed “Give Up Selfishness, Rugged Individualism” would be like cleaning the Augean stables. Rather than attempt that Herculean task, I will summarize why I am a selfish individualist.

“Selfish” derives from the nature of a living organism. Every living thing must act to sustain itself. Non-human organisms are programmed to do this automatically. For a person, this action must be chosen and learned.

To sustain my life, I apply virtues such as rationality, honesty, and productivity.

“Individualist” derives from the fact that only individual people exist. “Mankind” or “society” are man-made concepts.

Some philosophers (like Plato) considered the concept to be superior to the individual units that led to the concept. This is collectivism, where the collective has rights, but the individuals do not. This viewpoint explains how collectivists throughout history have not hesitated to dispose of individuals, sometimes in the millions, for the (imagined) betterment of the collective.

As an individual, I have rights, such as to life and liberty. The concept of individual rights is inherently selfish.

To selfishly defend my rights, I recognize that every other individual has the same rights. I would forfeit my rights to whatever extent I would violate another individual’s rights (and vice versa).

In selfishly defending my individual rights, I defend the rights of every other individual, including those I’ve never met.

When I stand up for the individual rights of people I don’t even know, I defend my own rights. For example, I donate to the Institute for Justice; see IJ.org for how they operate through the legal system, assisting people (at no charge) whose rights have been violated (including some in Wisconsin).

I have acquired many values in my lifetime; some tangible, some intangible. When I think of all the values I have, I feel as wealthy as Uncle Scrooge McDuck in his cubic-acre money bin.

But I’m selfish. I want more.

That “more” could be anything that furthers my life. Knowledge I don’t have. Experiences I’ve never had. Skills I lack. Goods and services I’m unable to produce.

To gain these values, I understand that I must offer values in turn. I need to offer skills, knowledge, conversation, friendship, ideas, tangible goods—whatever I enjoy creating and/or can create well. And I’m optimistic there are selfish people who want more of what I have to offer.

Selfishly wanting to retain my individual rights, I scrupulously and uncompromisingly honor the rights of every person I deal with. I apply virtues like honesty, justice, integrity, and independent judgment in dealing with others. I offer in trade whatever I’ve created.

I am counting on the selfishness of others who want more. They are motivated to create more knowledge, goods, and services.

This cycle explains how wealth grows, even as population increases.

Consider India, whose massive population suffered terribly for most of the 20th Century under the anti-selfish collectivism of socialism and communism, but then experienced greater prosperity when it took tentative, imperfect steps toward selfish individual rights (capitalism).

Despite the worst efforts of collectivists, selfish individual rights does not seem ready to

give up in the world. As Earth's population continues to grow, extreme poverty has declined world-wide, and might end in our lifetimes, if mankind does not commit suicide with collectivism (a pretty big "if," considering current self-destructive trends).

I shun the term "rugged individualism," and urge every individualist to do the same. A society where individual rights are recognized and protected, where freedom of opportunity exists, is benign and easy, compared to the alternative.

In contrast, I can't think of anything more "rugged" than a self-negating, collectivist dictatorship that forces people to give up their values, goals, and even their lives.

Just ask the many immigrants who come here from anti-self, collectivist countries, which lifestyle is more "rugged."

And speaking of immigrants...

My selfish individualism asks, not what kind of hat a person wears; not what color her skin; not how eloquently he speaks my native language.

I ask instead: Does he respect my rights as much as I respect his? Does she want more out of life, and does she operate by the virtues of rationality, honesty, justice, productivity, and integrity to acquire more? Does this person trade value for value (that is, is this person a capitalist)? If an immigrant shares these values, I would like to clasp his or her shoulder, shake her or his hand, and say, "Welcome." I wish I could do that to every immigrant of that caliber.

(Actually, I'd like to shake hands with anyone sharing those values, immigrant or native-born. Just one reason selfish individualism and individual rights, where no person is master or slave, leads to benevolence.)

I have been asked: Do you favor more immigrants coming to this country?

I restate the question: "Do I want people coming here who want more? A better home for their families; nice furniture; entertainment; good food? People who, to acquire those things, offer me a broader selection of goods and services, and continually think of innovative ways to improve my life? People who, by wanting more, create greater opportunities for me and everyone else who can create the values they want? Do I want to live in a country that becomes wealthier, as more people selfishly improve their lives by making mine better?"

You bet your donkey I do.

(Of course, immigration should not be a free-for-all. For example, we should not allow known terrorists here.)

That briefly describes what selfish individualism *is*. Here are a few things it is *not*:

-- Compromising one's rationality (a virtue required for basic functioning, success, and happiness) with drugs or alcohol.

-- Violating the individual rights of others through initiating force or fraud.

-- Failing to protect individual rights by not using retaliatory force against initiators of force (such as morally inept mayors and governors who fail to have the police do what is necessary to stop rioting and looting by collectivist mobs).

-- Acting carelessly or recklessly to endanger others (driving like a maniac, dumping poison in a drainage ditch, spreading disease).

-- Treating an individual as if she were part of an interchangeable unit of a collective (principled individualists have *no* use for racism).

The crazed mobs now burning our cities are composed of selfless non-entities who have discarded their independent judgment to follow the commands of whoever screeches the loudest. They are giving us a horrifying preview of the ruggedness of collective mob action.

The blinking, stupidly gaping officials who watch this carnage and do not act to stop it give us a terrifying preview of the ruggedness of a society where individual rights are considered not worth defending.

Yes, it *is* time to rethink our values. Virtuous, principled self-interest and a passionately rousing defense of individual rights are the solution to the various crises we face.

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