

# Self and Other: Tensions within Modern Liberal Individualism and Moral Education

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary moral education of children in America derives from multiple sources including parents, schools, religious institutions, and the media. Thus, children are commonly confronted with inconsistent, perplexing moral demands. This paper focuses on a bewildering mixed message children receive regarding ethics: American society strongly conveys that both relentless self-interest and genuine selflessness are moral imperatives. For example, the economic system promotes self-indulgent consumerism and competition while at the same time children are admonished to respect and even to love others. These contradictory messages emerge from an ethical framework, often termed “liberal individualism,” which offsets an emphasis on self-interest with an ethical view of human beings as having dignity and inherent rights. The tension between the ethical poles of radical self-interest and significant commitment to others can be deeply confusing and problematic in practice. In this paper we seek to clarify the paradoxical relationship of the ethical poles of this moral framework and outline some of its implications for psychological theory and practice.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the tension between two poles in the modern ethical outlook often termed “liberal individualism,” probably the dominant moral outlook or value system of our era, namely the poles of obligation or commitment to self and to others. Liberal individualism appears to be an overarching ethical framework for much of American culture. It is not an “ethics code;” rather it is a philosophical viewpoint from which professional ethics codes derive and within which debates between “conservatives” and “liberals” typically occur. It will be argued that individuals in our culture are faced with the perplexing, perhaps even disorienting challenge of making sense of mixed messages and sometimes conflicting ethical demands emanating from this framework. The way in which children (and adults) cope with this challenge seems likely to have weighty consequences for identity development, major life commitments, and many facets of well-being.

The beginning of the paper will briefly outline the philosopher Charles Taylor's (1989) contention that being a healthy, whole person necessitates being oriented in moral space. This line of reasoning will set the stage for explaining the importance of recognizing possible gaps or contradictions in our ethical views or frameworks, especially as they pertain to the relationship of self and other. Some of the most important features of liberal individualism and its underlying assumptions will be outlined as a way of highlighting the dilemmas and challenges individuals in our culture commonly face on this front. The moral imperative of individualism and pursuit of self-interest may be easiest to recognize at the political and economic levels, so a brief sketch of this dynamic follows in the next section as a way of highlighting the importance of the topic of individualism. A review of four variations of liberal individualism in our culture will require more detailed analysis follows in a later section of the paper. Finally, the role psychology has perhaps unwittingly played in promoting a problematic or one-sided individualism will be discussed.

In this paper is not possible to do more than briefly outline Taylor's (1989) tightly reasoned contention that psychological health and wholeness require orientation in a moral space. However, understanding his basic thesis will reveal potential difficulties faced by persons attempting to cope with, adapt to, or integrate apparent paradoxes or even potential contradictions in the overarching ethical framework of liberal individualism. Liberal individualism is one moral framework that provides orientation in moral space, though as Taylor points out; there have been a variety of robust moral frameworks throughout history.

Taylor (1989) argues that ethical frameworks in all cultures provide a background or context for moral intuitions, reactions, and judgments required in daily living. The traditional place of ethical frameworks has been questioned in modern culture, in part, due to the success

and prominence of the natural sciences and technology. In fact some have gone so far as to say that we can or should do without ethical frameworks altogether and focus purely on technical or utilitarian considerations and tasks—as if that were not a highly tendentious ethical framework in its own right. In any case, people in pre-modern or traditional societies took for granted that they belonged to a meaningful and ordered world, a vision that was shared widely throughout their community. The upending of this sort of traditional vision of a meaningful cosmic order came about with the advent of the natural sciences and a metaphysical and moral outlook that gave science pride of place so far as both knowledge and practical life are concerned. Above all, this new view adopts an “objectifying” approach to the world (Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon 1999). Natural science operates by abstracting away from the particular and by sifting out bias and opinion from observable, replicable phenomena. By doing so, science regards the world in a somewhat detached and impersonal manner. In doing so, it treats the values, experiences, and meaningful relationships of ordinary life very differently than ever before. In this new order of things, experiences of beauty, relevance to our purposes, goodness, and so on, tend to be regarded as mere human preferences confined to a private, subjective realm. This kind of “subject-object ontology,” defines an outlook on the world that under-girds and shapes much of our modern view of life. This new scientific outlook and ontology support a picture of ourselves as both disengaged scientific observers confronting a separate material universe and, in the realm of ethics and politics, as quite separate, autonomous, and free individuals (Richardson and Zeddies 2001).

Psychologists and social scientists are familiar with the claim (sometimes referred to as the “naturalist reduction”) that only the types of methods employed in the natural sciences produce real knowledge. Ethical frameworks are unable to be verified according to these

methods and are thus thought to be unverifiable “stories” -- irrelevant to those who seek authentic knowledge (Taylor 1989). Taylor argues, however, the naturalist reduction that denies ethical frameworks altogether is not credible at all. Building on Taylor’s argument, some leading theoretical psychologists (Richardson 2005; Slife, Smith, and Burchfield 2003) argue that psychologists and psychotherapists who advocate, often vehemently, for “value-neutrality” or a thoroughly “non-judgmental” approach to research findings or therapy clients are anything but value neutral or nonjudgmental. Paradoxically, they present value neutrality as a firm moral imperative. Once we appreciate this paradox, it becomes clear that these advocates really are seeking to defend and advance some quite familiar modern liberal values of respect for individual human rights, dignity, and privacy, but are doing so in a confusing manner that may actually impede our ability to communicate and encourage those worthy moral ideals. Taylor (1989) argues that human beings, at all times and places, inescapably define themselves in terms of some fundamental moral notions. In this view, most philosophical relativists fervently promote their relativism because they believe it is good for us—it undercuts dogmatism and authoritarianism, for example—and is good for us in ways that they really do not take to be of indifference or pure subjective preference at all. Thus, in Taylor’s view, a strict objectivist stance advocates neutrality toward values and is commonly tied to an underlying agenda of promoting certain other fundamental values of liberty, tolerance, and human rights. Commitment to human dignity and rights clearly sketches out a way of life that is felt to be good in itself. The difficulty here is that a principled neutrality toward all notions of the good life risks extending that neutrality or indifference to those basic values of liberty and dignity as well, undermining their credibility, and stripping them of rational defense, thus actually making them harder to live by (Richardson and Zeddies 2001).

According to Taylor (1989), there is an integral relationship between ethical frameworks and coherent human identity: To know who you are involves being oriented in a moral space. In such a space questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not worth doing. Taylor argues that human beings cannot live without ethical frameworks and that to try to do so would result in what we would readily recognize as damaged personhood or severe identity crisis. Identity consists, in part, of knowing what is of crucial importance to us. Identity is defined by the values and ethical commitments which provide the frame within which one can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable or important – what ought to be done or what ought to be opposed. If one were to lose the overarching sense of a framework of commitments, then one would be at a loss for knowing the significance of things on a range of issues. An acute form of disorientation on this order would be equivalent to an identity crisis. It would involve not knowing whom one is because of radical uncertainty about where one stands. In this view, gaps or contradictions in our ethical viewpoints may raise vexing questions about how to resolve such discrepancies.

Taylor's (1989) Gadamer (1989) philosophical hermeneutic approach puts forward the claim that humans "always already" presuppose and take seriously some ethical framework and commitments. This does not mean, however that they can or do lay claim to final or certain truth in the moral sphere. Quite the contrary; in this view, it is the individual who claims to be able to stand apart from all such values and commitments and achieve utter value-neutrality who is making absolutistic claims. In the hermeneutic approach, "truth," is socially distilled and clarified. Our moral understandings and frameworks are rooted in and shaped by particular cultural and historical contexts. They are shaped and reshaped through a process of mutual influence and dialogue that depends greatly upon the context and particular parties involved.

Thus, they show great variety in history, and are capable of “potentially endless innovation” (Taylor 2002, 129).

However, the hermeneutic view by no means implies that we are in a position to proclaim a total relativism of moral beliefs or points of view. Such a relativism, just as much as a strong “objectivism” (Bernstein 1983), only make sense if propounded from a god’s eye point of view, which we are far from attaining. Thus, the human situation seems to be that we live in a certain quintessentially human, exquisite, sometimes unbearable tension. On the one hand, we harbor self-defining beliefs and values concerning things we care about greatly, in which we have a “deep identity investment,” sometimes in “distorted images we cherish of others” (Taylor 2002, 141.) On the other hand, since our ideals and our images of others and events are always partial or distorted in some way, we need not just to compromise and get along with others, but to learn from the past, others, or other cultures. In this sense, we depend upon them greatly in matters closest to our own hearts, an often uncomfortable and taxing situation. To gain such learning, we have to open ourselves to other perspectives, let them call us to account and interrogate or challenge us and allow at least some degree of what Gadamer (1989) calls a “fusion of horizons” to take place, a melding of insights that incorporates old ones and new in a transformed outlook. In doing so, we sometimes incur a deeply personal, sometimes painful “identity cost” (Taylor, 2002, 141)

Probably the most salient moral obligation for individuals in our culture is, at a minimum, to respect the rights of others, and ideally to care for or seek the good of others (e.g., Sampson 2003). This ethical demand is most clearly seen in our responsibility to assist those who are close to us. For example, a parent who is neglectful or abusive toward his or her children is viewed as failing in his or her duty toward them and judged accordingly. A parent is subject to a degree of

regulation by the state, and, if his or her conduct is not deemed satisfactory parental rights may be terminated. The moral obligation of caring for others begins with those who are close to us, but also extends to those who are strangers. It requires that we act charitably toward those we encounter who are vulnerable or in need, even if we are unrelated to them or do not know them. Children are often introduced to this moral responsibility by teaching them the “golden rule” and this ethical formulation is both powerful and pervasive in Western culture (Sampson 2003). On the other hand, modern Western culture, perhaps particularly American culture, is characteristically individualistic. That is, autonomy is highly valued and individuals are expected to pursue their self-interest vigorously. Pursuit of self-interest is likely to have considerable momentum in most cultures, but ethical frameworks and social institutions further support individualism in our culture. We will say more about psychology and individualism later. For now, let us spell out in greater detail the claim that in American culture, pursuit of self-interest is viewed, not just as permissible, but also as a moral imperative. Such a claim may seem counterintuitive, or just plain wrong in light of the previous argument that compassion or care for others is the most salient moral obligation in our culture, so a brief explanation is in order.

To see how deeply embedded the moral imperative of self-interest is in our culture, just consider how our political and economic systems depend on its pursuit. For example, our political system relies upon a balance of powers embodied in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. For the system to work properly, each branch of government must carry out its designated function and preserve its influence so that another branch of government does not grow too powerful and undercut the prerogatives of the other branches or trample the rights of nation’s citizens. This balancing of powers is also reflected at a psychological level in the citizenry. Theoretically, through self-interested advocacy, citizens

protect themselves against the danger that their fellow-citizens will encroach on their rights and privileges. For example, if all citizens, based on self-interest, compete vigorously for government spending in their own political districts and each of their governmental representatives enthusiastically advocate these policies on their behalf, then politicians will ultimately be required to work out a compromise in which, at best, many benefit moderately and few are hurt. Failing to reach such compromises through a competitive process risks creating policies that benefit a few greatly and hurt many irreparably.

Ideally, the economy functions in a similar manner; and self-interest is also its prime mover. Based on self-interest, businesses vigorously compete for customers; workers compete for jobs; consumers compete for commodities; universities compete for students and resources; psychologists compete for clients and research funds, and so on. From an economic perspective, if people at any of these levels fail to energetically pursue their own self-interest, then inefficiency is introduced into the market jeopardizing overall economic well-being. Conversely, it is thought that rigorous competition based on self-interest produces the best products, services, research, and innovation. In short, it is believed that competition based on pursuit of self-interest will produce excellence. Therefore, in this view, it is incumbent upon individuals to pursue their self-interest for the welfare of the political system, the health of the economy, and the good of society. Although pursuit of self-interest is not as often directly asserted as a moral good as altruism, this line of reasoning suggests that pursuit of self-interest is regarded as a kind of moral imperative in our society. An indication of that is our tendency to look down on people who do not aggressively pursue success and satisfaction or fail to show concern to “be all they can be.” We often feel guilty if we do not drive ourselves toward these goals.

Of course, unregulated pursuit of self-interest risks undermining social cohesion and even the viability of social institutions instrumental to the pursuit of self-interest through a clash of wills in which the overriding factor determining any outcome is power or success at any cost (Richardson and Zeddies 2001). To mitigate the destructive consequences of unrestrained pursuit of self-interest, our kind of society lays down rules and procedures that govern fair play in the pursuit of self-interest. The overarching framework in our culture that sets out the rationale for these rules is commonly termed “liberal individualism” – an ethical framework with philosophical roots in the work of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. It appears to define the moral outlook of modern times for most people. Liberal individualism counterbalances its emphasis on self-interest with an ethical view of human agents as having inherent value, dignity, and rights. The tension between self-interest and respect for the rights of others is regulated based on formal principles of procedural justice (Neal 1990; Rawls 1971). A major advantage of the emphasis on respect for individuals and their choices regarding particular ends in living is freedom from imposition of choices by powerful or capricious outside authorities. Liberal individualism represents a genuine endeavor to do away with dogmatism and affirm freedom without abandoning our moral duties to others (Richardson and Zeddies 2001). Tension between these two ethical poles of radical self-interest and deep obligation to respecting the rights of others shapes the way individuals in our culture experience many kinds of interpersonal conflicts.

If liberal individualism is a shared overarching ethical framework, why is it that we seem to have so many disagreements on so many important issues? There are probably multiple reasons for our disagreements, but among them is that within the broad tradition of liberal individualism there are variations on a theme. Different versions of liberal individualism deal with the problem of self-interest differently. Social theorists identify four main variations on the

theme of liberal individualism that are reflected in various traditions within psychology. Sometimes these strands of individualism are referred to as “disguised ideology” (Bernstein, 1983; Richardson, 2005) because they represent basic philosophical and ethical assumptions that serve as a basis for psychological inquiry and practice, yet they often go unrecognized and unquestioned, hidden behind a pretense of dispassionate value-neutrality.

In their text *Habits of the Heart*, (Bellah et al. 1985), the authors identify two main forms of individualism in modern times: “utilitarian individualism” and “expressive individualism”. Utilitarian individualism assumes that the ends of human life are either innate pleasures and satisfactions or simply whatever goals or desires we happen to prefer. Human thought and action are essentially tools for effectively and efficiently pursuing survival, security, and satisfaction. The ego in Freudian or classical psychoanalytic theory is almost a purely utilitarian calculator of self-gratification working within the confines of socially permissible boundaries. Although behavioral and cognitive theories are generally at odds with psychoanalytic theory and practice, it has been pointed out that utilitarian individualism is foundational for them, as well (Richardson and Zeddies 2001). In fact, many psychotherapy theories appear to have an instrumental orientation that emphasizes means-end calculation derived from utilitarian instrumentalism. A basic concern of these approaches revolves around developing more and more effective means of self-control of thought and behavior to attain rationally calculated satisfactions. A problem with an overemphasis on instrumentalism suggested by some theorists is that though it may expand our control over thoughts and behavior in important ways, it may also undermine or undervalue the ability to evaluate the worth of the ends we seek. An instrumental orientation is not helpful—indeed may actively undermine—our ability to set needed healthy limits in our personal lives or develop integrity and meaning.

Bellah et al. (1985) identify expressive individualism as another form of liberal individualism. The Romantic movement of the late 18th and 19th century was a reaction against the overly rationalistic, calculating aspects of utilitarian views. This view is captured in Wordsworth's famous line "We murder to dissect," which reflects the feeling of the Romantics that the cold analytic tools of science and utilitarian ethics represent an overly rationalistic, calculating and ultimately deadening approach to life that ignores or destroys nature, feeling, beauty, and art. Romanticism is reflected in psychology in client-centered, humanistic, Gestalt, and Kohutian approaches to psychotherapy. These approaches are guided by the core belief that each person has a unique inner source of feeling that ought to be expressed in order to fulfill the potential of the individual (Bellah et al. 1985). Expressive individualism tends to view the world and others as aids or impediments to pursuit of self-interest represented by our projects and self-actualization. This view contrasts sharply with a notion of moral commitment as something, in part, that sets a limit to the exercise of freedom. By itself, self-actualization of this sort seems insufficient for overcoming egoism, resolving interpersonal conflict, and achieving lasting social ties among mature individuals (Richardson and Zeddes 1999).

A third type of modern individualism, "existential individualism," also figures prominently in psychological theory and practice (Richardson 2005). Like expressive individualism, existential individualism also protests against the rationalism, technical control, bureaucracy and conformity in modern society. However, existential individualism is skeptical of the expressivist idea of getting in touch with inner feelings or impulses as the best way to find integrity and direction in life. In this view, we should take total responsibility for the basic choices that "invent" the ultimate values and "fundamental project" of our lives as a whole. Several modern psychotherapy theories incorporate a version of this ideal of existential freedom,

including Gestalt therapy and many influential "existential" accounts of psychotherapy (Yalom 1980; May 1958). Despite many appealing aspects of existential individualism including promotion of authenticity, integrity, taking responsibility for one's choices, and opposition to arbitrary authority, some critics claim that it offers too little guidance for evaluating the superiority of one way of life over another. In the end, the radical choice of ultimate values seems to come down to simply registering preferences or just arbitrarily settling on one option over others (Guignon 1986). This perspective may not provide the kind of guidance that would substantially help reign in self-interest in and shore up other values including concern or care for others, more lasting social ties, and a sense of loyalty—albeit a critical one—to one's best traditions or one's community. In fact, existential individualism would seem to actually exacerbate fraying of social bonds due to the emphasis on pursuing realization and fulfillment of the authentic self.

Richardson and Zeddes (2001) have argued that influential postmodern and social constructionist views in psychology (e.g., Gergen 1985; Gergen and Kaye 1992; McNamee and Gergen 1992) reflect many of the themes of existential individualism, but also represent a distinct form of modern liberal individualism (even though, rejecting the other forms mentioned in many ways, they would deny this). Typically postmodern theorists assert that there is no universal truth about the self. Conceptions of self and world and the meanings or values we live by are believed to be social artifacts that are not grounded in any metaphysical or ethical reality, but are formed through ongoing "negotiations of meaning" in social life. Constructionist thinkers emphasize how deeply embedded in and shaped by culture we are. They insist that the only basis for evaluating our beliefs or values, in everyday life, science, or psychotherapy, is according to their "pragmatic implications" (Gergen 1985, 275). Any claim to hold "true" moral beliefs or

values only gets in the way of what truly “works” in the business of living. The problem is that this approach itself seems to amount to an ethical stance (disguised ideology) that such theorists deeply believe is right and good for us. It is not something that we could discard with impunity if it no longer suits our “pragmatic” purposes. One may be sure they will protest if we announce we have elected to become neo-Nazis because it best serves our ends of ruling the world and gratifying sadistic inclinations. In fact, the values and goals in living constructionists implicitly recommend seem to closely resemble the highly individualistic sort of radical freedom advocated by existentialists, and like existentialists, they reveal, in the end, that they endorse many familiar liberal individualist values. Thus, they seem to reproduce the paradox of ethical commitment to value-neutrality in yet another variation.

The principle of respect for others’ choices as formulated in the various forms of liberal individualism outlined above present a predicament in for psychological theory and applied psychology (Richardson 2005). Stated differently, simultaneous commitments to value-neutrality based on a scientific or naturalist reduction and commitment to the welfare of students, research participants, or psychotherapy clients presents a conundrum for psychologists. Paradoxically psychologists must both remain neutral about the life choices clients make and at the same time be committed to seeking their well-being. In practice this may be quite difficult, if not impossible, as when a psychotherapist works with a client to formulate life goals including long-term relationships and career goals. Remaining value-neutral while doing such work often requires obscuring how much “health” or “adjustment” is, in part, defined by cultural and moral norms, and how much we influence clients in adopting or reworking the meanings they live by (Christopher 1999; Fancher 1995; Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon 1999).

Children and adolescents growing up in American society may not be aware of the arguments that justify and promote the pursuit of self-interest. Nevertheless, they are immersed in a culture that promotes the pursuit of self-interest, self-promotion, and competition. Cultural slogans such as “Be yourself,” “Be all that you can be,” “Express yourself,” “Thirst is everything” are repeated time and again in many different formats. Competition and self-promotion play a large role in the acculturation of children in schools where they compete in the classroom for grades and ultimately for admissions to good colleges and choice jobs. Extracurricular activities such as sports, band and orchestra instruction and contests, debate teams and other extracurricular activities are often organized around a competitive premise. The underlying assumption is that through competition children will be able to develop their fullest potential. Pursuit of self-interest generally needs little prompting to become a force to be reckoned with. Parents of children and adolescents do not need studies conducted by developmental psychologists to let them know that children’s natural inclination is to pursue what they perceive to be their own self-interest. However there are ramifications for the development of children who grow up in a culture whose political, economic, and ethical systems are predicated on self-interest and competition. Many cultural critics have voiced concern about our culture’s self-indulgent consumerism egged on by the marketing industry. Some have argued cogently that our culture promotes narcissism and that psychology, with its emphasis on individualism and neglect of ethics, has at times unwittingly added to these problems rather than ameliorated them (e.g., Cushman 1990).

The dilemma presented by the conflict between self-interest and obligation to others creates a context in which children (and adults) may experience ambivalence and confusion. How do children and adolescents successfully integrate the notion that their classmate is both

their friend and the person whom they need to beat to win a competition, to be valedictorian, or to get into the best college? Many (not all) of us learn to live with such conflicts and tensions, but at what price in terms of self-acceptance, real maturity, or spiritual peace. How does an adult judge how much time to devote to one's career versus one's children, spouse, or aging parents? Ambivalence in interpersonal relationships can be particularly challenging for young children. For example, Harter and Buddin (1987) conducted a study in which young children, ages 4 and 5 years old, sometimes firmly denied experiencing more than one emotion at a time. Their comments included: "There is no way you could have two feelings at the same time since you only have one mind!" Other children, though more concrete in their formulations, still recognized the paradoxical nature of the experience. For example one asserted: "You'd have to be two different people to have feelings at the very same time;" while another proposed, "You can't make your mouth go up and down at the same time" (Harter and Buddin 1987, 398). In a study of college students (Harrist, in press), participants reported experiencing ambivalence and tremendous anxiety associated with dilemmas presented by weighing their obligations in interpersonal relationships. Their experiences were described as disorienting. At times they were disorienting to the extent that some reported feeling "crazy" or psychotic. Responses from people across a wide range of developmental stages indicate that dilemmas posed by competing or conflicting interpersonal obligations are confusing, anxiety provoking and difficult to resolve. Liberal individualism's internal tensions and its overall insufficiency in terms of making peace with life's many limitations and sufferings surely exacerbate these difficulties and stresses.

Some have argued that liberal individualism's characterization of human action and motivation as exclusively or primarily self-interested may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Others feel that liberal individualism's vision of the good life seems to undermine the capacity to

respect and cherish others--that its emphasis on individual rights and autonomy tends to underestimate the value of relationships and other non-instrumental goals. According to Michael Sandel, the individualistic public philosophy by which we live “cannot secure the liberty it promises, because it cannot inspire the sense of community and civic engagement that liberty requires” (Sandel 1996, 6). Ultimately, self-interested pursuit of happiness may degenerate into a pursuit of security and/or self-gratification that may not be fulfilling or generative or promote the type of meaningful social ties and sense of community most of us we aspire to in the long-run. Sandel and others currently are exploring how fundamental liberal values of human rights, dignity, and autonomy might be integrated with a richer sense of individual character and community belonging (Damon 1995; Etzioni 1996; Glendon 1991). However we may not even be able to address that challenge, or appreciate the need to address it, unless we first raise our consciousness about the internal tensions and significant blind spots of modern liberal individualism—the problematic credo that to a great extent we strive to live by while encouraging our children to do the same.

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