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BOB DOPPELT: Don't confuse freedom with selfishness

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Not long ago, I dragged myself out of bed early for a 5 a.m. interview on a live Chicago drive-time radio show. I enjoy talking with people with strongly held views, but this exchange was awful.

Whenever I spoke, the host interrupted and then ranted on proclaiming that selfishness and greed were the only driving forces of the world. As he sounded off, I kicked myself for losing sleep for this spectacle.

Afterwards, while downing some caffeine, I thought about what the shout-radio personality had said. He claimed it was not possible for humans to consider or minimize the consequences of their behavior on other people or the natural environment, whether those actions are driving a car or using energy-intensive electronic equipment.

He also believed that even trying to consider the effects of our behavior on others or the planet's natural systems might lead to constraints on behavior, and thus limit individual freedom.

The radio host is wrong on both counts. He is confusing self-centeredness with freedom. Consequently, he is promoting ideas that are making all of us, and all future generations, much less free.

Extreme individualism dominates our society. Today's overriding cultural narrative is that a self-focused emphasis on "me first" — on always trying to get what we want for ourselves, when we want it — is not only natural, it is admirable. Many economists, politicians and corporate executives tell us that if we all aggressively pursue our own interests, everything magically will work out for the best.

But a little self-reflection and ample experience show this line of thinking to be both incorrect and harmful.

We all know how our selfish acts can affect family members: They might feel used or abused. If the pattern continues, our relationships can shatter.

Most of us realize this, so we constrain our egocentric and aggressive urges all the time and magnify our equally innate caring and cooperative traits. Rather than feeling robbed, that leads to loving give-and-take and family relations that provide great happiness.

Too often, we fail to realize that these same dynamics play out in our community, the economy and the natural environment.

When we think only about our own wants and ignore those of our neighbors — whether it be mining a hillside surrounded by homes or short-changing customers — anger and resentment grow, reducing the well-being of the entire community. When banks and insurance companies maximized their self-interest without considering the effects on the larger economic system in 2008, the entire economy suffered, and millions became poorer and jobless.

The United States has burned fossil fuels aggressively to power the economy without concern for the effects on the Earth's climate system. The more frequent and intense heat waves, flooding, windstorms, droughts and wildfires that have resulted threaten everyone's safety, health and financial well-being.

Indeed, the belief in freedom without restraint in the service of self-centered greed and aggression is eroding the ecological basis of life, increasing fear and suffering worldwide, and reducing everyone's options for the future.

Albert Einstein once said that humans live in a sort of optical illusion. We are created and sustained by the Earth's ecological and social systems, yet we imagine that we exist independently from them.

The belief in extreme individualism is a natural extension of this illusion. Its roots go back to philosophies that emerged 300 years ago in reaction to the authoritarian control of feudal kings, landlords and the church, and the concept has been embellished many times since.

The conditions that led to that notion faded long ago. It is time to update our thinking and adopt cultural narratives that help us cope with today's reality.

When the concept of extreme individualism first took root, for example, only about 1 billion people inhabited the planet. Today, the world is packed with more than 7 billion humans. Three hundred years ago, it took days or weeks for news to travel any great distance. Now, huge sums of information travel worldwide almost instantly.

Three centuries ago, most environmental problems were localized. Today, human-induced climate disruption and ocean acidification affect the entire planet.

True freedom is freedom from the control of outdated ideas that cause us to live and act on autopilot.

If we really want to protect our freedom, we must rise above the rants of the radio host and realize that in today's interdependent, overcrowded, over-consumed, over-heating and extensively interconnected world, an exclusive focus on our own self-interests harms others — and ultimately ourselves.

To resolve today's pressing problems we must strive always to meet our needs by considering and caring for the larger "we" that make our lives possible and worthwhile: other people, here and abroad, and the Earth's climate and ecological systems.

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