

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Manuscript 1469

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ARTICLE

Ethical Foundations Revisited

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Overview

In this article I argue that “civility” lies at the foundation of ethics. Ethics is relationship permeated and finds meaning in civil behavior by acknowledging the dignity and importance of others. Civility lifts personal narcissism from the boundary of the self outward to other human beings.

Introduction

And so, with the Democrats in the White House we believe that the threat to democracy is over and done with. Not so fast: what we have witnessed these past seven years is only the tip of the iceberg. Anti-democratic voices are all around us. Those groups who would destroy democracy have not gone away. They will appear again and again, and next time will be better prepared to destroy the institutions democracy has created for governance. Reality ain't what it seems to be.

Just look around; you don't have to read newspapers or history books, simply open your eyes to the realities of 2023. I don't know about you, but I'm bothered, perhaps scared—scared about the future of democracy, of civility, and of morals. I understand the Democrats are putting a positive spin on their successes, but there remains a remnant of discontent revealed in the numbers that MAGA-manians can exploit. I'm not anxious for myself only, but for my children and grandchildren, for my friends and neighbors some of whom are still living in a Trumpian myth, and for my nation. And although there was not a “red wave” in the 2022 mid-term elections, the potential for the destruction of democracy still lingers.

Democracy is a moral vision requiring constant vigilance for its protection and support. But in our time this vision has been diminished, politicized, and pushed into a corner of pious hyperbole, religious postulations, violence, and political maneuvering. All of this has stupefied thinking and distorted the edges of right and wrong making the moral vision called “democracy” seem like a distant wish or a dream gone bad. And so, with emotion, not reason (whatever that used to be), we argue over issues such as abortion, gun control, and same-sex marriage, etc., but when we look closely, we see that these issues are masking something much deeper and more profound; namely, “might makes right” and that we have created a ruling class of hyper-politicians who, while fighting each other, always protects and uplifts its

own. The power structures governing our lives, Democrat or Republican will always call the shots.

Because our collective lives are dominated by a constitution, morality is increasingly defined in terms of “rights,” but rights to be resolved by litigation only and who is it that controls the courts and interprets the Constitution? Increasingly, the ruse we use to call “democracy” is and will be in the future dominated by force. This seems to be the tenor of our times as morality has been lifted from the moral conscience becoming irrational and negotiable and definable in term of “who’s in power.”

But as I wax and wane, and moan and groan about all this, I most assuredly know, responding to issues is one thing; understanding the values involved is another. Easy to ask, but difficult to correct, “What has happened in America in 2023?”

“What has happened to moral civility and not only in public discourse, but among family members and friends as well?”

If ethics and morals seem complex and convoluted, it’s because our values repeatedly overlap, rub against each other in uneasy affiliations, and clash, sometimes violently. Personal values, especially, travel a meandering road in the human conscience yielding to a plurality of moral schemes, constructs, and frameworks. Many of these do not always yield to academic

“Some political theorists, such as philosopher John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*, suggest that it is in the best interests of democracies to have a standard of civility to allow for civil discourse. Mill’s argument for civil discourse illuminates why it is in the best interest of the United States, as a democracy, to adequately address the pressing racial and religious tensions that have been amplified during this campaign season ... Democratic values become threatened when incivility manifests itself in the form of violence, intimidation, and exclusion of certain groups in public discourse. This is the type of incivility that has been predominant throughout the 2016 presidential election.”—Harvard International Review, “On Liberty: Democracy and Civility” (9 January 2017) <https://hir.harvard.edu/on-liberty-democracy-and-civility/>.

analysis (Copeland, 2014) as some are ill-defined and violently pursued. Many have closed their minds to reason and fact-based knowledge lingering in the afterglow of a diabolical cultic personality who cares nothing about others, only about himself.

The struggle to understand these moral currents and their shifting direction poses a difficulty. This is sometimes unrecognized, especially among our closest friends and colleagues, as many assume that “we” are just like “them.” This makes dialogue imperative, perhaps a necessary evil, but necessary nonetheless. This also poses a difficulty

as antagonism often ensues and some, perhaps too many, don’t possess the wherewithal to engage in intelligent, let alone, civil discussions. Governing the nation with reason and care seems to have been replaced with vengeance or retribution, the motivating forces of our political lives.

“The society of a scientist must be a democracy. It cannot keep alive and grow only by a constant tension between dissent and respect; between independence from the views of others, and tolerance for them. The crux of the ethical problem is to fuse these, the private and the public needs. Tolerance alone is not enough ... and independence is not enough either ... Every scientist has to learn the hard lesson, to respect the views of the next man—even when the next man is tactless enough to express them.”—J. Bronowski, *Science and Human Values*, 1965, p. 63.

To turn such encounters into positive dialogue, personal and collective values must be, so to speak, defanged, and placed in a larger, more conventional context of “moral” principles, principles that can be discussed calmly and in a civil manner. This often depersonalizes as well as cools heated discourse, especially that which is concerned with the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. The goal should be that of developing more civil families, institutions, and communities. A cooperative pragmatism should guide our efforts. This is what makes us human in the first place. But I’m no longer an idealist and know this will probably never happen.

We must admit that the moral underpinnings of American democracy have all but disappeared in our self-focused culture. Characterized by individualism, our sensitivity to the value of democracy has been dulled by a media-saturated environment overshadowed by commercial greed and the quest for power. Even news broadcasts are susceptible to these values where some seek to sensationalize and divide, radicalize and misrepresent rather than investigate and report. Extreme political, social, or religious ideas shadow objectivity undermining democratic ideals and expressions of freedom of choice. After all, it’s freedom of choice that marks our humanity in the first place.

One result has been the putting forth of a self-focused ethic encased in a closed-minded ideology and a willingness to submit to political power as long as such power promises to take care of our personal needs and wishes. Cultivating civility and ethics is perhaps our greatest task and our most effective tool for promoting community and nationhood. The nurture of civil and personal morality is the proper responsibility of everyone and every institution within a democratic culture. But sadly, most hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see, becoming just another collective tool in a mind-numbing ideological trap.

The Nature of Civility

The National Civility Center has provided several keys to civil behavior: these are trust, process, people, and dialogue. The NCC reminds us that our moral value is derived from our capacity to:

- 1) *Generate knowledge,*
- 2) *Collaborate with others, and*
- 3) *Engage in critical thinking and problem solving.*

According to the NCC, each of us should take a pledge to the following civil behaviors:

- **View everyone in positive terms.**
Seeing everyone as a potential resource and agent of change helps to level the playing field and engage all stakeholders.
- **Develop a common language.**
The language we use can either unite or divide people. How can we discuss change if we don’t understand each other? Being aware of the problem, and agreeing on the terms to be used, is a good start.
- **Build strong relationships and trust.**
It is impossible to overstate the importance of trust, which builds bridges across boundaries and makes relationships solid.
- **Remember our shared humanity.**

It is easy to forget we are all human, with more commonalities than differences. Common sense and history tell us we can work together to solve common concerns and that when we separate ourselves, we are less effective.

- **Value both the process and the results.**

The gap between these two – the process and the results – causes many people to give up on collaboration. Results-oriented people need actions with observable outcomes, and process-oriented people focus on continuing the methods that drive the action. Both are crucial for improving communities.

- **Look both within and outside the community for guidance.**

People living in communities need to take responsibility for their problems and find actions that will address them. But we also need to recognize when to accept and use resources that are available from outside of the community. All resources need to be leveraged around a healthy attitude toward self-improvement.

Expanding Value Orientations

In order to enrich our own understanding of human life we are morally compelled to acknowledge the diverse values that are freely expressed by our friends and colleagues, as well as the importance of democracy as a moral principle of governance. Jefferson (1787) reminded us to “shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched.” He said that we should “Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion” and “question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.”

It goes without saying that understanding personal values is a prerequisite to becoming aware of the basic ethical principles comprising the foundations of civility in democratic societies. Without such understanding, civil dialogue is impossible. Thus, we are challenged to define the common values that we share with others, discuss these in a respectful manner, and explain why these values are foundational to moral behavior.

Civility is the most inclusive concept in our moral wicker and assumes the importance of equality, fair-treatment, honesty, and decency. Civility presupposes the positive role of humans in their relationships with others; can organize ethical principles for the useful tasks of community involvement; and establishes the boundaries of human connection and interaction. Civility assumes respect for the law, for the rights of individuals, and for the rights of other groups to express their interests and opinions.

Of course, not everything in our culture or community will be acceptable to others. We live in a world where diversity seems to define our lives, especially our values. As an outlaw responding to a query from Marshall Dillon said on a Gunsmoke episode, “Marshall, I have a conscience; I just don’t use mine the way you use yours.” The moral conscience, defined by personal narratives and social in-breeding lies flaccid on the floor of ethical deliberation.

The world we inhabit is a growing pluralistic and disparate world. Differences abound, meaning morals can and will change over time. Consequently, understanding and respect will provide a foundation for moral reasoning that encourages discussion and dialogue about what we deem morally important in our lives, nation, and world. But responding to issues is one thing; understanding the deeper values lying at their core is another. To whisper only in echoes is to negate the value of our lives.

"Every man is a creature of the age in which he lives and few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time."— Voltaire, <https://amzn.to/3TLqB3p>

Civility calls us to reexamine our public lives as a common ground where the application of moral values is most important. Like any approach this one begins with an ethical assumption: a pragmatic concern and respect for the needs of others that supports positive communication. This keeps us open to others as we listen and respectfully respond to what

they are saying. Hopefully, they will listen to us and show us such respect. Charles Taylor believed that there are certain features of the moral self and its world that are endemic or common to all healthy, sane persons. He recognized plurality in the shape of human moralities; that is, the conscious mind as a multiplex of aptitudes, attitudes, and feelings including intuiting, imagining, and creating new ideas and innovative solutions to problems (UBCGCU, 2019).

Undoubtedly, conscious judgment is sometimes insightful, rational, and considerate, and at other times irrational and maleficent, carrying within it the burden of moral decision making. Undoubtedly, it is our moral conscience that makes available our moral capacity, an indispensable aptitude — honed through time and cultivated by our parents and loved one — that is definitive of human life. Thus, moral consciousness reveals our character and identifies who and why we are, our authenticity or lack thereof. It is a moral-identifier saturating our developing moral propensity with ideas, beliefs, and conclusions about people and their behavior, some articulately clear and others vague and disorganized. Understandably, moral consciousness is as communal as it is personal, typifying social behaviors and actively inaugurating moral veracity. It is within community where moral understanding is most needed, discovered, and intentionally initiated. Value sharing is thus a dialogic process of communicating diverse perspectives and becoming consciously aware of what Aristotle called “our proper humanity;” that is, humanity as community (Hester, 2020).

Searching for Foundations

Harkening back, since 1900, the successes of science have morphed into a technology that has heavily influenced the development of major industrial, medical, and technical innovations. Subsequently, these innovations have caused and are causing social transformations, including alterations in our values. This often goes unnoticed as a *habit of expectation* (Desrosiers, 2018) dulls our awareness, solidifying our beliefs. Notably, our values lie deeply within being intrinsic and culturally generated mystifying our unreflective ideas and behaviors. Forewarned by Jacob Bronowski, “The values by which we are to survive are not just rules of just and unjust conduct, but are those deeper illuminations in whose light justice and injustice, good and evil, means and ends are seen in fearful sharpness of outline” (Bronowski, 1965).

Religion’s Influence

Although the influence of the church has in the past provided a foundation for values’ stability and continuity, today its power to persuade is tenuous and remains in limbo, caught between a native spirituality, continuous secularization, and its contemporary political affiliations. The industrial/technical revolution has brought into being a sterile, secular society to which the ancient symbols and words of “faith” have little value (Cox, 2019). Moral theorists agree that

the religious foundation of morals have been compromised, if not shattered, making belief in a “moral conscience” a nebulous idea and perhaps only an ideological principle of orientation (Miller & Shanks, 1996). This has social and political consequences as stated by Miller and Shanks:

Voters also tend to have general ideological orientations and dispositions. While most voters lack a well articulated and clearly thought out political ideology, they usually have some general ideological tendencies or predispositions. Some are strongly liberal across the board, others strongly conservative, and still others are moderates in most areas. Some may tend to be liberal in one area, such as social issues, but conservative in another, such as economic issues. These general ideological orientations influence voting.

It has been left to everyday people, religious and nonreligious, to seek their own moral foundations making religion less communal and more individualistic. Today, foundationalism is caught in the sway of postmodernism which is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person.

The idea that there is no foundation for ethics and that morals are personal, cultural, and therefore relative speaks to the impermanency of the moral point of view. Among other things, this points to the fact that we live in a fragmented moral world, which is also found among the religious – between those who adhere to ancient scriptures interpreting them literally and those who offer

contemporary explanations and applications of their faith. This makes speaking to each other, even family members, about such ideas tenuous and fragmented.

We often squirm at these conclusions, but the tentacles of our skepticism about morals reach back to the beginnings of the European Enlightenment. In the 17th century, Descartes’ idea that an intrinsic “mind” inhabits our physical bodies dominated discussions about humans and their place in the world, but the connection between the two (mind/body) has yet to be resolved (Rorty, 1981). Theologians took up the mantle insisting that we are “created” as living “souls.” “Soul,” as it were, became the foundation of human moral sensibility, at least for Christians. Hence, not only *mind* but now *soul* muddled the foundations of moral sensibility.

Science and religion have been locked in debates about these matters for over three centuries. Issues such as abortion, artificial insemination, birth control, and cloning, etc. have magnified these discussions forcing many into positions of absolutism. Our American founders were not exempt from these faith-science debates interpreting “reason” as a part of natural evolution (Stewart, 2014) and calling the source of reason and morality “Nature’s

“The question of whether or not morality requires religion is both topical and ancient. In the Euthyphro, Socrates famously asked whether goodness is loved by the gods because it is good, or whether goodness is good because it is loved by the gods. Although he favored the former proposal, many others have argued that morality is dictated by—and indeed unthinkable without—God: ‘If God does not exist, everything is permitted’ (Dostoevsky, 1880/1990). Echoing this refrain, conservatives like to claim that ‘declining moral standards’ are at least partly attributable to the rise of secularism and the decline of organized religion (see Zuckerman, 2008).”

—National Library of Medicine, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4345965/>.

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God.” Although “Nature’s God,” akin to Aristotle’s Prime Mover, seemed far removed from earthly affairs, nevertheless, for Enlightenment thinkers, and for many today, reason (contained in “mind”) became the *modus operandi* of morals and human rights.

For many, the mind-body dualism continues, but remains an unresolved mystery as it has a bit of unverifiable metaphysicalism about it.

Thomas Kuhn made several claims concerning the progress of scientific knowledge: that scientific fields undergo periodic "paradigm shifts" rather than solely progressing in a linear and continuous way, and that these paradigm shifts open up new approaches to understanding what scientists would never have considered valid before; and that the notion of scientific truth, at any given moment, cannot be established solely by objective criteria but is defined by a consensus of a scientific community.

—Kuhn, Thomas (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Even some of the early scientific thinkers held on to the idea that “reason” had a universal character, perhaps coming from God. Some followed the ideas of Plato thinking of reason “as the candle of the Lord” (Culverwel, 1652) which is universal and self-evident — that is, we cannot doubt the outcomes of reason because they have a built-in certainty about them. About this some historians have said that science was born with one foot in heaven and the other in verified truth. Shaking loose from this duality has proven difficult. In their minds, their assumptions about reason made their

pronouncements about the universe and humanity universal or complete and absolute. Today we understand that the methods of reason and science have changed, making truth somewhat less absolute than some think. Based on the methods used by scientists, “truth” shows an evolving history. On the other hand, for many, ethics and morals continue to be firmly embedded in religious belief. In America, religion, in all its diversity, is still a force in moral thinking.

An Uneasy Coalition

Shifting Currents

Indeed, religious belief and material success were and are conflicting forces in American life revealing the shifting currents of personal and moral value. In the 1950s, President Eisenhower had “One Nation Under God” included in the *Pledge of Allegiance* signifying God’s blessings on the American quest for material success. Eisenhower’s foundationalism is apparent as he had one foot in the values of the 19th century and the other in the evolving complexities of the 20th century. Yet, Eisenhower was on point by warning Americans of the rising power of the military industrial complex and its influence on determining America’s national and moral character. He was also being pressured by conservatives in his party who reacted negatively to the so-called “socialism” of the FDR

Our moral reactions have two facets ... On the one side, they are almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances ... on the other, they seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings. From the second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of a given ontology of the human ... The whole way in which we think, reason, argue, and question ourselves about morality supposes that our moral reactions have these two sides: that they are not only “gut” feelings but also implicit acknowledgments of claims concerning the objects. (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.1989, pp. 5 & 7)

administration and had recruited ministers throughout America to support their cause (Kruse, 2015).

This was the time when Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a Christian minister, published America's first great success book, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (2003), a book whose message is found among many success-oriented ministers in the 21st Century. His message was simple: follow the teachings of the Bible and you will have financial success. Americans believed this as their moral sentiments were more and more filtered through their capitalistic impulse. It seems that what Americans only believed in 1900 they now knew was true: among their doubts and questions, many held to the belief that Western Man represented the crown of God's creation, now, more particularly, "American Man."

Rising from the harsh realities of the 19th Century, capitalism became America's most fundamental value, blessed by God and articulated in the "success-as salvation" scenario, supplanting liberty, equality, happiness, or at least translated as such. This is often ignored in the culture wars of the 20th and 21st centuries. One can also ask if this is an attitude/belief lurking behind white America's disdain for immigrants, especially people of color and the moral and economic myths we hear from ministers and politicians. Americans, after the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II, wanted to forget, consume, and enjoy the fruits of their labor.

But an uneasy *moral coalition* had existed in America for many decades. This was not mentioned in schools or in churches, but the sudden desegregation of the public schools and its aftermath revealed what everyone knew but no one was willing to openly discuss: the poor, working class, and jobless had consistently been thought of as morally inferior and a drain on the American dream. In the 1960s, the belief that some Americans are morally inferior was applied to people of color and today is extended to those coming from America's southern borders. This is a view that will not go away. In 2022, with America's wealthiest 2% amassing or controlling 90% of American assets, the American dream and Christian ethics seem to stand worlds apart. Capitalism, Christianity, and secular views of morality coexist, but this is an uneasy co-existence.

Some of this was possibly due to a counter movement that began in the 1960s as the tragic view of human life (sin/salvation scenario) was considered too bleak and too defeatist. The civil rights and feminist movements showed positive signs of changing the tragic view, but the

In 2005, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton published a study of American teenagers in which they offered a "conjecture" that the dominant religion among adolescents was "moralistic therapeutic deism" (MTD). Suggesting that the MTD creed was operative among mainline and evangelical Protestants as well as Catholics, they reduced it to three basic claims: 1) being a good and moral person is central to a happy life; 2) religion is mainly concerned with feeling good, happiness, or being at peace with oneself and thus has therapeutic benefits; 3) God establishes a moral order for the universe and intervenes to take care of human needs.

—<https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/12/historic-christianity-therapeutic-christianity-and-the-wesleyan-tradition-of-evangelicalism>.

war in Vietnam kept nagging at the entrails of a more positive ethic, dragging us down and pushing us back. Beginning in the 1970s, the proliferation of self-help books, magazines, and the media in general seldom discussed material and economic progress in terms of a religious orientation. This was the time in which the baby boomers were reaching adulthood and the entertainment media was becoming a 24/7 phenomenon. The results on moral thinking were definitional and

reactionary as capitalistic and educational success now demanded measurement as the national theme became “reaching for the top.” Statistics became a tool of measurement and, in our public schools, a common motif was “what gets tested gets taught.” The bottom line in schools as in business was now a projected imaginary statistical goal, but what was to become of nurture, care, creativity, character, and complex understanding as educational goals. These were generally ignored because they cannot be contained in a statistical model; they can’t be adequately measured. Hence, the value of value was left in the dust of a thousand qualifications pushing moral value to the personal and leaving the communal foundationless.

Spiritual Restlessness

But the genuinely religious would not go quietly into the night. By the 1990s the religious right had become restless. Many found support in President George W. Bush, a former WWII pilot and head of the CIA, and an emerging religio-political movement. But this was perhaps more of a looking back than a looking forward. For many, religion had lost its hold on morality. Still, there were those who clung to this thinking, searching for ideas and beliefs to give them support and meaning. But little has happened to reinforce the vision of a Christian society among the young, upward mobile. The therapeutic philosophy (Powlison, 2010) inherited from Christianity and modernized by the media is today highly influential, especially among the young. Today there are signs of its influence on mainstream ministries as the poor and middle classes have been suffering economically. Bruce Thornton says, “Our therapeutic vision tells us all is possible. We can live without risk, without loss, without suffering. Every desire can be gratified, every pain can be alleviated, every limit can be transcended, and every goal is achievable” (Thornton, 2000).

Although therapeutic and self-improvement ethics garnish scientific rationality with the promise of heaven on earth, nothing has emerged to replace them. It remains that the intrinsic, the moral, spiritual, and humane are values promoted but to which little attention is given in our self-gratification culture. Churches too have been affected, becoming amassed with nonreligious activities, disguised as religious.

For reasons such as these values-based leadership theorists continue to write about “values complexity.” Politicians, businessmen, and ministers are more apt to be pragmatic promoters of their organizations than ones who adhere to moral leadership principles. Our moral frame of reference remains convoluted and is often thought of as a “personal ethic” rather than institutional, social, or something we share in common with our friends and neighbors.

Morality in the pew, as attested by what is heard from the pulpit and in church parking lots, has become emotional and accusatory. Perhaps we have become rational egoists turning more to self needs and interests, neglecting the needs of others, our communities, and nations, that is, unless we can find in them some benefit for ourselves. This theory says that promoting our own greatest good is always in accordance with reason and morality. In 1776, Adam Smith had his own version of this: 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. In a similar fashion, Bishop Butler (1776), a well-known religious philosopher of the eighteenth century, commented, “When we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit til we are convinced that it will be for happiness [good].”

Professor Kurt Baier (1993) suggests that being moral requires us to be impartial and that ethical principle should be for all people equally. For example, he says that if killing my grandfather to gain my inheritance is in my own best interest, then the rational egoist would approve. But this is not in my grandfather's best interest and it's illegal. Thus, I have a moral dilemma that rational ethical egoism cannot resolve. Baier asks, "...should we accept ethical egoism and so reject ethical conflict regulation, or should we reject [rational] ethical egoism?" Moral theories continue to be debated and reveal a moral conundrum that can't easily be ignored, blurring of the edges of right and wrong. It's along the blurred edges of these values where ethical meaning is discovered, debated, and articulated.

Conclusion: Our Moral Footprint

Saying all of this, it should be mentioned that there is a flow of moral currents in our society, but these currents often defy rational clarification and definition. Most remain bound to the moral footprint that stamped their behavior early in life — common minds adhering to common values unable to inhale the richness and variety of the human ferment; perhaps unwilling or ill-prepared to plumb the depths of our beliefs.

As George Packer (2013) reminds us, "Alone on a landscape without solid structures, Americans have to improvise their own destinies, plot their own stories of success and salvation." In telling the story of Dean Price, who was reared on a North Carolina tobacco farm and Price's widening view of others and the world, Packer says, "The people that built the roads followed the animals' paths. And once that path is set, it takes a tremendous amount of effort and energy to take another path. Because you get in that set pattern of thinking, and it's passed down generation to generation to generation."

Value complexity seems to mark the 21st century with a negative tone and a moral defeatism. The violence we see from terrorists who kill out of ideological conviction to local policemen who seem to be out of control, common moral sentiments appear lost in the quagmire of value confusion. As far back as 1992, General Schwarzkopf joked about the bombing of Iraq and the killing of innocent citizens pointing to an unaware bicyclist who narrowly avoided being killed by a smart-bomb on a solitary desert bridge. What has happened to our moral sentiments in a world of violence and unrelenting material progress? Has it all come down to "an eye for an eye," to the old maxim "It's nothing personal, just business"?

Perhaps egoism is more than theory. Is it a fact we cannot ignore? Can we change this? Hopefully, but of course, we do not always pick and choose the moral principles that impact our lives. Rather, these various moralities are often imposed on us by birth, religion, and/or other cultural/economic circumstances, and by events like 9/11, about which we were morally unprepared. The flow of these unchosen moral currents affects us all. Self- and moral-evaluation are difficult, even for the intellectually astute, the charismatic minister, law enforcement officers, or the politicians who make our laws.

Perspective is needed from the moral philosopher, preacher in the church, the scientific community, and from business leaders. What differences exist between the self-confident religious moralist and those espousing a "me-first" ethical egoism? Ethical egoism and religious foundationalism lie at the "extreme" edges of morality but impact our lives nonetheless as they are apt to receive more attention from the media. And they both have difficulty peering beyond their own needs and personal beliefs, or reconsidering their views taking in the wealth of human diversity and moral potentiality. If we look closely, we will learn

that they both have something significant to say about ethics and it is this ethical kernel we are trying to discover.

But reality demands that we even look beyond the horizons of these theories and into the jagged commons of real-life people. Caught in the middle of all these hankerings are those whose lives have been dehumanized and reduced by abject economic circumstances to a passive acceptance of whatever values have been handed to them. They live in a constant survival mode, eking out a living however, wherever, and whenever possible. Survival is a daily reality in their lives.

Bundled in this middle are many of the upward mobile whose basic value is “to get to the top as quickly and by any means possible.” They too are survivalists but the welfare of others is the least of their concern. Many of them are unserious churchgoers straddling the moral fence and making sure that they are in agreement with those with whom they identify and live to emulate. This makes values-based or ethical leadership difficult to infuse into a business, political, or church community. The struggle to understand these shifting moral currents poses a difficulty that is sometimes unrecognized. We study science but do not evaluate its impact on our beliefs. We acknowledge our beliefs but fail to evaluate them from either a scientific or historical point of view.

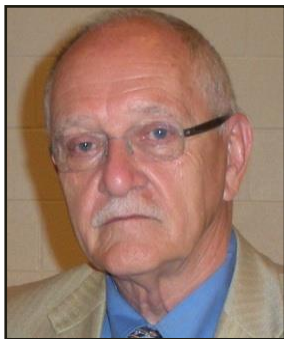
Seeking a foundation for morals is discovered in the debates between religious ethicists and those who are more secular and have turned to law or even science for ethical insight. Many stress our human commonality, but ethics also recognizes human diversity and individual/cultural differences. It is along this blurred line – individuality versus commonality – that many of our ethical debates are framed especially in terms of rights, duties, and justice which are often embedded in constitutions and litigation. Due to our cultural and national differences, unraveling the history of ethics remains a difficult and demanding task. Moral ideas spread slowly and remain deeply immersed in traditional beliefs and practices. Formalizing these beliefs into practical ethical ideas and rules for living has proven complex as human diversity re-mains a prevailing and sometimes disruptive influence in all areas of contemporary life. Thus, dialogue is imperative for understanding and moral clarity. To accomplish this task, we must place personal values in a larger context of morality and everyday ethics with the goal of developing more civil families, institutions, and communities. Understanding and respect will provide a foundation for moral reasoning that encourages discussion and dialogue about what we deem important in our lives, nation, and world.

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