

A Moral Compass for America

The Challenge

The fundamental American cultural value is that the individual finds within the core of the soul the meanings, the purposes, and the functions of existence.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 essay “Self Reliance” wrote, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it.”

Walt Whitman, in his poem “Song of Myself” wrote,

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
(I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house
by, after all.)

I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.

From “Song of Myself” in “Leaves of Grass” 1855 – 1881

These writings demonstrate the struggles and the opportunities inherent in foundational American thought as the culture was incubating a national identity and moral compass in the 19th century. Emerson’s address and the burgeoning American Transcendentalist movement that it reflected, grew out of the Unitarian value of individualism- rapidly developing as a core value of the United States’ cultural identity.

The American experiment, that which holds the ideal of the individual’s right to create the path of his life for himself so fundamental that it is emblazoned in the founding and governing documents of the government, almost by definition refutes the cultural morality of its Western European Christian extraction. The tribal law of the Judeo-Christian tradition could not hold for a society made up of a rainbow of cultural heritages and values. The founders of this American society intentionally undermined religious strictures in that their rejection of a relation between religious worship practices and societal governing principles led them to demand a secular government- a fundamental notion held sacred to this day in principle if not always in practice.

The Constitution of the United States holds this individuality sacred in its opening lines, as the document’s stated intent is to form a Union of individuals: “We the People of the United States of America, in Order to form a more perfect Union...” The word “We” implies unified individuals. Were the word “We” to be left off, the sentence would still make sense, but it would potentially have a very different meaning, as writing in the third person implies a vision not necessarily held individually, while writing in the first person, albeit with a plural pronoun, implies that the view is implicit in the individual.

“Pragmatism,” an American philosophical movement introduced in writings by Charles Sanders Peirce and developed in further publications of William James and John Dewey, among others, rejects the power of intuition in cognition (Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man, Charles S. Peirce,

Journal of Speculative Philosophy ((1869) 2, 103 – 114). While not specifically addressing individualism in this context, Pragmatism's insistence on applying only actual experience of cognition to experiences would seem to imply a rejection of applying assumed truths to predicted behaviors. In Pragmatism, then, we find a challenge to applying traditional western Judeo-Christian moral understandings to American thought.

Two major American cultural advances further highlight this challenge. Jazz, an American musical form and Abstract Expressionism, an American movement in visual art, both highlight individual expression using, although at times sublimating and sometimes even rejecting, traditional forms and techniques.

In such context, then, all of the various schools of thought, artistic movements, cultural development, etc. mentioned align in a consistent American ideal: The American people celebrate the individual over the collective. American philosophical and expressive movements are highly individualistic. The American hero is the solitary adventurer seeking to make his or her fortune in a way that values his/her vision over that of society. Our art forms value individual improvisation and innovation over mastery of conventional form and the solo artist over the ensemble. We honor the entrepreneur over the public servant. Socialist practices which sublimate the individual will to the collective, are seen as an enemy to the very spirit of the American ideal.

The symbol of the country, the bald eagle, is a solitary bird which does not habitually flock.

All in all, American intellectual and cultural values are inherently individualistic. Thus, our challenge: What is the American moral code?

Webster's gives us this definition of "morality:"

-Conformity to the rules of right conduct; moral or virtuous conduct.

(Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, c. 1996 Random House Value Publishing, Inc.)

Wikipedia states that morality "Can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion, or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes to be universal."

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality>)

As both include "conduct," they seem to imply that morality is determined by behavioral standards.

Looking more deeply, Webster's definition of "moral" gives us:

-Of, pertaining to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong; ethical; *moral attitudes* (emphasis Webster's)

Again, the term "conduct" is included, indicating a behavioral component of evaluation.

So, our challenge is to identify the parameters of a guiding moral principle for American society in which such morality

1. applies to a culture positing significant value on individuality and
2. is in line with American founding principles that are intentionally and rather vociferously secular.
3. is expressed in behavioral terms.

Moving Ahead

Emerson, in his 1838 Divinity School Address, said, “A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue. Then he is instructed in what is above him. He learns that his being is without bound; that to the good, to the perfect he is born, low as he now lies in evil and weakness.” Later in the address, Emerson said “The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves.” And, later still, “The imitator dooms himself to helpless mediocrity.”

This discovered virtue and moral sentiment aid the individual in his or her *independent* journey toward insight into the fundamental aspect of his or her being- that of the soul itself. And, therein, Emerson’s view that “these laws execute themselves,” stated in the context of “the perfection of the laws of the soul,” implies that these laws are inherent within the individual and not dependent upon outside influences, including social mores or strictures. The discovery of virtue thus presented here is a benefit to the individual, without, of necessity, the need to express this discovery in a social setting. And, the statement “the imitator dooms himself to helpless mediocrity” implies that seeking moral intuition in context of social understanding denies the individual the potential for the realization of himself as “to the perfect he is born.”

So how may this idea be expanded to the extent that it becomes the basis of a cultural moral principle fundamental to one’s membership in American society? American morality, expressed in our founding documents, in our philosophical and artistic schools of thought, in our national symbols, and in our mythology, heroes, and political advertising, is that we value most highly the individual and his or her right to self-realization. The American core value is that of respect for the right of every individual to live according to the vision that he or she holds for her or his own life.

To make this a moral code, to state it in behavioral terms, the core morality for Americans would be that ***each individual respect the sanctity of every other individual, setting restrictions on individual behaviors only when these would interfere with the individual rights of others.***

American society’s governing principle following from this moral imperative must be egalitarianism. Only with absolute equality before the law may a society provide for the nurturance of the individual.

Limited socialist practices, including communal shepherding of resources, do have a place in a society devoted to the individual. In fact, an egalitarian society demands a certain degree of socialist support. A public infrastructure, built and maintained with funding provided by a collective, supports the individual need for transportation, public safety, commerce, and quality-of-life interests. The publicly-funded education system is intended to provide the individual student with the intellectual foundation necessary to support his or her freely-chosen path in adulthood. The American citizen pays taxes which, in part, supply the resources necessary to a common civil defense. Laws and regulations on businesses provide a system to protect the individual against the crimes or excesses of those who would undermine another’s efforts to provide for their own path in life. We know that without these and other such socialist practices, the egalitarian ideals essential to the support and protection of the individual are but glossy idealistic dreams with no chance for survival in the face of concrete reality.

But the social practices that govern our lives must be contained by a moral compass uncompromising in its vision, unchallenged in its application, and universal in its acceptance.

The American Moral Compass

The American Moral Compass demands that individuals should be free to follow their path of self-realization. American society must:

1. Hold sacred the individual rights of all persons to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
2. Establish and maintain practices that allow the individual opportunity to grow, to explore, to express ideas, and to flourish.
3. Maintain a value hierarchy in which individual freedom is held in the highest esteem.

The American Moral Compass demands that our society be guided by egalitarianism and secularism. Our governing societal laws must be:

1. Applicable to every individual equally.
2. Secular, and, thus, free from judgement based on religious principles.
3. Written and enforced to support individual freedoms, restricting behaviors only when these behaviors interfere with other individuals' freedoms.

The American Moral compass demands that individuals must:

1. Participate in the governing structure of society by voting, paying taxes, obeying laws, and, when qualified, holding public office.
2. Respect the individual rights of others and behave in a manner that reflects this respect.
3. Follow the path to self-realization true to the individual spirit guiding the individual soul.

In Closing

I close with a quote from Simone Weil, a 20th century French intellectual. Although her heritage is not American, her words seem to apply:

“The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to the obligation to which it corresponds, the effective exercise of a right springing not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation towards him. Recognition of an obligation makes it effectual. An obligation which goes unrecognized by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence. A right which goes unrecognized by anybody is not worth very much.

It makes nonsense to say that men have, on the one hand, rights, and on the other hand, obligations. Such words only express differences in point of view. The actual relationship between the two is as between object and subject. A man, considered in isolation, only has duties, amongst which are certain duties towards himself. Other men, seen from his point of view, only have rights. He, in his turn, has rights, when seen from the point of view of other men, who recognize that they have obligations towards him. A man left alone in the universe would have no rights whatever, but he would have obligations. “

(Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, page 1, Translated by Arthur Willis, 1952, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London; original: *L'Enracinement* was first published 1949 by Editions Gallimard, Paris)

David White
Topical Seminars
Lewes, Delaware
2016

Seminar Topics
Preparation for September 20, 2016

The Moral Compass – David White will lead a discussion on the direction of morality in American culture. In preparation for this discussion, participants are to read David's paper. While pertinent quotes of materials are included in the document, it might be of interest to peruse the materials listed below, at least in part (some of these are quite lengthy), to familiarize yourself with the ideas presented in the paper. In addition, please feel free to do some research on the topic to add to the conversation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

A Divinity School Address

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>

Self Reliance

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>

Walt Whitman

Song of Myself

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm

Charles S. Peirce

Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man

Journal of Speculative Philosophy (1868) 2, 103-114.

<http://www.peirce.org/writings/p26.html>

Simone Weil

The Need for Roots

<https://ia801608.us.archive.org/23/items/WeilSimoneTheNeedForRootsPreludeToADeclarationOfDutiesTowardsMankind/Weil,%20Simone%20-%20The%20Need%20For%20Roots,%20Prelude%20To%20A%20Declaration%20Of%20Duties%20Towards%20Mankind.pdf>