

# The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

---

Volume 15  
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2022*

Article 6

---

January 2022

## A Leadership Role: Creating an Ethics of Diversity

Joseph P. Hester  
southcline@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl>



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hester, Joseph P. (2022) "A Leadership Role: Creating an Ethics of Diversity," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22543/0733.151.1386>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol15/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

# A LEADERSHIP ROLE: CREATING AN ETHICS OF DIVERSITY

---

— Joseph P. Hester, Independent Writer

## Introduction

The release of the 2020 national census confirmed much of what we already suspected — Americans are not only racially and culturally diverse, they are becoming more so. For the first time, there was no growth in the “white” population as it has decreased 8.6% since 2010 while Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians showed substantial growth.<sup>1</sup> The political ramifications of these changes are unpredictable, but one can surmise many nervous debates will take place about how these changes will influence political agendas in years to come. Let’s not make the mistake of assuming we’re referencing demographic diversity only. A broader view calls attention to the assortment of values obscured by one’s genetic, social, political, or religious affiliations. One cannot speak about this wide array of diversity without referencing the multiplicity of values housed within cultural as well as demographic variations.

To be sure, the demographic composition of an area does not tell the whole story. Patterns in voter registration and voter turnout vary widely by race and ethnicity, with White adults historically more likely to be registered to vote and to turn out to vote than other racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, every presidential election brings its own unique set of circumstances, from the personal characteristics of the candidates, to the economy, to historic events such as a global pandemic. Still, understanding the changing racial and ethnic composition in key states helps to provide clues for how political winds may shift over time.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/2020/09/23/the-changing-racial-and-ethnic-composition-of-the-u-s-electorate/>

In 2021 political actions were already occurring relating to these changes as new laws focusing on voting rights restrictions were being debated. The purpose by some (extreme conservatives) is to limit access to voting by minorities and/or non-white voters. They are also claiming that democrats are initiating a form of “replacement theory,” warning that the democrats’ policy is to replace America’s indigenous European — e.g., white population by non-European immigrants. To counter, democrats in the House passed the *John Lewis Act*

strengthening the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and making it more difficult for states to restrict voting access. Obviously, there is a great deal of racial prejudice in America, something the more conservative politicians are utilizing to their advantage. The

According to democratic theorist, Paul Fairfield, one of democracy’s salient features is “the desire to stand to other persons in a relation of fundamental *moral equality*, where ostensible moral differences between persons (or indeed between nations and cultures) are decisively rejected and persons in general stand to one another as equals.” Fairfield also claims that another feature of democracy is the peaceful and regular transformation within a constitutional order. Both statements imply that the existence of peace must be present for an effective democracy to exist.

— Virginia R. Benson (6/19/2020) “Changes in the meaning of individualism and democracy in America.” *American Woman’s History Journey*

values gap between America’s two political parties seems an unbridgeable divide calling attention to the distinction between *individualism* and *collectivism*, two ideologies that are sometimes veiled in their prognostications.

At local and state levels, where values often clash, both parties are searching for votes. Here is where the impact of the census will have the greatest effect and where politicians on both sides of this ideological divide will exert their influence. For example, the 2020 census reveals Illinois will lose a seat in congress. Illinois professor Dr. Kent Redfield said now state leaders will begin an intense legal battle over how state legislative districts should be drawn, pointing out with Democrats in control, they will not have much difficulty making sure it is a Republican that loses their district.<sup>2</sup>

“I can tell you it’s a partisan map. Absolutely no question,” Redfield said, “This is the democrats being extremely partisan, but there’s no reason to believe the republicans wouldn’t be extremely partisan if they had control of the map.” Hidden among this political disarray, for good or bad, are various viewpoints, principles, and beliefs reflecting deep-seated and diverse values continuously shaping American life. Although most Americans are inclined to vote along party lines, an often habitual proclivity, there is enough demographic variation in the voting public to cause some concern among leaders of both political parties.

The significance of American diversity has become a reality – socially, religiously, politically, and historically. At stake is democracy itself, at least democracy conceived as a moral ideal. Inconceivably, many seemed to be caught unawares and failed either to recognize or effectively judge this importance of the energy gathered by the events of January 6, 2021. From these political fissures and values obfuscations, we have learned the harsh lesson of taking others for granted, of assuming that “we” Americans are mostly alike in sharing common values, outlooks, and beliefs, and that we all have a similar interpretation of individual freedom and liberty, of what it means to be an American. As we have seen, for some this has proven to be a naive judgment. Even those who support democratic values have failed to articulate – in a language all can understand – what it means to be an American.

## Individualism and Collectivism

Two socio-political forces have converged – individualism and collectivism – straining our interpretation of “democracy.” Discussed in academic literature for decades, these two forces have emerged as generic appellations requiring closer inspection as they more often than not are used in to designate particular values and/or values orientations. But here we have to be careful, for over-generalizing about these concepts can lead to faulty judgment and misunderstanding.

*It may seem to you, as it does to me, that these conceptions of individualism and collectivism each have their attractions, and each contain some level of truth. Both are ultimately concerned with the well-being of all people, even if they might seem to start from a different end of the spectrum in deciding where the foundation of values should be (with the individual, or with the group). Both focus on human rights. So why are people so divided in their views on this matter, at least as presented in the mainstream media and by political parties?*

— Any Cools, The myth of the divide between individualism and collectivism.  
<https://ordinaryphilosophy.com/2014/04/16/the-myth-of-the-divide-between-individualism-and-collectivism/>

### **Individualism**

American individualism is a recognized foundation supportive of democratic freedoms. The Hoover Institute reminds us:

*Individualism has been the primary force of American civilization for three centuries. It is our sort of individualism that has supplied the motivation of America’s political, economic, and spiritual institutions in all these years. It has proved its ability to develop its institutions with the changing*

*scene. Our very form of government is the product of the individualism of our people, the demand for an equal opportunity, for a fair chance.*

*The primary safeguard of American individualism is an understanding of it; of faith that it is the most precious possession of American civilization, and a willingness courageously to test every process of national life upon the touchstone of this basic social premise. Development of the human institutions and of science and of industry have been long chains of trial and error. Our public relations to them and to other phases of our national life can be advanced in no other way than by a willingness to experiment in the remedy of our social faults. The failures and unsolved problems of economic and social life can be corrected; they can be solved within our social theme and under no other system. The solution is a matter of will to find solution; of a sense of duty as well as of a sense of right and citizenship. No one who buys “bootleg” whiskey can complain of gunmen and hoodlumism.<sup>3</sup>*

Historically significant, but perhaps overstated by the Hoover Institute, *individualism* has from the beginning been a keystone value in American life, contemptuous of conformity and undergirded by the belief that all values, rights, and duties originate in the individual moral consciousness. Noticeably, individualism has been intensified by heated protests and an abundance of incoherent and loud rhetoric. We have seen this in politicians and in groups such as “white supremacists,” including self-identified members of the alt-right, neo-Confederates, neo-fascists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and various right-wing militias. To oversimplify and put these groups in the individualist camp is questionable for, as we have witnessed, individualism often morphs into conformity, is influenced by insecurity gathering itself into large groups, and can culminate in mob violence and undemocratic actions by elected leaders. Consequently, asserting one’s individual rights might just be a mask hiding other deep-seated values, even doubts about one’s beliefs and values.

Sociologists call this by various names: “groupthink,” “groupshift,” and “deindividuation.” Thus, not only a surface anomaly, but lying within the psychology of the individual — both liberal and conservative — individualism and collectivism are difficult to separate seeming to overlap and incrementally coalesce over particular issues. Over-stated generalizations are common by those who agree or disagree with either, but their generalized “Goodglizations” often miss the salient features of their fluctuating interconnections.

### ***Collectivism***

Collectivism goes by various names, but generally is used to designate those who see value in group behavior; one being democracy. This is often expressed by *communitarians*— those advocating recognition of common moral values, collective responsibility, and the social importance of the family unit. That’s the bright side, but it could be a collective effort to push negative anti-democratic values as well. Robert Bellah and his co-authors<sup>4</sup> represent communitarianism, but upon a careful reading, we discover Bellah et al. overstating the obvious and neglecting the convergence of individualism and collectivism in certain significant ways. They say,

*What prevents Americans from making improvement is our long and abiding allegiance to ‘individualism’ — the belief that ‘the good society’ is one in which individuals are left free to pursue their private satisfactions independently of others, a pattern of thinking*

*that emphasizes individual achievement and self-fulfillment rather than the common purpose and public spirit.*

This requires some unpacking as the radical individualism to which Bellah et al. respond is not the way American democracy generally works. There are times when radical individualism raises its head and is negative and amoral, but when the dust settles, we find different sides getting on with the business of governing and accommodating differing views. Of course, we Americans don't view democracy from the same cultural prism as we often over-generalize about "individualism" and "collectivism" depending on our personal commitments to either. Both represent a moving and changing target, difficult to define and even more difficult to assess as democracy is often interpreted from differing perspectives. Also, either may represent the other negatively; that seems a bit of human nature. Strawman arguments inflate their differences and more often than not deceptive and designed to catch our attention. So, care must be taken and we should hesitate jumping to conclusions.

Perspective is provided by ThoughtCo as it explains the convergence of individual rights and collective action in the formation of the United States Constitution:

*Individual rights are those considered so essential that they warrant specific statutory protection from interference. While the U.S. Constitution, for example, divides and restricts the powers of the federal and state governments to check their own and each other's power, it also expressly ensures and protects certain rights and liberties of individuals from government interference. Most of these rights, such as the First Amendment's prohibition of government actions that limit the freedom of speech and the Second Amendment's protection of the right to keep and bear arms, are enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Other individual rights, however, are established throughout the Constitution, such as the right to trial by jury in Article III and the Sixth Amendment, and the Due Process of Law Clause found in the post-Civil War Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>5</sup>*

## **Value Convergence**

Value convergence reveals the struggle between these two foundational ideologies, with each counteracting the other from time to time and neither one always becoming the dominant American philosophy. Collectivism is the practice of prioritizing group cohesion over individual pursuits, whereas, individualism focuses on human independence and freedom. Although protecting the rights and liberties of the individual has been the ultimate aim of morality and politics, the collectivists have been responsive to others by seeking what is best for the group, family, church, nation, etc. through community actions and in local, state, and national initiatives.

America seems to have set its feet in both streams not willing to give up either while partially embracing both. Here we can find value — giving various viewpoints their due and a rationale for the checks and balances built into our representative form of governance.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, we live in a "both/and" world requiring communication, understanding, and accommodation of different points of view — that is, dialogic civility.

A way to move forward may be to give greater commitment to personal as well as interpersonal needs and obligations with the understanding that *there is no sharp dividing line* between individualism and collectivism. In fact, individualism is not only reliant on collectivism, but is a by-product of it — provided by collective agreements locally and

nationally. But, for some change is difficult as we see and hear what we wish to see and hear while neglecting the obvious: by collective agreement we are permitted to protest and express our individual opinions. As many are clamoring about their “individual rights” these days, perhaps we need to reconsider what it means “to have an individual right in a collectivist, democratic society.”

## Reconsiderations

A watershed moment in the history of human rights discussions came in 1971 when Judith Jarvis Thomson’s “A Defense of Abortion” was published in the first issue of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Mulling over Thomson’s queries is a moment to pause and reassess our own views about rights, rules, and obligations. William Parent, who edited Thomson’s “Essays in Moral Philosophy” comments,

*She [Thomson] finds herself confronted again and again, in connection with one issue after another, with the question: what is it to have a right – whether the right to life, or any other right? What shows we have such rights as we take ourselves to have? What is the moral significance of a person’s having a right? What do we owe to those whose rights we infringe, or risk infringing, if we act in this or that way?*<sup>7</sup>

Comprising universal questions in the history of human rights and in moral philosophy, Thomson’s queries are both plaguing and disturbing. Today, health professionals, educators,

*...civility is ultimately a reminder that life is best lived with concern for self, others, and sensitive implementation with the historical moment, while consistently reminding us that our communicative actions have public consequences that shape the communicative lives of many people.*

— Arnett, R. C. and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age*. Albany, NY: SUNNY Press, 1999

and ordinary folks are claiming their right not to get vaccinated for the Covid-19 virus and many are claiming their *individual* right not to wear masks, and many are appealing to principles of human rights and freedom of choice. Many also believe the Presidential mask-wearing mandate in September 2021 was dictatorial; an act of fascism. Because the moral connection between freedom of

choice and human rights is imprecise, Thomson’s questions should be given serious consideration.

So, like Thomson, it’s fair to ask, “What is it to have a right anyway?” That is, do we possess the rights we claim to have due to our humanity and living within a democratic nation, are they sacred as many others allege them to be, or are these rights conveyed on us due to our citizenship and provided by negotiation and compromise and embodied in law? We can bend the ear of utilitarian thinking for answers or even seek prayerful guidance, but we know there are no simple and easy answers; yet, as rational beings, we are disposed to discuss them anyway, openly and in a civil manner.

As 2021 rolls into 2022, the meaning of “democracy,” itself a moral postulate, is being called into question and redefined by some with a narrower, individualistic view, while others are seeking to widen its scope. “Democracy” seems to have become a malleable idea twisting in the wind of political power and sub-cultural (ideological) interpretations, while being used to reinforce and justify a variety of issues and policies. Maybe this is democracy’s strength as Constitutional safeguards have kept the diverse factions making up our political pallet from moving to too far left or right. On the other hand, this may reveal an

inherent weakness as it allows some to grab power and control and assert their intentions over others. Cecil Hook notes,

*If all citizens were fully informed and totally unselfish, most any form of government would work well. But therein lies the weakness of any form of government, even true democracy or representative democracy. Elected officials may grasp for power to control, and individuals or tiny minority groups may selfishly limit the privileges of the general population.*<sup>8</sup>

We should never underestimate the power of greed and unabashed individualism or even small power-groups (consider what is happening in Texas over abortion rights) in the making of and enforcement of law. Even members of the Supreme Court are susceptible to weighted ideologies finding wiggle room to maneuver around Constitutional law. Voting must be available to all adult citizens as voting just may be our most sacred right; after all, voting is a values-sorting-out process and potentially a values-equalizer.

Understandably, productive societies and nations need structure and ethical consistency, but also needed are patience, time and space where people can think, even transcend their individuality and become one with each other. This will not be easy; it never is. Passion often moves against commonsense, so reason, commitment and sacrifice are required, even putting aside many of our differences and re-orientating ourselves to a higher purpose than self-aggrandizement. Undergirding this purpose is a *moral impulse, pragmatic and definitive of democratic purposes*; destroy this impulse and democracy disappears.

Unlike our Enlightenment forefathers, we acknowledge that the values definitive of democracy are NOT axiomatic (by “axiomatic” is meant they require no justification; they are self-evident), rather they are contingent, personally and culturally, requiring rational judgment and consideration and even reconsideration. In itself, this causes some uncertainty in the American heartland for there are many who use the idea of “inalienable rights” to support whatever actions suit their beliefs, purposes, or, as it were, political agendas. Consequently, although fermented culturally, within the moral consciousness, the public affirmation of moral rights, like legal rights, requires reason and good judgment; sentiment alone or even religious beliefs are an unstable platform on which to rely.

## **The Blurred Edges of Moral Thinking**

Our values, even democracy as a moral value, were exposed in 2021. Complicating this exposure is the divide between those with an extreme individualistic value-set narrowing the meaning of “democracy,” and others expressing a more inclusive democratic philosophy. Actually, “democracy” is a collectivist doctrine supportive of human — individual — rights. Also, with this exposure came a contraction in moral thinking. Many began attacking the moral foundations of democracy and pointing to *America's demographic diversity as a central problem*. White nationalists of different sorts, along with Christian Evangelicals, led this condemnation. Getting at the heart of some of this is difficult as our moral thinking has been blurred by a narrow-mindedness definitive of evangelical fundamentalism, along with a distortion of the ethical dimensions of democracy itself.

Often, and this is difficult to admit, there are those amongst us who are morally astute but who lack the courage of their convictions and fail to speak up to friends, church members, and community groups when the foundations of democracy were attacked. Just maybe, the democracy we once knew and prized is sinking into a worm hole of failed convictions and

spineless affirmations. Here, we are tracking along the blurred edges of morals and ethics, even democracy, replete with suppositions, conjectures, and philosophical commentary. Many who gather in groups to discuss democracy's future are ill-prepared to do so as their short-sighted vision of democracy and the responsibilities it brings have roots no deeper than the topsoil of their beliefs and inclinations, or their desire for power and control. The path ahead of us is unclear, but commitment to democracy as a moral ideal pushes us forward.

The *assumption* is made that we are well served, both practically and morally, by living in demographically diverse communities whose members have values, skills, and priorities that are often different from our own but are beneficial to our communities. And although there are some who would belie this observation, the fact is that American diversity has been a source of strength and inspiration for minorities within its borders and many others around the world. This will again be tested in coming months as many Afghan refugees are being located in communities across America and more and more immigrants are breaching our southern border.

Not all agree with this assumption as it is within the messy arena of human living and political discourse where the blurred edges of morality, rights, and justifications are exposed and where clarification is needed. Understandably, not all values are "moral values." Some are issue-specific and personal; others social; and still others are defined constitutionally.

**Political polarization is the defining feature of early 21<sup>st</sup> century American politics, both among the public and elected officials. As part of a year-long study of polarization, the Pew Research Center has conducted the largest political survey in its history – a poll of more than 10,000 adults between January and March of this year. It finds that Republicans and Democrats are further apart ideologically than at any point in recent history. Growing numbers of Republicans and Democrats express highly negative views of the opposing party. And to a considerable degree, polarization is reflected in the personal lives and lifestyles of those on both the right and left.**

**<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/7-things-to-know-about-polarization-in-america/>**

Consider the following example:

What is or is not a moral right is difficult to decipher. For example, in September 2015 a Justice of the Peace in Kentucky refused to grant wedding licenses to gay couples citing her religious beliefs that gay marriage is wrong or sinful.<sup>9</sup> She did this despite the fact the United States Supreme Court and the Kentucky courts legalized such unions. She was incarcerated for contempt of court and later released. In her mind, gay marriage was immoral, but we're talking about what is and is not legal. The judge violated the couples' legal rights.<sup>10</sup> We assume we have a right to pursue activities that are legal. It seems as if the blurred edges of law and morals remain convoluted, at least in this case.

Justice and human rights are deeply connected; it's difficult to speak of one without referencing the other and more so about infringing rather than violating one's rights. Understanding this connection is important for communal living. We live in a nation of laws and the United States Constitution defines human rights in terms of law. We acknowledge that laws are not absolute as many are changed from time to time through political argument, debate, and Constitutional amendment. Laws are and remain a pragmatic answer to the adjudication of human differences and exist to regulate societal living.

It is honest to ask, "Do moral principles fluctuate and change through such legal maneuvering?" The Justice of the Peace in Kentucky doesn't believe they do. Many



objecting to getting the Covid-19 vaccination agree, but with one caveat — they believe their moral rights are personal, individual, and sacred and supersede all other rights, communal or legal. Another warning, because we are a nation of laws, *we tend to believe that our moral rights and values are reflected in political debate and litigation only*. This is not the way it has always been nor is it the way it is today.

This example demonstrates that *moral values are often embedded within the other values we prize* and are tightly entangled within our beliefs, even our diversity. And as we have experienced, many unexposed assumptions tint our lives with personal preferences making impartial judgments unachievable.<sup>11</sup> Inside and outside of America, an “ethic of diversity” considers all as significant and worthy of respect, viewing “humanity as community.” Consequently, it’s important to comprehend the moral principles upon which our laws rest. This can be difficult because unbridled freedom — unchecked and unconstrained by law and commonsense — has diminished the moral surplus created by democratic inclusion.

## Searching for Authenticity

During the past year we have come face to face with the reality that among Americans values differ, many widely, and total agreement or unanimity is conceivably impossible. No one is exempt from this problem as it haunts family and friends, workplaces, schools, and centers of worship. Certainly, the foundations of democracy have been challenged and its purposes complicated as many are beginning to rethink issues that threaten our core

### 10 Key Recommendations for Corporate Governance:

1. Understand and explore the diversity of thought and experience on the board
2. Ensure that the company’s push for diversity and inclusion is a strategic and commercial imperative for the organisation
3. Look critically at the culture in the boardroom
4. Review nomination and succession planning processes for all board and executive committee appointments
5. Look critically at the individual roles assigned to board members
6. Learn from the experience of improving gender balance and learn from the experience of other sectors
7. Understand the company’s stakeholders. Actively listen and respond to them
8. Communicate aims and milestones internally and externally
9. Learn from a more challenging board evaluation
10. Recognize inequalities and racism as systemic risks to the economy and see diversity and inclusion as an opportunity for long-term change

— Deborah Gilshan, “The Ethics of Diversity,”  
*Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance*,  
Wednesday, February 3, 2021

principles and values.<sup>12</sup> Within our burdened values diversity maybe all that’s achievable is to *acquiesce*; accepting reluctantly that total accord about democratic values has never been and will never be attainable. As early as 1989, philosopher Charles Taylor<sup>13</sup> mentioned this dilemma as “problems leaking into our time,” but I would suggest these problems and issues have been with us since the founding of our nation. Taylor identified these as cultural and social hindrances such as *narcissitic individualism, subjectivism, and relativism* saying they are formidable impediments diminishing the meaning and impact of democracy and rendering ethics as transactional or negotiable.

Some years later, in 1991, when writing about “authenticity” in ethics, Taylor made a case for “ethical authenticity” with the following caveat: *ethics is*

*authentically moral if and only if one’s ethic* (1) seeks a moral horizon stretching beyond personal concerns and goals, (2) pursues moral inclusiveness, and (3) is freely entered into as a collective effort.<sup>14</sup> All three of Taylor’s requirements require our attention for generally, they are definitive of the point of view of morality comprising a theoretical foundation for

democracy itself. From this perspective, and speaking ideally, any personal claim to be moral or supporting democracy as a moral ideal is nothing but an empty jester *if it fails to meet* these three criteria.

Gathering our thoughts, Taylor's words express a *moral ideal* definitive of not only a "moral democracy," but an *ethics of diversity*. Embodied in this ideal is acknowledging there can be conflicting moral views in a democratic society, many worthy of our attention and some deserving of respect requiring re-consideration. Allowing a variety of views and opinions to be openly expressed and considered, a moral democracy is built on belief and insight tempered by dialogic civility.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, among those expressing democratic beliefs, many remain unconvinced saying there are limits to how much tolerance and respect can be granted to views considered anti-democratic or even amoral. This is a major problem *leaking into democracy* often shattering the ceiling of effective communication and civil dialogue. Recognizing the reality of this dialogical vacillation, Gilbert Harmon reasons,

*At some point long ago, people first became aware of moral diversity. They discovered that members of different cultures often have very different beliefs about right and wrong and often act quite differently on their beliefs. This discovery of differences soon suggested to some thinkers that there can be no single absolute truth about morality and that what is right or wrong must always be what is right or wrong in relation to one morality or another... . Moral relativism denies that one of these moral frameworks can be singled out as the true morality.*<sup>16</sup>

Making an argument for *ethical or moral relativism*, given the facticity of values diversity, seems a nature inclination, but turning to force (political pressure or violence) and backroom negotiations or even gerrymandering as means of asserting our policies and values seem to loosen the ties that make our values special, ethical, and sacred. When this happens, values become transactional and negotiable, and beset with a pragmatic philosophy only, and as Taylor pointed out, *resisting the claim to be inalienable and authentically moral*. One can't have it both ways.

Implied by ethical relativism is that we ought to be free to pursue our own dreams and live by our own values *even if they are inconsistent* with what is thought of by the majority as ethical. This raises a problem: If ethical relativism is accepted as a moral prescription, pragmatic and utilitarian, it avoids the difficulty of seeking collective values and a common moral ethic; it claims none are available nor can be found. Among other things, this means there is no basis for judging behavior as right or wrong or a foundation in law, religion, or commonsense for creating such a starting point.

Many accept ethical relativism as normal and routine, a fact of life (resulting in making ethical relativism axiomatic; that is, requiring no justification) seldom understanding its moral or even practical ramifications. They either don't understand its implications or just don't care, living by the maxim "What we don't know can't hurt us." Although remaining ignorant or uninformed about something doesn't exempt us from responsibilities to it.

On the other hand, although anthropologists and sociologists have established the *facticity of cultural values variations*, *this in no ways implies* that ethics is or *should be* relative, transactional, and negotiable. Amelia Oksenberg Rorty explains,

*We are well served, both practically and morally, by ethical diversity, by living in a community whose members have values and priorities that are, at a habit-forming,*

*action-guiding level, often different from our own. Of course, unchecked ethical diversity can lead to disaster, to chaos and conflict. We attempt to avoid or mitigate such conflict by articulating general moral and political principles, and developing the virtues of acting on those principles. But as far as leading a good life – the life that best suits what is best in us – goes, it is not essential that we agree on the interpretations of those common principles, or that we are committed to them, by some general act of the will. What matters is that they form our habits and institutions, so that we succeed in cooperating practically, to promote the state of affairs that realizes what we each prize. People of different ethical orientations can – and need to – cooperate fruitfully in practical life while having different interpretations and justifications of general moral or procedural principles. Indeed, at least some principles are best left ambiguous, and some crucial moral and ethical conflicts are best understood, and best arbitrated, as failures of practical cooperation rather than as disagreements about the truth of certain general propositions or theories.<sup>17</sup>*

## Understanding, Tolerance, & Acceptance

When America was founded, moral law was thought of as natural – laws bestowed by Nature’s God.<sup>18</sup> Our founders considered this to be a universal belief (idea, concept) that could unite the diversity making up the American population. Even today, evangelicals remain strident in the belief that America is in the hands of “their God.” Philosophically, divine providence was

*The first step in the evolution of ethics is a sense of solidarity with other human beings.*

—Albert Schweitzer, Reverence for Life

a means of counteracting ethical relativism, but its limitations and belief-orientation should be noted. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, natural law was applied to land-owning white males only, while females and people of color were excluded.

Natural laws were believed to be those to which everyone has access through their individual conscience and by which actual laws in particular times and places might be judged. This idea has some grounding in religion as God is thought of as the giver of our humanity through creation – a natural as well as metaphysical event. This also seems to be the belief lying behind the claim to the sacredness and absoluteness of personal rights by those who attacked our nation’s Capitol on January 6, 2021 and by some who have refused to comply with guidelines recommending the Covid-19 vaccination.

Often *neglected in the principle of natural rights* are its universal assumptions; that is, morality is not generated from human differences, but from *what we share in common*. Jefferson seems to have gotten this right. This view does not rule out our respecting human diversity or individuality, but acknowledges morality as being built up from our common needs and capacities, joys and pains, and our ability to think, reason, and learn from each other. This is essential and flows naturally from our participation in families, groups, schools, and other kinds of joint activities. This view also supports the value of character and virtue in human relationships acknowledging the convergence of individualism and collectivism in our social activities.

Confusion abounds as our communities have become splintered and remain so amidst heated discussions and views about all of this. Actually, the polarization of our values is nothing new. A model, produced by Vicky Chuqiao Yang, a complexity postdoctoral fellow from the Santa Fe Institute and a team of researchers from Northwestern University and UCLA may have some answers for us. They discovered that “...in recent years both the

Democrats and Republicans have been moving away from the center and narrowing their views. This has left a large number of moderate voters in the middle but many of them have still been voting. Yang's new model accounts for this by including a concept known as 'satisficing' where people vote for a candidate that is 'good enough' rather than the most qualified. The result is a large number of voters in the middle are continuing to vote but are not happy with either candidate."<sup>19</sup> Hardly satisfying, this is where politics is today. Of course, this is not only a political issue as businesses and industries – with a diminished labor force – are having to cope with a growing diversity and constantly self-reflecting and adjusting ('satisficing') their own values-orientation to present-day realities.

*Understanding* is a mental, sometimes emotional process of comprehension, assimilation of knowledge, which is subjective by its nature. Ideally *tolerance* is a fair, objective, and, as Jefferson Fish says, a "permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one's own." In a nutshell, tolerance is freedom from bigotry. "*Acceptance*," says Fish, "is a person's assent to the reality of a situation, recognizing a process or condition (often a negative or uncomfortable situation) without attempting to change it, protest, or exit."

Among some, there is confusion between demographic diversity and values diversity. It is not always true that an ethnic minority in a community or workplace will have different values from the majority or that all in an ethnic group share the same values; this is a false assumption. This befuddlement continues to produce uncomfortable working relationships within businesses and factories, schools and professional offices, as well as in churches and community gatherings. *Diversity conceived as a value*, like much in our moral thinking, has been blurred, perhaps fractured by over-worked clichés and demeaning generalizations causing dissimilar and unclear thinking about our ethical responsibilities. Grey areas are common, but this is not acceptable to those seeking stability and commonality within their communities and places of work. Nor is it acceptable to many Evangelicals who proclaim an unquestioning absolutism regarding their values. In order to promote effective communication, we must continually resist the tendency to reduce values to a few principles or behaviors we personally believe are important and/or correct. A much broader and inclusive perspective is required.

To repair these fissures will take some time including a willingness to understand, tolerate, and accommodate differences of opinion about community values and even the purposes of the "American dream or promise." This is a *normative conclusion* unacceptable to many, especially to the single-minded who say, "You're either with me or against me." This phrase underscores the value-polarization in our communities and is usually "issue" orientation. Specifically, this is meant to force and intimidate those unaligned to either side to become allies of one side or the other or lose favor. But history demonstrates there is no "clear-cut other" as many fail to comprehend the values undergirding the issues being flailed about. Yet, ironically, values convergence is a reality as our diversity testifies.

Dialogic civility pursues the path of weighing and sorting out, blending and accommodating various value orientations. Michael Tomasky noticed this when he wrote, "What we've seen in our time – starting in the 1960s over civil rights, then accelerating in the succeeding decades over social issues and immigration – is what I call the great ideological sorting out of the two parties."<sup>20</sup> But this extrication has been anything but peaceful, clear cut, and effortless.

Political chaos just may be definitive of our time. At its heart lies a values chaos based on an unwillingness to listen to and understand others whom we find different, distasteful, and unlikeable. Issues such as abortion and voter rights draw us into groups, but understanding the values on one side or the other definitive of these issues is not always clear. While facing large historic transitions, we have indeed been placed in the fulcrum of change, violent reactions, and moral agnosia. And although our moral roots may have been separated from their traditional moorings, we cannot remain alienated from the fabric of our culture – the social norms of our societies, as well as the beliefs, arts, laws, and customs definitive of who we are, including our moral sensibilities. These may represent the flotsam and jetsam lying on the floors of Congress, in backroom caucuses, or in state houses and in back rooms in cities and towns across America, but the survival of democracy depends on their resurrection and our ability to breathe new life into them as we decide what is essential to our democratic way of life and what is not.

Without generalizing too much about either ethics or politics, it might be better to focus on how the moral imagination functions in crisis, in a world where, as Wallace Stevens once said, reality has become violent and the imagination is obliged to summon a form of violence in resistance.<sup>21</sup> For the moralist, the pressures of this reality is *a disturbance or violence within* (moral and ideological) as reactions are mounted to resist the physical violence that has occurred and is threatening to reoccur. We can only stress the value of *tolerance and understanding* as our moral sensibilities take on added importance and are hopefully not stretched beyond repair.

### **The Choice is Ours**

Jefferson Fish says, “Here is the problem. It is possible to tolerate or accept someone without understanding him or her, and the same goes for tolerating or accepting a different culture. And the converse is also true. It is possible to understand a culture or a person without acceptance, or even tolerance.” With these insights, Fish adds a *normative quality* to understanding:

*Tolerance and/or acceptance are desirable, but they are not a substitute for understanding. They are relevant for getting along with others in the world (though understanding helps), but understanding is essential!*<sup>22</sup>

As we have experienced, many Americans are neither tolerant nor are they accepting of people of color, ethnicities other than their own, gender differences, or, in general, those who differ with their political and or religious views. Unabashed prejudice and unclear ideologies characterize this intolerance and unaccepting attitude. Likewise, there are those who *claim to be more liberal and open-minded* and even more tolerant than most, but, like their adversaries, make little effort to understand those with opposing views, repeatedly casting them aside as being uneducated, narrow-minded, and prejudice. It seems that the “values divide” as widened and people are wondering who or what will step into this rift to ultimately define “American Democracy.”

Almost twenty years ago, John White <sup>23</sup> explored the increasingly dominant role values play in today's public and private life and his insights are as apropos today as they were in 2002. White argued that while politically important, the present “values divide” goes much deeper than cultural conflicts between Republicans and Democrats. He pointed out how citizens are reexamining their own intimate values – including how they work, live, and interact with

each other — while the nation’s population is rapidly changing. White says the answers to these value questions have remade both American politics and the popular culture. Democracy as a moral value has clearly been allowing us to see not only what divides but what unites, and that the choice is ours, White says.

*The easy way out of this dilemma* is to give in to the dictates of ethical relativism reducing ethics and morality to political maneuvering and power politics, threatening and intimidating, with the understanding that “might makes it right”— a violence without.<sup>24</sup> Understandably this is not the credo of a moral democratic republic — but one of despotism and tyranny — although recent events would have us to believe it’s true.

There is hope, for looking back, history testifies to the hope for values-reconciliation. Although we are a nation of immigrants with diverse beliefs and cultures, we have discovered certain democratic and social values we share with each other. Our immigrant forefathers held tightly to their beliefs and values as immigrants do today. In time they became unified as Americans recognizing their common values and

As a “normative ideal,” multiculturalism “...endorses an ideal in which members of minority groups can maintain their distinctive collective identities and practices. In the case of immigrants, proponents emphasize that multiculturalism is compatible with, not opposed to, the integration of immigrants into society; multiculturalism policies provide fairer terms of integration for immigrants.”

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>

common needs, especially the value of freedom and order, equality and respect. America’s path has not been easy. Protests, and demonstrations, violence and war are a part of our history. So have been greed, deception, and unethical practices in businesses and industries. Uncovering definitive collective values in our time could be a way of uniting Americans in a common social order. But this will require time and patience from both sides of the ideological divide, including a willingness to put power politics aside and begin a new chapter in American history shaped by reason and active listening.

Every so often we forget about the power of the human spirit — the moral consciousness — to unite and heal our personal and collective relationships, to assist with reconciling our differences. We sometimes forget about the struggles and wars of the past uniting Americans with a common purpose and helping to identify the shared values that set us in a democratic direction. These events underscore the myth of the irreconcilable divide between individualism and collectivism. There is an undeniable moral thread woven into American democracy which can be a positive force as we attempt to reconcile our relationships and

*Self-absorption in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compassion. When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection - or compassionate action.*

—Daniel Goleman, *Social intelligence: The new science of human relationships* (New York: Bantam; Reprint edition, July 31, 2007)

rapport with those with whom we often disagree. But I am neither optimistic nor delusional; indeed, reconciliation just may be a pipe dream out of reach and impractical. Disagreements about primary principles can tear a society apart, plunging it into internal physical violence or something much like a civil war. From the civil rights struggles of the 1960s to today we have witnessed bits and pieces

of this and know of its divisive and violent nature.

## The Struggle of Living Together

The struggle of working and living together and of finding a common ethic remains a persistent moral task; more so is the commitment to Constitutional principles and laws. We are an evolving diversity requiring mental and emotional adjustments, social order, and even tweaking our values from time to time as accommodation can be a reconciling and healing antidote to violence and turmoil. Social and moral sensitivity are prerequisites to this therapeutic process.

So, as a nation, we are challenged to become a more open society taking in the values, traditions, and cultures of others and learning from them. This can be positive and doesn't denigrate traditional American values, but adds to them gathering in the moral surplus of others. In this opening, all sides of the democratic divide need some breathing room — American needs to relax and take a deep breath and then reconsider who it is and what it is to become. "Openness" doesn't mean "acceptance" or "agreement with"; rather, from a moral point of view, it engenders a willingness to listen, understand, and explore mutual values that can unite rather than divide people. Some don't want this; they have a desire to keep those who are different out of America and, in America, to push aside those who differ with their views by limiting their community voices. They wish to build a wall and close the doors to those whom they disdain. Actually, walls already exist, but they are more mental and social than they are physical. Wall-builders represent what is called "a closed society" in which their understanding of law, morality, religion, and/or democracy is unchanging, narrow, and static.

Like a closed mind, closed societies are problematic because they are supportive of two fallacies: <sup>25</sup>

*The Privacy Fallacy* occurs when we think the values and beliefs we use in public discourse cannot be openly and critically discussed by all stake-holders. We assume that because matters of conscience are private in the sense of being unforced and unlegislated, they are also private in the sense of a personal preference. This belief is accompanied with thinking our values are "sacred" because they arise in the moral consciousness.

*The Liberty Fallacy* claims we're free to believe anything we desire to believe without any consequences. This is thought of as an unalienable right. There is an inner connection here to the *Privacy Fallacy* — we are free to believe because belief arises within the moral consciousness. There is a deep-seated religious connection between these two fallacies, both connected to the idea that within each person there resides a "moral soul" created by God which supersedes being responsible to man-made laws.

Most Americans are touched by both of these fallacies, even the most open-minded and liberal among us. Yielding to the pull of over-heated individualism and our own perceived freedom, we hesitate; curtailing our collective inclinations not wanting to infringe on or violate the values of others even if we think they are expressing anti-democratic beliefs and opinions. Freedom of speech is a sacred value that runs deep within American culture. The conflict between individualism and collectivism is in reality a struggle in the minds and hearts of Americans about the values they believe they cannot live without. These they accept as "true," "ultimate," and "unquestionable" and therein is the problem even dialogic civility can't resolve.

## **Roadblocks**

The above *attitudinal fallacies* work against us, preventing understanding and tolerance, even accepting the fact of our diversity; especially when underscored with the idea that “my values are a priority and your values – well, maybe – are not.” This is the view of radical egoism; a relativism proven to be socially destructive because it denies the dignity and integrity of others, including their rights and freedoms. Radical egoists have a tendency to believe all people are like them, self-centered, looking out for their personal interests and values only. They also claim that the world and our lives will be better off if we all look after our own interests and let others look after their interests. This is an attitude which maintains that we should always act to promote our self-designed goals and viewpoints. This ethic recommends self-centered behaviors – “Me first, you second, maybe not at all” – as the best way to survive in a values-diverse world claiming such behaviors will, in time, promote industry and the creative arts, social cohesion, and education – *The Rising Tide Lifts All the Boats*.

This idea as appeared in various forms in American politics, most notably in President Reagan’s “trickle down” economic theory and the aphorism “a rising tide lifts all boats” is associated with the idea that improvements in the general economy will benefit all participants in that economy. The phrase is commonly attributed to John F. Kennedy who used it in a 1963 speech to combat criticisms that a dam project he was inaugurating was a pork barrel project. Actually, according to Kennedy’s speechwriter Ted Sorensen, the phrase was not one of his or the president’s own fashioning. It was in his first year working for Kennedy (during JFK’s tenure in the Senate), when Mr. Sorensen was trying to tackle economic problems in New England, that he happened upon the phrase. He writes that he noticed that “the regional chamber of commerce, the New England Council, had a thoughtful slogan: ‘A rising tide lifts all the boats.’” From then on, JFK would borrow the slogan often. Sorensen highlights this as an example of quotes mistakenly attributed to President Kennedy.<sup>26</sup> Actually, the phrase and its use outdate Kennedy as noted by the 1920 slogan of *The American Gas Monthly*.<sup>27</sup>

### **“The Rising Tide Lifts All the Boats.”**

**When the tide of public opinion swells through recognition of service well performed, all our boats will be lifted.**

This cliché seems not only rational, but an item of commonsense, a hallmark of modern-day capitalism, pragmatism and liberal democracy. Yet, is this the way the world really works? The answer is “yes” and “no.” What about those who are unable to help themselves, the poor and misfortunate? Do we have a moral obligation to these misfortunate people? To label our helping these individuals as “socialistic” and “anti-capitalistic” is a stretch, nothing but a political ploy to disparage the poor and misfortunate as an excuse for neglecting our moral responsibilities to them while denying our own benevolent feelings; however, it’s also a way of defining our political affiliations.

Of course, it’s true that among the rich and middle class, as well as among the misfortunate in our society, there are those who have taken advantage of this ideal and worked their way into positions of leadership where they can influence law-making for their own personal benefit. This we can’t deny but, at the same time, we cannot let this deter our efforts from lending a hand to those who truly need assistance. After all, democracy is not only a guiding political principle, but a moral ideal. We can ask, as did President Obama, “Am I my



brother's keeper?" "Am I my sister's keeper?" If we believe democracy is a guiding moral principle, the answer to both questions is "Yes." Woven into the tapestry of American democracy is a moral philosophy we cannot let die.

But ethical relativism keeps us at bay. There is something about it appealing to our individuality and our freedom of conscience. Maybe it's the idea (if we accept it as normative) that all beliefs and points of view are equally valid and have a right to be heard. This seems to appeal to our innate sense of equality and freedom of speech built into our democratic DNA, but this can also curtail our ability to reason and adapt, critique and restrain those who seek to destroy our collective values, even democracy itself.

Some<sup>28</sup> claim ethical relativism is true, that there are no common standards or measures for morality. Others<sup>29</sup> argue that *the choice between competing theories is arbitrary, since there is no such thing as objective truth*. Steven Pinker<sup>30</sup> responds by explaining that if we accept ethical relativism we have no grounds to criticize or punish others no matter how barbaric their behaviors because "we have our kind of morality and they have theirs." Pinker says, "And the whole enterprise seems to be dragging us to an amoral *nihilism*" (the belief that traditional morals, ideas, beliefs, etc. have no worth or value). In a weird sense this would make morality an emotive jester with no rational foundation. Given this conclusion, ethics loses both its salience and substance and becomes a world of empty promises and impractical choices making force (political or violent) the only option.

While butting our heads against radical individualism, *against egoism and relativism*, we perhaps reach a dead-end in moral discourse, but let's not rush to judgment. Ethical egoism claims that a person ought to perform some action *if and only if*, and because, performing that action maximizes his/her self-interest. Egoists are correct in saying taking care of self-interests and even personal health, family, one's education and vocation are important; no one can deny this. We can't survive in our competitive world without developing survival

The Markkula Center defines ethical relativism as . . .

The theory that holds that morality is relative to the norms of one's culture. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced. The same action may be morally right in one society but be morally wrong in another. For the ethical relativist, there are no universal moral standards -- standards that can be universally applied to all peoples at all times. The only moral standards against which a society's practices can be judged are its own. If ethical relativism is correct, there can be no common framework for resolving moral disputes or for reaching agreement on ethical matters among members of different societies.

<https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/ethical-relativism/>

John Gray, reflecting on the insights of Marc Hauser, comments: [Hauser] accepts the prevailing view that moral behavior is fundamentally about conforming to principles, but argues that this view attaches too much importance to conscious processes of reasoning. Just because we reason from explicit principles — handed down from parents, teachers, lawyers, judges, or religious leaders—to judgments of right and wrong doesn't mean that these principles are the source of our moral decisions. On the contrary, Hauser argues that moral judgments are mediated by an unconscious process, a hidden moral grammar that evaluates the causes and consequences of our own and others' actions.

—Gray, John (2007). Are we born moral? Accessed from <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/05/10/are-we-born-moral/>. See also, Marc Hauser (2006) *Moral minds: How nature designed our universal sense of right and wrong*. New York: Ecco (1<sup>st</sup> edition).

skills, positive work habits, and cognitive abilities. Self-preservation is innate and can't be shucked off so easily. Out of a sense of self-interest and personal responsibility we take care

of that which is important to us. Admittedly, we sometimes act selfishly, neglecting to care for others, taking credit for the work of others, or making excuses for our own misgivings. We sometimes lift ourselves above others and complain when others do not cater to our wishes. Most of us are to some extent selfish and in other ways reasonably ethical. Human nature is unpredictable and flexible, sometimes uplifting and other times destructive, and often bedevils those searching for absolute surety in ethics.

Admitting this, we understand what the relativists are saying: we are passionate about some things and many times neglect other things that are important to others. Some say, “It all depends on time, place, and circumstances.” We hold to personal values and hope others will agree or that accommodations and compromises can be made along the way. We often play the reciprocity game — I’ll do something for you if and only if you do something for me that I think important. But compromising our moral values can lead us onto some untenable paths leaving us on morally shaky ground.<sup>31</sup>

Yes, we are all different and the world is not just like you or me. This fact disturbs many, but *over-generalizing about others* often stands in the way of moral understanding — so does a sense of satisfaction about our personal values without giving attention to their particularities and varieties. America’s greatness has been built on the backs of national diversity, so, some leeway and understanding needs to be given to individual differences as these are sources of creativity and innovation, arguably the foundation of invention and discovery. We are not all alike and never will be; we are unique and individualistic, but this doesn’t deny the importance of seeking common moral values. According to the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, “Such differences may lead us to question whether there are any universal moral principles or whether morality is merely a matter of ‘cultural taste,’ relative, and individualistic.”<sup>32</sup>

So we can ask, “Does individualism *beg the question* of our common humanity?” Perhaps it’s just a matter of attitude, of what we wish to accentuate — our common humanity or our differences. At the extreme edge of individualism is the claim there is nothing absolutely right or wrong; it’s up to the individual to determine “his” or “her” right and wrong. After all, our morals have evolved over a period of time allowing us to adjust ethically as knowledge

*The heat of the dispute between Left and Right has grown so fierce in the last decade that the habits of civilized discourse have suffered a scorching. Antagonists seem no longer to listen to one another (p. 18).*

– Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 1987

and technology change. Those who survive are those who adjust to changing circumstances. This also implies we actually don’t have a solid foundation for our moral sentiments<sup>33</sup> — that morality is anchored in the shifting sands of time and culture, in

opinion and custom.

Some of this is true, but the implication that there are no foundations for morals and ethics defies history and commonsense, including the development of rational judgment, reaching as far back as Plato and Aristotle. We have built families, organizations, and governments on recognized moral principles with the understanding there is something about *our common humanity* that is morally foundational. Without this understanding we are left with no common ethic, as Robert Reich<sup>34</sup> comments,

*Without a set of common moral assumptions, we would have no way of identifying or categorizing problems and possible solutions.*

This does not imply the standardization of morality, the death of individualism, or that there are real differences in our values. We are tasked with responsibly identifying ethical principles with collective importance that can unify humanity and consistently guide our behavior and decision-making. These principles should be realistic, not asking more than is conceivably possible, and flexible — able to adapt to changing situations without losing their moral acumen. They should also be based on a sense of human dignity and integrity. Rabbi Irwin Kula adds:

*At the same time, we must be careful not to simply say that since everything is partially true, nothing really matters, as if there aren't standards of right or wrong. Yes, in every view there is a partial truth. But not every view is equally true. There are standards of right and wrong, gradations of truth. I've heard so many people use the phrase 'This is my truth' or 'that's your truth' as a way to defuse conflict and stifle discussion. This relativism is just lazy absolutism. It makes the claim that in effect we each have our own absolute truth, and so anything goes; why fight the fight? This spineless and limp relativism is as frustrating as hostile know-it-all absolutism. Both halt the search for truth.<sup>35</sup>*

## **An Ethics of Diversity**

We live in a democratic nation that influences the political and economic welfare of not only us but many other nations as well. We claim to be a “moral democracy” and to this many adhere. Therefore, understanding personal and national values is both common sense and necessary. Without this sensitivity ethical behaviors will be buried in a *radical individualism* that has no awareness of other people’s feelings and needs, and will be neither tolerant nor forgiving. Perhaps we are experiencing this today? Extending our compassion to others doesn’t mean giving up what we believe is of value. It does mean collaboration, seeking common values that unite rather than divide, and viewing others, like ourselves, as humanly important. It also demonstrates a willingness to listen and support those in need as these are the attitudes and behaviors upon which an ethics of diversity is based.

## **Moral Balance is Needed**

Ethical diversity reflects the different values and beliefs people hold and adhere to. An open discussion is needed where there is as much or *more listening* as there is talking when seeking understanding and accommodation. And we should acknowledge when we apply our values publically and freely, we release them to *the assessment of others*. Consequently, as we voluntarily use our beliefs and values in the public forum to support our views, the behaviors we recommend require public scrutiny and reconsideration. These behaviors are the scaffolding upon which objectivity and impartiality are built.

*One approach to an ethics of diversity for healthcare professionals is a call for intimate listening to the stories of those who are different, who may be unseen, marginalized, and excluded in our health care systems...Therefore, this ethics column focuses on exploring diversity from an ethical perspective and how intimate listening can help us to move through our worlds of differences and thus grow, understand, and care.*

— Sorrell, J. (August, 2003). Ethics Column: The Ethics of Diversity: A Call for Intimate Listening in Thin Places. *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, Vol. [www.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/ANAMarketplace/ANAPeriodicals/OJIN/Columns/Ethics/EthicsofDiversity.aspx](http://www.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/ANAMarketplace/ANAPeriodicals/OJIN/Columns/Ethics/EthicsofDiversity.aspx)

Yet, admittedly, objectivity about our values is difficult to achieve as many are still heard claiming “I have my rights,” no matter what these so-called “rights” happen to be. This

seems morally cold and isolated, and perhaps insulated by adherence to what is believed to be a dominant cultural ideology. Implied by this notion is the rights of others don't count. But we don't live on an island and life is not a reality show. Rather, we live together, in community, always rubbing against each other, where rights and freedoms are adjudicated by commonsense and in law, and where dialogue and reason are guided by civility, or at least should be.

Amelia Oksenberg Rorty has pointed out that an ethic of diversity asks that we be objective and impartial, but these are difficult attitudes to maintain as values have become politicized, twisted, and colored by opinions that divide rather than unite people. It remains important we come to terms with the questions, "Who am I?" – our individualism – and "Who are we?" – our collectivism. Self-identify as well as community and national identity are important in a diverse and values confused world. Corporations, churches, community groups, and each of us as "moral agents" are asked to take the lead in these discussions in order to create a values-based culture and a moral identity supportive of the notion that "humanity is community." As Emerson so aptly said, "We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity."<sup>36</sup> Even so, the beliefs we hold and the decisions we make can become tainted, bending truth to our wishes and coercing a response from others. To this we need to give our attention. Surely, even a surface understanding of democracy and the diversity it embraces reveals our vital connections with others.

## Who Will We Become?

Understandably, all societies have core values they call the "common good." When promoting civility where individuals and nations recognize their shared values, *we are tasked* with acknowledging the core values of others. *This is difficult* as understanding those who invaded our nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021 were violent, nasty, and brutish. Yet, those who value democracy and dialogic civility are asked to listen as well as speak demonstrating their respect and integrity as they address issues affecting our nation and its burdened democracy. This carries the weight of not only personal and social civility, but of collective morality.

Are we not required morally and democratically to seek a balance that enhances the lives of

*By promoting our own good unimpeded by legal or self-imposed moral constraints to protect the welfare of others, would be the most efficient means of advancing the good of all persons — the common good.*

— Smith, Adam (1776/1950). *An inquiry into the nature of causes of the wealth of nations*. London: Methuen (6<sup>th</sup> ed).

others, all others, to seek *moral homeostasis* conceived as a valid life force, personally and collectively?<sup>37</sup> Jean Paul Sartre<sup>38</sup> made it clear, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world; he is responsible for everything he does. It is

up to you to give [life] a meaning," he said. This is our challenge and responsibility. We are forever connected to each other and our decisions expose the imprint of our mores (ethos) and common humanity. Within the context of this understanding, we are free to choose and in choosing *we are deciding who we will become*, what kind of life we will lead, and, especially, how we will relate to others, above all "in the eyes of the least favored" or "to those treated the most unjustly."

Without apologizing, an ethic of diversity tries to avoid the extreme view of coercing values into a preconceived shape. This seems to have become an unwanted consequence of what

is known as “political correctness,” and for many its demands have strained the meaning of an ethics of diversity. Our values may never mirror each other. Life would be boring if we were all alike; *but there is moral and cultural surplus lying within our diversity that needs harvesting in the collectivity of our national goals and our common humanity.* In being moral, we are only asked to share our principles openly and seek collective values for the benefit of all—the franchised and disenfranchised — regardless of ethnicity, religious belief, or gender. For example, a Muslim, Jew, and Christian may never totally agree on the foundation of their faith, but moral prescriptions are discovered in all three that can unite them in brotherly love.<sup>39</sup> This many have sought and others have ignored or rejected. Such discovery requires intellectual as well as moral effort and the willingness to communicate freely with others.

But none of this is automatic; it takes commitment and effort, honesty and responsibility. It's extremely difficult to change course when our habits become entrenched, especially our mental and moral habits. Prejudice is found buried deeply within the unconscious mind and also with our intentional judgments. Our past habits and traditions have a binding effect and if unchecked, will harbor resentments and breed intolerance and discrimination. This is not only a fact about our past, but is a present reality to which attention should be given, or as Nietzsche said, *this will only be a dwelling on ugly truths in order to purge old lies.*<sup>40</sup> Politicians, local and national, as well as corporate and religious leaders, need to give this their attention. And we should not underestimate the vanity of ourselves or others. Again, Nietzsche has reminded us,

[Beneath] all the deceptive junk and gold dust of unconscious human vanity; that even beneath such flattering colors and cosmetics the frightening basic text *homo natura*, must be recognized for what it is.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Lawrence Hinman comments, “Our history is in many ways the history of diversity.”<sup>42</sup> How true this is, and this is America’s greatest strength, but dealing with diversity has been an inconsistent and rocky road, perhaps, to date, our greatest challenge and failure. Thus, its important individuals, businesses, and institutions give the idea of “an ethics of diversity” serious consideration. For many, an “ethics of diversity” will challenge established beliefs about democracy, faulty assumptions about others, as well as the pride we take in our individualism. Significant are the questions, “Who am I?” and “Who are we Americans?” An ethic of diversity converges on the belief: “We are a human community.” The moral significance of that phrase adds depth and meaning to not only American democracy,<sup>43</sup> but challenges our moral veracity as we reconsider our attitudes and actions toward the diversity that is us.

Most assuredly, our values have attached themselves to our lives almost unknowingly and, especially, uncritically. Perhaps this accounts for the inconsistent ranting we hear from both sides of the political aisle. We were born into an ongoing history, an ongoing values-orientation, created by time and social/political/religious attachments. Thus, situated within our personal and familial narratives are deeply held values lying within and beneath layers of social/political acculturation. To define and distinguish these values, moral or otherwise, from others will take time and require the courage to bring them to the table of critical reflection and dialogic interaction. Likewise, uncovering the layers of our personal histories and assessing their meaning and communal worth will be an arduous task.

Although we desire peace and tranquility, harmony and social stability, life can be harsh and brutish. We also acknowledge exploiting the values of others for self-aggrandizement negates their sacred personhood. And although we dance on the summit of individual rights and liberties conceding their personal and private nature, we need to understand democracy is built on a collectivity of like-minded people, on a foundation of dialogic civility, communal accountability, and a moral sensibility that is public and open to criticism and adjustments.

For sure there have been violent reactions to diversity, both diversity in our values and demographic diversity. Without overreacting this should become a starting point as well as a pinnacle for measuring self-worth. Over-reacting to the views of others is something we've seen enough of and now it's time to draw in our emotions and get down to the business of redefining ourselves by the diversity we are and making no apologies to those who believe they are the "true" Americans.

To be an American is and will always be an embryonic idea rebirthing itself in every generation of American life. And this we must accept as a clear and present reality for "diversity" will continually drive our values and challenge our moral worth. We dream of a perfect democracy, but perfection is not in our grasp. Perhaps conflict is the motor of history, but experience also teaches the power of generosity and cooperation, of trust, accommodation, tolerance, and understanding to bring order out of chaos and to shape, as Stephen Crane said, the "expression of human energy in life."<sup>44</sup>

---

## Endnotes

1. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/population-changes-nations-diversity.html>.
2. <https://www.kwqc.com/2021/05/26/illinois-democrats-release-proposed-redistrict-map-republicans-call-it-partisan/>.
3. <https://www.hoover.org/research/future-american-individualism>.
4. Bellah, Robert et al. (1991). *The Good Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
5. <https://www.thoughtco.com/individual-rights-definition-and-examples-5115456#:~:text=Common%20Individual%20Rights%201%20Religion%20and%20Belief.%20Most,...%204%20Rights%20of%20Speech%20and%20Expression.%20>
6. Turiel, Elliot (2002). *The Culture of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 168-169.
7. Thomson, Judith Jarvis (1986). *Rights, Restitution, & Risk, Essays in Moral Theory*. William Parent, editor. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
8. Hook, Cecil (2001). A Weakness of Democracy. [cecilhook.net/pdf/WeaknessofDemocracy.pdf](http://cecilhook.net/pdf/WeaknessofDemocracy.pdf).
9. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/supreme-court-denies-appeal-of-kentucky-clerk-who-refused-to-administer-gay-marriage-licenses/ar-BB19IUag>.
10. Infringement - an act that disregards an agreement or a right; "he claimed a violation of his rights under the Fifth Amendment." Violation. actus reus, wrongful conduct, misconduct, wrongdoing – activity that transgresses moral or civil law; "he denied any

wrongdoing”; to encroach upon in a way that violates law or the rights of another. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infringe>. I have difficulty separating “infringement” from “violation” pertaining to what is perceived as one’s rights. In the work of Judith J. Thomson mentioned above she tends to separate them, but this is drawing the moral line a bit too closely blurring its fine edges.

11. Hester, Joseph P. (2020). An explication of our collective moral consciousness. *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, Volume XIV | Issue II | Summer/Fall 2020.
12. Hester, Joseph P. (2010). *Blurred Edges: Seeking Moral Insight in a World of Values Diversity*. Unpublished manuscript.
13. Taylor, Charles (1989). *The Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
14. Taylor, Charles (1991). *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991). Harvard University Press; Reprint edition (August 6, 2018).
15. Arnett, Ronald C. (August 2001). Dialogic civility as pragmatic ethical praxis: an interpersonal metaphor for the public domain. *Communication Theory*, Volume 11 Issue 3.
16. Harmon, Gilbert (1988). *Moral Diversity as an Argument for Moral Relativism*. [www.princeton.edu/~harman/Papers/Moral\\_Diversity.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~harman/Papers/Moral_Diversity.pdf)
17. Rorty, Amelia Oksenberg (1992). *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Volume 9, Issue 2, Summer 1992. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 13 January 2009, pp. 38-62 Print publication: Summer 1992.
18. The concept of “Nature’s God” descends from an ancient Greek tradition and was passed along through history to men like Jefferson and Franklin. America’s founders intended to liberate us not just from one king but from the ghostly tyranny of supernatural religion. Drawing deeply on the study of European philosophy, Matthew Stewart brilliantly tracks the ancient, pagan, and continental ideas from which America’s revolutionaries drew their inspiration. In the writings of Spinoza, Lucretius, and other great philosophers, Stewart recovers the true meanings of “Nature’s God,” “the pursuit of happiness,” and the radical political theory with which the American experiment in self-government began. See: Stewart, Matthew, *Nature’s God: The heretical origins of the American republic*.
19. Anderson, Kevin (2020). This is the reason American values are so polarized. *Forbes*: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinanderton/2020/10/27/this-is-the-reason-american-politics-are-so-polarized-infographic/?sh=414a5af187b3>.
20. Tomasky, Michael (23 July 2021). “Political polarization is America’s normal – and there’s nothing new about it” | Opinion. <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/political-polarization-america-divide-20190207.html>.
21. Stevens, Wallace (1951). *The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words – The Necessary Angel*. New York: Knopf. See also, Jacqueline Brogan (2003). *The Violence Within / The Violence Without: Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
22. Fish, Jefferson (25 February 2014). Tolerance, acceptance, understanding. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/looking-in-the-cultural-mirror/201402/tolerance-acceptance-understanding>.

23. White, John (2002). *The values divide: American politics and culture in transition*, 1st Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press. See also: Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer (2020) *Fault lines: A history of the United States since 1974*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
24. Brogan, Jacqueline Vaught (2003). *The Violence Within / The Violence Without: Wallace Stevens and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Poetics*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
25. Dacey, A. (2008). *The Secular Conscience, Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*. Amherst, New York, NY: Prometheus Books.
26. <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/230520/origin-of-a-rising-tide-lifts-all-boats>.
27. *American Gas Association Monthly* (31 October 2015). Volume 2, Issues 4-12. Arkose Press.
28. Bernstein, Richard (1983). *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
29. Popper, Karl (2013). *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
30. Pinker, Steven (2008). *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. New York: Penguin Books.
31. Hester, Joseph P. (2018). Veiled Assumptions and the Failure of Ethical Conversation. *Humanities Bulletin*, 1 No. 2, 120-134. <https://www.journals.lapub.co.uk/index.php/HB> .
32. <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/ethical-relativism>
33. <http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/ethical-relativism-faq.htm>.
34. Reich, Robert (1987) *Tales of a new America* (New York: Random House).
35. Kula, Irwin (2006) *Yearnings*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
36. Emerson, R. W. (1903) *The complete works*. Cambridge, Mass: Riverside Press, Vol. 2, p. 60.
37. Hester, Joseph P. (2022) "Seeking Moral Homeostasis." Forthcoming: *Journal of Values Based Leadership* fall/winter 2021-22.
38. Sartre, Jean Paul (1948) from the lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism" translated by Philip Mairet (1948). <https://wmpeople.wm.edu/asset/index/cvance/sartre>.
39. Hester, Joseph P. (2003) *The Ten Commandments, a handbook of religious, legal, and social issues*. McFarland & Company. The introduction to this book compares and contrasts the ethics of the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
40. Nietzsche, F. (1955) *Beyond good and evil*. Chicago: Regnery, p. 160.
41. Ibid. p. 201.
42. Hinman, Lawrence (2005) *Contemporary ethical issues*. New York: Routledge.
43. Hester, Joseph P. (2018). Seeking Community in a Divided World, *Humanities Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 139-155.
44. Crane, Stephen (1976). *The Red Badge of Courage*. New York: Norton, p. 103.





### **About the Author**

**Joseph P. Hester** is an independent writer living in Claremont, North Carolina, and serves on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Values-based Leadership* and the Advisory Board for the *Humanities Bulletin*.

Dr. Hester can be reached at [southcline@gmail.com](mailto:southcline@gmail.com).