

## **Some Reflections on a Relational World View**

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### **Introduction**

In “The Promise of Mediation”,<sup>2</sup> the authors, Robert Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger, discuss, and ultimately advocate, a new organising framework for (western) society, referred to as the “Relational” world view. The purpose of this article is to explore the Relational vision, primarily through a comparison with the prevailing paradigm of Individualism. In particular, the article will examine how our behaviour as social actors might alter if we were to adopt the Relational perspective in place of the Individualist model.

### **The Individualist world view**

A necessary precursor to considering the Relational world view is to understand the philosophy that has motivated western society for (at least) the past hundred years, namely, Individualism.<sup>3</sup>

As the title implies, Individualism dictates that the single most important goal of human existence is individual satisfaction. Accordingly, the governing value for all of society’s institutions (political, legal, economic and social) is individual autonomy. In essence, this is because satisfaction is subjectively defined and thus each individual must be free to pursue what is required to satisfy them (with the rider that in doing so, they do not infringe upon the aspirations of others). So, for example, we see a legal system based on individual rights, a democratically elected parliament (voting being an exercise in individual autonomy), and economic principles designed to maximise individual rather than collective welfare.

A natural corollary of valuing individual satisfaction and therefore, individual autonomy, is competition – for most resources are finite (especially those that are of more general appeal). We compete for tangible assets like money and property, as well as intangibles such as power, authority and reputation. In essence, competition is encouraged, and our institutions are founded upon it. Thus we prohibit monopolies in commerce, we have an adversarial system for enforcing legal rights, and we restrict tertiary education via a complex (and highly competitive) grading system.

It is not difficult to see how Individualism has shaped our institutions, yet perhaps less obvious is the impact that it has had on people as social actors. That is, what effect does a rather esoteric philosophy actually have upon the way that we behave in our everyday interactions with others, be they our colleagues, business counterparts, family or friends?

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<sup>1</sup> Published in (1999) 2(7) *ADR Bulletin* 63.

<sup>2</sup> R.A.B. Bush and J. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict through Empowerment and Recognition* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes referred to as Liberal Individualism and commonly associated with the writing of J.S. Mill.

While the answer will necessarily vary from person to person, there are two generalisations that might be made:

- Individualism causes us to regard ourselves as essentially separate from each other,<sup>4</sup> and thus we tend to behave in a self-interested manner; and
- as Individualism promotes competition, we tend to regard others with suspicion.

Let's consider each of these in more detail.

In relation to the issue of self-interest, this impacts upon our behaviour in a number of ways. For example, when we form relationships with others, it is generally for selfish purposes. I foster a relationship with you because I believe that you can give me what I want; at the same time, I tend to neglect relationships that do not seem to be able to meet my needs. Further, because we regard ourselves as separate from each other, we make decisions based on what is best for us (in some cases, that may extend to 'and our family'), and we action them without necessarily considering their effect on others.<sup>5</sup> We are not motivated by a sense of community - we would not behave in a manner detrimental to our individual selves for the benefit of society generally. Put simply, we are each primarily concerned for self, not other.

The second general pattern of behaviour that Individualism promotes is distrust. This is an inevitable consequence of the fact that we believe that we are competing with others for limited resources, and that like us, others are motivated by self-interest. Accordingly, to ensure that we do not 'lose out' (that we maximise our own individual resource accumulation), we are cautious in what we disclose to others, and we are generally suspicious and distrustful of those with whom we deal.

It is important to recognise that this self-interested and suspicious behaviour is legitimate because of the pervasive effect of Individualism upon western society. This is not to suggest that such behaviour is instinctive (although some may argue that it is), but rather that it is accepted, because it is prevalent, and because we see it reflected in all of our society's structures.

What are some examples then of how Individualism influences our day to day behaviour? Consider the fact that many of us drive our cars to work, generally without passengers. We do so because it is convenient (and thus brings individual satisfaction) notwithstanding that our actions negatively impact upon the environment and thus others in the world. Likewise, we buy products that are made in Indonesia or China because they are cheap, without contemplating that in doing so, we are supporting 'sweat shop' labour conditions. Further,

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<sup>4</sup> I am not suggesting that we never form a connection to others; rather, that we tend to view ourselves as separate from the rest of humanity and thus without responsibility for the collective. This can be contrasted with tribal societies in which each member acts pursuant to the communal good, even if doing so results in individual detriment.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, we can always find examples of individuals who do not fit this stereotype – those who work tirelessly for the common good, without concern for their own needs or wants. The point intended by the text is simply that we generally act to promote (what we perceive as) our own best interests, unconcerned by the interests of others.

when we deal with someone and are left feeling dissatisfied, we immediately attribute blame for our dissatisfaction to them, without reflecting on our own role in the interaction.

While many of us proceed in this individualistic way without pause for reflection, others of us at times feel uncomfortable with our self-interested behaviour. Perhaps it was the deal that you did for your client that resulted in the closure of its main competitor, or when you refused to let that car in at the lights, or when you told your child that you wouldn't play with them because you wanted to relax, or on any other occasion when you were solely motivated by self-interest, that you experienced a pang of guilt or regret. Or perhaps you have experienced disappointment at the self-interested or suspicious behaviour of others on occasion.

This raises an interesting question, namely, why do we sometimes feel less than satisfied with behaviour that is a natural (and predictable) product of Individualism? Indeed, it seems ironic that we could feel disappointed when others behave in a manner entirely congruent with a philosophy that we ourselves adhere to.

Bush and Folger suggest that the reason for this discomfort or dissatisfaction is essentially that people have an inherent need to recognise, and demonstrate compassion toward others (and have that reciprocated in others' treatment of them) and that this need is unfulfilled when we operate in accordance with an Individualist philosophy. They go further and state that we can only recognise our full potential as humans when we adopt (and allow ourselves to be influenced by) a Relational world view. So let's now consider what that vision for society is and further, what impact it is likely to have upon our behaviour.

### **The Relational world view**

Under the Relational world view, the single most important goal of human effort is 'transformation' (compared with individual satisfaction). The authors explain transformation as moral growth, primarily achieved through our interaction with others.

Bush and Folger believe that all relationships, personal or commercial, provide an opportunity for individual moral enhancement. Relationships are no longer conceived of as vehicles for maximising individual satisfaction, but rather, they are the means through which we realise our highest 'goodness' (this might be read as our highest human potential). And we do so by demonstrating what the authors refer to as 'compassionate strength'.

By 'compassionate strength', Bush and Folger mean that we should be motivated by both self-interest *and* concern for others, and that our behaviour should reflect a balance of strength of self and compassion. Of course, implicit in this is the assumption that humans have the capacity to exercise compassion and self-interest – an assumption that is easily tested if we consider our behaviour in the context of family or close friends. Most of us have no difficulty demonstrating compassion to those that we have an intimate connection

with, and, at the same time, we are generally able to assert our own needs and desires (sometimes quite forcefully) with those people.<sup>6</sup>

Under a Relational world view, our compassion would extend to all with whom we interact. We would show our work colleagues, our commercial competitors,<sup>7</sup> our negotiation counterparts, and indeed, everyone with whom we deal (personally and professionally) the same concern and respect that we demonstrate in our more intimate relationships.

It is important to recognise that Bush and Folger are not advocating an abandonment of self-interest in favour of complete selflessness. Just as extreme selfishness impedes our ability to reach our highest human potential, so too does self-abandonment. Rather, what the Relational vision suggests is striking a balance between these two extremes of human behaviour; exercising compassionate strength. And, it is when we achieve that balance that we will experience the moral growth that, according to Bush and Folger, is the ultimate purpose of human interaction.

### **The shift to a Relational paradigm**

Accepting that there is an alternative philosophy, at least in a conceptual sense, it is relevant to ask whether the Relational world view is likely to be realised. Put differently, is it conceivable that we would ever abandon Individualism at a societal level (especially as it appears so entrenched)? While we might be able to imagine ourselves acting in a more balanced (more compassionate) manner towards others, will our institutions ever change?

Bush and Folger suggest that we are already beginning to move away from Individualism as an organising framework at an institutional level, toward a more Relational vision for society. By way of example, they point to the changes evident in our legal system, in particular the recent shift away from litigation as a means of resolving disputes, toward more conciliatory or collaborative processes such as mediation.

We can identify a further example in the corporate sphere, namely the demise of the hierarchical structure of management and the trend towards increased collaboration between management and employees (as well as amongst employees). Moreover, the fact that venerable academic institutions such as Harvard University are dedicated to the development and practice of theories like principled negotiation<sup>8</sup> suggests that Individualism is losing credibility and that we are moving towards a Relational vision for society.

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<sup>6</sup> Again, we can probably all think of an exception – a relationship that we have with one friend or relative in which we find it difficult to be assertive. However, as a generalisation, it is fair to say that we all have the capacity to demonstrate both compassion and self-interest, albeit perhaps at different times to different people.

<sup>7</sup> There is a certain irony to using the term ‘competitor’ in this context. If the Relational world view were adopted, we would not perceive others as being in competition with us – we would have a much more collaborative perspective on commerce (and indeed, on all other aspects of modern life).

<sup>8</sup> Although prescriptions like ‘separate the person from the problem’ and ‘focus on interests not positions’ are applicable when negotiators are acting out of self-interest alone, the relationships that ensue are inherently fragile and transient. The distrust that invariably attends strategic behaviour significantly undermines the power of these best practice guidelines.

## **Conclusion**

We agree with Bush and Folger that a paradigm shift is under-way, and perhaps more importantly, that it is necessary and desirable. We also believe that we are presently in transition. While we may have begun to alter our behaviour in accordance with a more compassionate and balanced view of the world (at an institutional, if not individual level), in order to complete the shift, we must be prepared to fundamentally alter the assumptions that we have about our role in the world and those with whom we share it.