



Examining Obama's Idea of "Fundamental Transformation"

Since he has been elected President, commentators on the right have debated amongst themselves as to what Barack Obama honestly expects to gain from his policies. One school of thought, represented by the likes of Rush Limbaugh, swears that the President seeks nothing more or less than the destruction of America. The other school, of which Michael Medved is a key representative, insists that Obama has nothing but the best interests of the country at heart — however misplaced his mind on this matter may be.



From which of these two positions should we choose?

Obama himself gave us more than a few hints regarding the correct answer to this question. Setting aside everything else we know about him, we need only turn our attention back to the presidential campaign of 2008 when then-[Senator Obama proudly pledged to "fundamentally transform" America](#) in the event of his election.

Even though a transformation involves *change*, it is a mistake to identify it with change as such. Still, to comprehend the nature of a transformation, we must begin our inquiry with an examination of the concept of change. Fortunately for our sake, we have a millennia-old philosophical tradition at our disposal, a tradition which stems back 2,600 years to classical Greece and which helped define Western civilization.

From its inception, the themes of *change* and *permanence* have more or less determined the character of Western philosophy. For this, we have the "pre-Socratic" philosophers to thank. [Parmenides](#), for example, thought that change must be an illusion, for change is identity-extinguishing. This reasoning is sound. Think about it: We know that two things are *two things* and not the same thing because each possesses properties that the other lacks. But whatever thing changes has properties at one moment that it lacks the next. If change were real, then, we wouldn't be able to identify anything. Yet we can identify things. Thus, change must be an illusion.

[Heraclitus](#), in contrast, argued for just the opposite position: It is permanence that is illusory; change is the only reality. We witness change all around us. However, in spite of his disagreement with Parmenides over the nature of reality, what proves that Heraclitus shared his belief that change precludes identity is his famous declaration, "one cannot step in the same river twice!"

These early partisans of permanence and change, respectively, deserve gratitude for getting this conversation underway. Yet, thankfully, the conception of identity as *exact sameness* underlying their conflict has been revisited — and rejected — by subsequent generations of thinkers. The most plausible candidate for identity, one that resonates with our "common sense" intuitions, conceives identity in terms of *continuity*. In this view, something is the same thing at one moment as it is at the next, not if it



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never endures change, but if the changes that it undergoes are continuous with one another and, hence, capable of being assimilated.

It is important to note that this conception of identity excludes radical or *transformative* change. The person I am today bears few similarities to the person I was as a two-year-old, but the fact of the matter remains that I *am* the same person. That is, I can justifiably point to the picture of the two-year-old on the mantle and claim: “That is I when I was a baby.” Although the cumulative effect of the countless changes I have undergone over the span of my life have produced a 39-year-old with characteristics dramatically different from those possessed by the two-year-old I once was, these changes have been *gradual* and *continuous* with one another.

If, however, all of my memories, my very history, were suddenly to be eliminated and replaced by the experiences of another, *then* I would be “fundamentally transformed” into that other. This, though, is but another way of saying that the person I have always been would cease to exist. To put it even more starkly, the “fundamental transformation” of anything is simply — and literally — its *death*.

So, paradoxically, “fundamental transformation” is beyond change altogether. Change is experienced in *the process of dying*, it is true, but since *the dead* experience *nothing*, the event of death can’t be said to be a change at all, for there no longer is a subject to suffer the change. In other words, *transforming* consists of radical change(s) but *the transformation* is beyond change.

Anyone with any doubts on this score should ask himself how his wife would respond if he expressed his wish to fundamentally transform her. The answer to this question is obvious. Most spouses, at least those in moderately successful marriages, recognize the need to make some changes in themselves. But the desire to fundamentally transform one’s spouse is nothing other than the desire for a new spouse.

With these considerations in mind, it should now be clear that President Obama does indeed wish to destroy America. It isn’t that he longs for destruction for its own sake. His aim is to destroy the country that we have inherited and to forge from its ashes a new America of his leftist imagination. No doubt Obama genuinely believes that this new America in which material resources are more “equitably” distributed among racial and other groups is morally superior to the status quo. He no doubt believes that we will all be better off for it.

However, while he may be devoid of malice, our President’s promise to fundamentally transform our country is the promise to replace it with another.



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