

6. What problems did you have with understanding the meaning of vocabulary in the English Only lessons?

英語のみを使用する授業で、単語の意味の理解に関してどんな問題がありましたか。

Please explain.

説明して下さい。

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## Consideration on American Individualism II: Individualism Transformed and its Subsequent Impasse

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### Introduction

In part I (Nakamura, 2012), I discussed how the early European immigrants initiated their experience in the New World. They generated the powerful American mythology that stressed progress and self-reliance. On the other hand, they inherited a large portion of European thought characterized by civic and biblical traditions. “Traditional individualism” has inspired Americans to be committed to their religions and to be virtuous citizens who voluntarily contribute to the public good.

This paper, part II, mainly discusses the transformation of American individualism and its impasse that followed. The virtues of American individualism have suffered from the rapid social changes brought by industrial capitalism. In the nineteenth century, America developed a new kind of individualism that put a priority on individual self-improvement over the good of the larger social body. “Modern individualism” has made Americans more preoccupied with their work and private time, isolating themselves from public commitment.

Let me emphasize that the purpose of this paper is not to disparage or negate American values. Having experienced American life for 6 years in the 1990s, I directly saw many Americans who voluntarily and appreciatively participated in civic and religious activities. Up to the present, I have often been amazed at the potential power of America through sharing ideas and actions with many Americans around me. Based on these personal experiences, my gratitude to America has never been diminished in my life so far.

On the other hand, when I objectively look at the statistics of disproportionately high percentage of crimes, drug problems, family breakdowns, and other troubling social phenomena that the media continuously report, I recognize a negative side of American individualism. It seems certain that, in this culture of separation, contemporary Americans are widely suffering from some profound mental and social problems.

In the sequel to this paper, I intend to turn to Buddhist perspectives to consider how they can contribute to understanding and treating the “disease” of American society. I expect this paper to work as a stepping-stone to a Buddhist diagnosis of American individualism in part III and after.

### **1. Modern Individualism vs. Traditional Individualism**

In his book *Democracy in America*, Alexis De Tocqueville (1899), a French traveler in the nineteenth century, kept in perspective the republican and biblical ethos of the new society. He (p.104) observed that Americans had an essential purity of faith in their voluntary participation for the common good at the expense of private interests. He claimed that only because Americans were so intensely religious could their political and personal freedom be maintained. On that assumption, he defines individualism this way:

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself (p.104).

It must be noted that Crevecoeur (1963), whose viewpoints I examined in part I (p.3), failed to mention the less pleasant face of American individualism. He focused on the possibility of an American individual changing one’s life in a dramatic way. His notion helped to confirm the myth of America that an individual can become new, better and happier one in the New World.

Contrary to Crevecoeur, Tocqueville used the word “individualism” as a pejorative term. He argued that it was not the same as selfishness, but warned that it could very easily turn into preoccupation with self to the exclusion of society and community. He presented a more penetrating view than Crevecoeur, warning against the morally corrosive potential latent in American individualism. This paper will later depict how Tocqueville turned out to be a great prophet of American society.

The type of individualism Tocqueville warned about is roughly identified with modern individualism, which Robert Bellah et al. (1986) explain in

contrast to traditional individualism. In part I (pp.4-5), I mainly referred to their book *Habits of the Heart* (1986) in examining traditional individualism. Here again, the same book is the primary source for clarifying the definitions of modern individualism.

Bellah et al. (p.143) categorize modern individualism into two types: utilitarian and expressive. Utilitarian individualism originally appeared in seventeenth-century England. In those days, middle class citizens, especially merchants and industrialists, gained more power. As a result, they felt oppressed by the monarchial and aristocratic authority. A radical philosophical defense of individual rights emerged out of their struggle against the authority. The key voice was an English philosopher, John Locke, who asserted that society came into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest.

Locke’s thought had a great impact on American people, combined with the American mythology that emphasized the idea of progress. A great number of early American leading figures, although they understood civic and biblical virtues, stressed the idea that the individual could get ahead on one’s own initiative. Bellah et al. (p.33) suggest Benjamin Franklin was one of those who inspired many Americans to focus exclusively on individual self-improvement. Utilitarian individualists viewed life largely in terms of economic and career success. It is speculated that utilitarian individualism manifested itself in pure form by the end of eighteenth century.

On the other hand, expressive individualism, according to Bellah et al. (pp.33-34), emerged, in a sense, as a reaction to utilitarian individualism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, utilitarian individualism had become dominant in America. A life devoted exclusively to career success and material prosperity came to be seen as problematic for many Americans, some of whom were poets and writers. Ralph Waldo Emerson was an initiator of this new romantic ethos, followed by enthusiastic disciples such as Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.

Expressive individualists put aside the search for wealth, and sought a deeper expression of the self based on some sublime human feeling. In general, they emphasized the freedom to express oneself against all constraints and conventions. Bellah et al. (pp.34-35) regard Walt Whitman as representative of expressive individualism. For Whitman, the ultimate use of

American independence was to cultivate and express the self and explore its cosmic identities.

It must be noted that modern individualism, represented by utilitarian and expressive forms, stresses individual self-improvement over the larger social good. It stresses that the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct. Traditional individualism, on the other hand, positions the individual in relation to a larger whole – community and tradition. It inspires one to be an active citizen who contributes to the public good and evokes a notion of government based on the voluntary participation of individuals. From these perspectives, modern individualism poses a striking contrast with traditional individualism.

Traditional individualism has long coexisted with modern individualism in America. Bellah et al. (p.143) suggest that the conflict between the two was initially muted, because they each shared a common belief in the inherent dignity and autonomy of the individual. However, gradually, the latter became more dominant over the former. There is no doubt that this general shift was deeply connected to rapid social change.

## **2. Individualism Transformed by Industrialization**

Between the period of rapid westward expansion and industrial growth that followed the Civil War and World War I, American society experienced “the most rapid and profound transformation in its history” (Bellah et al., p.42). The industrial revolution, together with its aggressive capitalism, generated the new economically integrated society.

The “laissez-faire” theory, presented by eighteenth-century Scottish economist Adam Smith, greatly motivated American utilitarian individualists to push themselves forward. The theory held that individuals left to their own initiative would naturally produce the greatest good for both themselves and society as a whole. It not only justified the world of self-centered competitors, but encouraged individuals to pursue their own interest for the public benefit. Americans began to place an exclusive emphasis on hard work.

David M. Potter (p.102) imaginatively combines utilitarian trends with what he calls “frontier” individualism. As I discussed in part I (p.2), early Europeans were required to be essentially self-reliant, with an undeveloped continent in front of them. Utilitarian individualism shared a great deal in common with

this. Both, Potter explains, exalted strength and scorned weakness or lack of practicality, and required individuals to fight for their own aspirations and act alone. Most importantly, both demanded a drive toward some external goals prescribed by society. It seems reasonable to suggest that Americans, almost exhausting their geographical frontier in the late nineteenth century, made the realm of economy a new kind of frontier.

The industrialization of the economy led to the development of new forms of social organization and culture. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a national market increasingly deprived American society of the small towns and regional cities, and Americans became more dependent on a national occupational system based on education, mobility and the ability to compete. The bureaucratic organization of the business organization became dominant in the twentieth century (Bellah et al. p.118). Working life became more specialized and its organization became tighter. The growth of industrial structures obviously changed the original American pattern of decentralized, self-governing communities.

Under such circumstances, the workplace continues to be critically important for most Americans, closely linked to the demand for self-expression in their leisure time. Instead of relating the self to its larger context, Americans today have an increased tendency to make a world of their own in those two realms. As a result, the division of life between work and leisure, or public and private, has been rapidly facilitated.

Despite these changes, Americans’ primary emphasis on self-reliance has remained unchained. However, they take a different approach to self-reliance. More Americans today try to be self-reliant by breaking free not only from the past but also from social commitment. Some Americans separate their idea of the self even from work and family. For them, the individual self becomes its own source of moral guidance. They think they can gain independence by pursuing their own personal wants, which are often created by the self’s inner impulse. In a sense, a modernization of expressive individualism has occurred.

Thus, under the growing strength of industrial capitalism, it is clear that the fabric of a democratic society weakened. As time went on, modern individualism inevitably came in conflict with traditional individualism. Stress on self-reliance and the absolute commitment to individual dignity emphasized private goals and private values at the expense of community

goals and community values. The coherence of the community and its vitality was lessened. Tocqueville's warning against individualism given in the 1830s was more relevant than ever.

### 3. Tension between Society and the Individual

The English novelist D. H. Lawrence (1961, p.5) proposed a negative view of American society in his book, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. He argued that America was a "vast republic of escaped slaves" who came to America largely "to get away" with "a black revulsion" from "the old authority of Europe." Democracy in America, he stated, was just the tool for undermining European spirit. He negated the American concept of freedom, asserting:

Men are free when they are in a living homeland, not when they are straying and breaking away. Men are free when they are obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief. Obeying from within. Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom (pp.6-7).

Much of American literature reflects the theme of conflict between society and the individual, in which a heroic individual must stand against society. To be truly a good person, the hero, in the end, becomes totally alienated or isolated from society. *Huckleberry Finn*, *Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Moby Dick*, for example, are the novels that exemplify this theme.

As was discussed in Part I (pp.1-2), the "Garden of Eden" was a metaphor for the image of the New World. It symbolized freedom of experience and fundamentally forward-looking nature. From this perspective, an American hero is identified with an "Adamic" figure. In his very newness, he is fundamentally innocent and is the type of a creator or a poet. He is independent, self-reliant, and is ready to confront anything with human instinct. It is certain that the literary imagination has a deep connection to what happens in general culture.

The first European Americans had the big dream of making a society of

free and equal individuals. They developed a special idea of democracy which was distinctively American. As was discussed in part I (p.6), the American system of democracy tried to give the full scope of power to individuals. It was mistrustful of things which would repress individuals. While celebrating the individual, they fostered a myth that American was "a land of opportunity" where they could individually make progress. The idea of frontier reinforced the myth. As they had boundless land, there were always new territories they could move on to. It was always possible that they would escape from the constraints of society.

American literary heroes often have difficulty in settling down in a society, being ever in search of a better place. As soon as they settle down wherever they think there is a "garden," it is no longer the ideal place. After all, human beings are imperfect and impermanent. No human society, whatever forms or sizes, can remain a "garden." Leo Marx (p.342) asserts that the best and the most characteristic American fiction has been shaped by the conflicts or contradictions, not by utilities and harmonies of American culture. The contradiction, Marx explains, embodies what is most distinctive in American thought.

There is no doubt that Lawrence, through his literary imagination, was deeply aware of the nature of the contradictions inherent in American culture. Lawrence (p.5) stated that Americans had not yet discovered the "spirit of place," thus, a "dark suspense" was always at the bottom of American soul.

It is reasonable to suppose that the "spirit of place" was rather difficult to foster in American civilization. Kamei (pp.41-42) points out that European Americans, in the beginning, harmed their bonds with the "place" by exploiting native Americans, whose lives had had deep connection with the land. America, then, continued to accept a large number of immigrants from all over the world. Their races, languages, and cultural traditions were so various that it was not easy to share common feelings with one another. Further, many Americans kept moving in search of a better place one after another. The "dark suspense" in Americans today may be getting darker in this age controlled to a great degree by money and technology. Even though they keep on running, they may be less sure of their destination.

Lawrence seems to me to be another great prophet of American society

when I read his statement:

Liberty in America has meant so far breaking away from *all* dominion. The true liberty will only begin when Americans discover IT, and proceed possibly to fulfill IT. IT being the deepest *whole*, not idealistic halfness [emphasis in original] (p.7).

#### 4. The Impasse of American Individualism

The impact of industrial capitalism on contemporary American society is ever-increasing and has become more profound. Massive urbanization and organization of work have made society grow beyond an individual's comprehension. Large private corporations for a national or international market are the most powerful structures today, affecting everything else. American society has developed a stronger tendency toward the "survival of the fittest," where the powerful, with the support of money, exploit the weak.

Another powerful structure is government, which had become much larger and stronger. The government today holds corporate structures and power in its large bureaucracies. It is more difficult for Americans to participate in politics today. According to Sheldon Wolin (1989, p.103), one of the most important developments in America in the last thirty years has been "the steady erosion of faith in democratic values." In his view, the idea of democracy and the idea of a strong government are incompatible. Democracy, Wolin argues, implies involvement, shared power, and a significant equality, while state power implies the opposite of those things.

Participatory culture in politics has thus become increasingly disintegrated. Instead, American politics has fostered a culture of self-assertion. Large numbers of individuals and groups insist that they are entitled to certain benefits as a matter of right. Politics has become governed by people's wants rather than justice. As a result, politics has become more concerned with seeking compromise among competing individuals and groups. Bellah et al. (p.277) suggest that ideological fanaticism and political oppression have reached extremes unknown in previous U.S. history.

It is no wonder that more Americans today define success primarily by economic measures. Money is the most reliable thing to assure their freedom to help them pursue their personal wants. Only those who can purchase private

property can do what they want to do. After all, income and consumption are the only clearly defined standards for measuring success.

Setting rules or laws has been, traditionally, a rational and effective method to restrict people's actions in America. However, as people's actions are more divorced from a common commitment to the social good, it has become clearer that rules and laws are not sufficient for society to function. Governed by personal preference and consideration of individual profit, more Americans have come to think that something is ethical as long as it is legal. Michael Josephson (1989, p.17) refers to this mentality as "legal minimalism." Americans, he explains, look for the lowest common standard of ethics, and "approach life and laws as if everything is the Internal Revenue code."

Willard Gaylin (1989, p.119) points out that American people tend to see everything in terms of "isolated I," which refers to only one's rights, pleasure and privilege. In the pursuit of individual liberties, Gaylin asserts, Americans have allowed a corruption of the public space:

There are areas that are not safe, and where that happens, there is no individual liberty. The people who are living in Harlem, who cannot go out to shop at night because of the crack addicts, are in a prison, and we've helped create the prison by ignoring what community means in this country (p.119).

Bellah et al. (p.150) convincingly point out the irony of American individualism today. They argue that Americans have obscured the ends and purposes of life by putting too much emphasis on the importance of individual wants and the rationality of means. The dominating focus of individualism is no longer an end in itself, but an "instrument for the attainment of private life style." The intrinsic value of the work itself is lost in this situation. It also deprives private life of intrinsic meaning when involvement with others is only for personal satisfaction.

Many Americans seem to understand that the emphasis on the individual, in which public values are sacrificed in favor of private values, is not beneficial in the long run to a democratic society. They are developing a desire to reconnect themselves with others to make their lives more worthwhile. However, as Bellah (1989, p.279) states, Americans generally do not like to accept the

fact that they depend on a lot of people. They cannot accept the emphasis of society over the individual, because it implies the sacrifice of individual freedom, or the subordination of the individual to a group. This may be the biggest dilemma for Americans today.

## Conclusion

Americans have fostered and maintained a myth that America is a land of opportunity where they can individually make progress. They have ever been forward-facing, and individualism has ever been at the core of American culture. In the course of history, America has endured some major social changes. In spite of those changes, Americans have never abandoned their emphasis on self-reliance and their belief in the dignity of the individual.

It is important to note that American progress has been mainly concerned with the external expansion associated with the idea of the geographical frontier. As the American ethos has been cultivated in a tradition shaped by an open frontier, Americans have been prone to have difficulty accepting the concept of limits. As their individualism has grown to excess, it has brought American individuals a widespread sense of uneasiness, insecurity, isolation, and alienation. Thus, it is clear that American individualism is at an impasse.

The question is how Americans today can transform their self-interested motives into public commitment by giving interrelatedness a positive moral meaning. In the sequel to this paper, I will attempt to consider how this question can be dealt with by examining possible roles of Buddhism in American society.

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