

July 2022

The Frayed Edges of Morals and Values: Seeking Balance in a World of Value 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) "The Frayed Edges of Morals and Values: Seeking Balance in a World of Value Diversity," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22543/1948-0733.1413>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol15/iss2/8>

This Editorial 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.

The Frayed Edges of Morals and Values

Seeking Balance in a World of Value Diversity

— JOSEPH P. HESTER, CLAREMONT, NC, USA

Many values and ethical ideas have played a role in shaping American society and the world, yet, identifying and ranking these values in importance remains a burden for many Americans, especially since there is considerable disagreement about the criteria of such a ranking. But, this morning, March 1, 2022, let there be no mistake: democracy is under attack in Ukraine and many European nations have awakened to this crisis, listening and uniting, and clearly focusing on the meaning and importance of freedom, liberty, and justice—the core principles of democracy. Significantly, democracy’s moral features are being accentuated as nations around the world are calling for a stop to Russia aggression.

Recognizably, many Americans are mentally exhausted and wish not to hear about Europe’s problems as during the past seven years democracy’s moral core has been continually bombarded from within and without. Discussions abound, lines have been drawn and sides taken. But, the former President’s failed coup in 2021 and now his words that only he could have stopped Russia’s aggression in Ukraine sound ridiculously silly and awkwardly narcissistic—history has proven to be much more complicated than this.

As we watch the unfolding of the attack on Ukraine, we who have lived through wars past are reminded of democracy’s vulnerability as it is a non-aggressive and value-based governing philosophy dependent on the will of the people not the military nor a dictator or a dictator-wannabe. To be sure, we have employed the military to defend democracy and may have to do so in the future due to men like Putin and would be autocrats like Donald Trump, but the salient feature of democracy is that it is supported by the will of the people supported by the right to vote. This is the basic expression of democratic freedom. Since December 7, 1941, at least, we understand that not all people or nations share our democratic principles, and that isolationism is no longer a viable option when democracy is under attack, here or anywhere else in the world.

Philosophically, the picture is more complex than many believe it to be. Ideologically—from a political, cultural, or even religious point of view—the nation we so fondly call “America” was in part a creation of the influence of Christian Europe and the development of scientific reasoning occurring during the 17th and 18th centuries. Generally speaking, there has always been an uneasy balance between science and religion, but as these two cultural forces were bumping into each other, the development of American democracy was taking shape. Over time, but not without turmoil and modifications, American democracy proved worthy of our efforts in building an exceptional nation and has spread, although unevenly, throughout the world.

In the 18th century, the great German thinker Immanuel Kant had no idea that the freedom and liberty, which he idealized, would soon take root in a new world, nor did he realize that ethics and morality, due to the scientific movement and his own sterile logic, would morph

into a secular modification — called pragmatism in the 19th century and utilitarianism in the 20th century — losing its bearings in human sentiment and the moral conscience. Dictated more by practical, commercial, and political concerns than human needs and value, the transformation of ethics and its variants, seemingly practical and innocuous, loosened ethics from its historical roots and ethics has never fully recovered.

In a sense, the Enlightenment had done its job but there was a cost as ethics and morality would eventually lose their moorings in human sentiment and the human conscience, and be defined more by rabid individualism, narcissism, and the actions of power brokers. The “will to power” seems to be its defining characteristic describing what Nietzsche may have believed to be the main driving force in human life and what Bertrand Russell called the fundamental concept in social science.” We see this today, and we don’t have to look far, in remarks by our former President and by two right-wing senators who seem obsessed with the Hitlerian philosophy of white supremacy. The will to power is also a driving force behind Putin’s aggressive behaviors. With no universally agreed upon foundation for ethics and the rise individualism — a me-first attitude that pollutes and demeans democratic principles — in our time, democracy seems to have lost its connection to the “moral conscience” and we to each other becoming just another negotiable commodity in our secularized and commercialized world.

And so, in America, as the public square fades into the void of the past, many remain insulated within their personal spheres of social media ambivalent about their nation’s future, about democracy’s future here or in Eastern Europe, and reluctant to converse with others about ethical norms and the issues such norms unearth. As political life in America became volatile in 2021, many, not wanting to offend or being questioned, have kept their opinions quietly within acquiescing to the popular notion that ethics and truth are personally relative and privately their own. Democracy cannot and will not survive on the frayed edges of this attitude.

Given this state of affairs, some are giving little attention to the war in Ukraine or express their opinions openly. This may be due to their loyalty to our past President, their lack of interest in world affairs, or generally, their lack of knowledge. Definitely, for some, their ethic has been narrowed to self and family, work and community. This is a situation of self-centering, believing that “we” are the center of our own universe becoming tools of our own tools, independent and self-reliant. The situation in Ukraine should dispel this notion as democracy falters on this idea disabling moral courage.

Thus, for some, morality and ethics have become a thin veneer, merely a patina of sentiments and opinions without salience or substance, something to discuss when the occasion arises, but not something to go to war over. On Face Book and in newspapers “thoughts and prayers” are being offered for Ukraine and its people; all the while many, following Trump’s lead and ignorant of history, believe Putin has a natural right to Ukraine. True, the land called Ukraine has been fought over for centuries, but no one, except the people living there today have a right to determine its future.

The experiences we have and share with each other are how we reveal ourselves and give meaning to our lives. *Sharing authenticates our lives and those with whom we share.* From a moral point of view, relationships are the way we think; they connect life to life and are the foundation ethics, of all value. Within our families and in our work, when important relationships break down, it is normal to feel that something vital is missing in our lives.

There is emptiness. Therefore, each day we must act as if other people matter. Personal meaning is achieved in relationship with others – through dialogue, cooperation, acts of kindness, and benevolent service. Likewise, national meaning is achieved in the same way understanding that we are a human “community” dependent and supportive of one another. This is something authoritarians don’t comprehend; better, don’t wish to acknowledge.

We may have been born with a different skin color and speak a different language than the majority in our social group, working environment, or community; we may differ with the Ukrainians and Russians as we live far away from their turmoil and anxieties, but inside we are all like, and *I say this unapologetically* recognizing humanity’s intrinsic worth. The Declaration of independence famously reads: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” These are words to live by and die for. They require no philosophical defense, but the ruthless and unprincipled dictators who seek only their own power and who have created a mental image of the world they desire means that we must support and physically defend, if need be, the application of these words across the world.

I write in support of the Ukrainian people and of democracy, to support the ethical life, a life that does not disparage others. It is a life lived unselfishly, avoids narcissistic behavior, and possesses a servant’s heart. Herein rests the real meaning of our common moral consciousness, our spirituality – we extend and enlarge our lives through the love we give to each other.

Many times, I have thought of family and friends who were lost in wars since 1941. Those who came home never complained, at least outwardly, that their sacrifices were in vain. They fought for a purpose, a cause, and defined it as a “moral cause” – a defense of democracy. Our struggle against despotism, home and abroad, especially with the threat of nuclear war, is an existential crisis, a moral fight for democracy. Putin in Europe and men like Donald Trump have made sure we can’t avoid this struggle. And this we must realize: our struggle is more than one of democrats vs. republicans or a struggle against a neurotic personality or a struggle of one nation against another; it is, as Edgar S. Brightman wrote in 1951, “*a struggle ‘in the minds of men [and women] about ultimate values.*”

About the Editor

Joseph P. Hester, Ph.D.

Dr. Joseph P. Hester is a professional writer and retired educator who serves on the editorial board for the *Journal of Values-Based Leadership* for which he is a frequent contributor and the advisory board for the *Humanities Bulletin* also for whom he writes. See <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/hester-joseph-p-1939>. He can be reached at southcline@gmail.com.