

Emerging “Individualism”

"Individualism is a word recently coined to express a new idea."

"Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into a circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."

"There are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands."

"Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart," forgetting his ancestors, his descendants and isolating himself from his contemporaries.

"It is odd to watch with what feverish ardor Americans pursue prosperity, ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it. They cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if they expected to stop living before they relished them. Death steps in, in the end, and stops them, before they have grown tired of this futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes them."

So wrote the French social philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), in *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. Tocqueville traveled throughout America of the 1830s, observing the emerging character of its people.



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How do we, as Americans, define a “rich person”? What is a “successful person”? What are the indicators and measures of that “success”? And to what extent are our responses to these questions linked to the social entity we call “the individual”? Specifically, a successful person is an individual that is independent, autonomous, and free of others. We can see many of the focal points of the corporate entity, “individual,” intersect in so many domains of our culture. For example:

- **politically**, in one’s autonomy involving inalienable rights of freedom and the pursuit of happiness, with each person guarantee the right to vote
- **economically**, in a competitive market place of individual produces and consumers, and critically, in the amount one can acquire – the more material possession one has acquired, the richer that person

- **bio-medically**, in how one's health and well-being are understood as vital
- **aging**, in not being "a burden to one's children," and the children often just as likely to not want to be burdened
- **athletically**, as individual athletes are immortalized as winners or losers, and less so as part of a team sport
- **spiritually**, with each person responsible for seeking and obtaining spiritual his or her own redemption
- **philosophically**, with the capacity for unencumbered free will and clarity of moral reasoning
- **ethos**, as expressed in the "Horatio Alger" story of "one pulling himself up by his boot straps" and making good. A spirit of "**rugged individuals**," of valuing **privacy** and of "**minding our own business**"
- and in other ways?