

**R I C H , F R E E ,  
A N D M I S E R A B L E**

**The Failure of  
Success in America**

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**mericans rush to work, gliding past stop signs, talking and texting on the phone, incrementally compromising public safety because our busy schedules feel more important. Once we get there, we stay, longer and longer, while simultaneously regretting the neglect of our loved ones. As a result, many of us have no network of social support, a trend that has worsened significantly over the last two decades. And despite this commitment to hard work and all the resources it yields—the highest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world—most Americans report not being able to afford what they need. Widespread dietary choices now known and recognized to be unhealthy contribute to substantial physiological ailments. And our consumption patterns create many other problems. The central claim of this book is that this mess is the result of a moral crisis brought about by market culture. The logic of the market—that everything is for sale and we should strive to get as much as we can—has pushed beyond the economic sphere into other parts of our lives. The most important consequence is a deteriorating capacity for meaningful relationships.

## THE DEATH ZONE

On May 15, 2006, on the slopes of Mount Everest, some forty people noticed a mountaineer named David Sharp was in serious trouble and walked right past him before he died. When you climb Mount Everest, according to Sharp's mother, "Your only responsibility is to save yourself—not to try to save anyone else."<sup>1</sup> About one out of ten people who have ever tried to climb Everest have died along the way and most of their corpses are still there. For those few who make it to the top, the payoff is unimaginably rewarding. In pursuing that goal, people act in ways they would never behave elsewhere. Attempting the summit entails putting your own life, limbs, and ethical standards at risk.<sup>2</sup> The entire 30,000-foot mountain is unforgiving, but the most perilous part is the spare terrain above 26,250 feet, the "Death Zone," where human (and most other) life is unsustainable. The air is thin, the soil is infertile, and the weather is incredibly volatile. If you try to climb a few more hundred feet when it is time to turn around, or stop to help someone, the danger to your own life could be greatly exacerbated.

There is nothing like Mount Everest. Singularly demanding and dangerous, it is literally the defining pinnacle of human achievement. But symbolically Mount Everest has many analogues in social life. Why do it? To prove that I can! The possible triumph of standing at the top calls to us relentlessly. The risk, the thrill, the deeply personal achievement, as well as the bond shared with few others who have endeavored and succeeded in the same way are all interconnected. Pushing past the boundary and exploring your own limits are social norms deeply enmeshed in modern society. More broadly, this "Everest psychology" of voluntarily taking on chancy, expensive challenges that have no tangible, socially valuable payoff is prevalent throughout our society. Perhaps it is the removal of firm social constraints and the irony of progress in modern life, but the need to be the best or find a new frontier is manifest in countless ways every day. Most glaringly, we encounter this mind-set in big-time sports, Hollywood film, popular music, and wherever else celebrity is recognized. It is also alive in information technology, fashion design, financial trading, and many other industries. For people in each context their ambition, effort, and daring yield big returns—if they win.

Several aspects of the Death Zone make it a useful metaphor for various other settings in modern society. I am talking about unforgiving conditions in which sacrificing one's own interests for another is extremely costly, and split-second decisions have vital consequences. To reach our goals in such circumstances, we must be utterly committed, disciplined, and focused. To get "there," we need to block out distractions along the way, even worthy ones like taking care of someone in need. Such a thin line separates winners from losers that we dare not gamble being on the wrong side by attending to anything but the highest priorities. We cannot afford to indulge the golden rule.

The market is such a place. For many, the risk and allure inspire total devotion. And for anyone who wants to be in the game tomorrow there is no space for altruism. Insofar as the values of the market are built into other parts of our lives, we may be captive to the Everest psychology. There are of course millions of ways kindness and generosity are expressed every day to our family members, neighbors, and people we do not know at all. But the market culture of our society is becoming a Death Zone within which our old commitments are eroding and human decency is thinning.

The frenzied pursuit of the next big achievement blinds us to this shift. We see the "Everest psychology" manifest in our daily attempts to not just keep up with but beat out the Joneses. If I can just get in to the right school, find the right mate, land the right job, buy the right house. The elusive summit is always within sight but just out of reach. I may recognize the man in distress sitting along the path as I walk by, throw my garbage on the ground, or know the hour is too late and I should turn around and return to a safe altitude. That is, I may keep long hours at work with some awareness that I do not need the money or other rewards and my family does need me. I may grasp that my burning ambition and narrow focus are costing me friends, health, balance, and perspective. In the mythology of the market, nevertheless, I must proceed to the peak. Higher. Better. More. The compulsion to stay on the mountain—both literally and figuratively—can overwhelm good judgment. For instance, it was just this kind of risky behavior that helped bring about the recent economic recession, as Richard Posner notes. "Even if you know you're riding a bubble and are scared to be doing so, it is difficult to climb off without paying a big price."<sup>3</sup>

In some sense, the most important expression of “Everest psychology” is not in the behavior of extraordinary overachievers at the top of their field—because they are so few—but in the daily choices of ordinary people—because they are so many. Neither their decisions nor the consequences are so dramatic as the dangers of mountain climbing, but failure in their efforts to produce, achieve, and accomplish is to be avoided at all costs. I am thinking along the lines of the obsessed professional so engrossed in her work she cedes her role as mother to the nanny; the father always too frantic with his children’s schedules to spend time with a lonely aunt; the neighbors so busy working to pay off debt accrued through extravagant indulgences they do not have time for a visit to the hospital after someone they know is in a car accident; the family whose primary activities revolve around shopping; the executive who compromises every important relationship in his life due to complete devotion to his ambitious career goals; or the public servant who surrenders his integrity by way of lucrative graft.

In addition to all the costs of such endeavors, the real price is in fact inevitable failure because, unlike the real Everest, there is no peak. We never arrive at a place of completion and joy. As Gertrude Stein lamented in not finding her childhood home, “there is no there there.” While we have much to be grateful for, the goals of market logic are in some fundamental way elusive. The market teaches us there is never enough. If that is where we seek comfort and security, sooner or later we are painfully enlightened. Ambitious careers always come with risk. Material comforts can only satisfy some needs. And the modern self is greatly overburdened and consequently fragile. For the vast majority of us, we simply cannot survive the Death Zone intact. This book is about the sociological forces that promote this sort of Everest psychology and compel us to enter the Death Zone of market culture.

## **CONFUSION AT THE TOP**

The great irony of this psychology is that we have, in a different, broader sense, already reached the summit and do not even realize it. For middle- and upper-class Americans, this should be the best time and place to be alive in human history. Having developed a remarkable level of security,

comfort, and ease, we have the extraordinary luxury of thinking beyond here and now. With all the lessons of what has transpired before us, we have at our fingertips more cumulative knowledge than previous generations ever dreamed possible. And the recent history in American society is one of amazing progress.

The standard of living in the United States is the envy of the world—even, or perhaps especially, in the midst of an economic crisis, at least comparatively speaking. Lifespan has been extended substantially. Crime rates are down. Our ability to understand and influence natural forces through the marvels of science exceeds what most people expected even a few decades ago. The means of sharing information in particular are wondrous. We nurture a rich and noble heritage of government “by the people” in a political system that has won over most of the world as the best available. We give more support and charity to other peoples than any other country. While frightening to contemplate, even the new threats of international violence have not penetrated the daily lives of most Americans in any demonstrable way. All in all, a very promising picture.

And yet, something is not right. Uncomfortable questions persist. Is this all? Is this the society, the life, so many have labored, fought and died for? The American Dream is in trouble. Maybe it always has been. But at a time when so many things have been going well, the basic premise of imminent improvement in our lives and those of our children seems to be in question. The level of frustration, anxiety, and fear so common among our people feels more substantive than the usual questions challenging each generation. With the promise of all these assets in our favor, how did this happen?

The main answer is not economic recession—as devastating as that is to so many Americans—but rather a moral crisis. Some of it is small stuff, like increasing rudeness, too much television, or not enough healthy food. Some of it is grave like the abuse of children, the decline in community, and corruption in government. Much of popular culture—from Hollywood, TV, pop music, or big-time sports—is so vulgar, cynical, or just inane that any notion that it would contribute to our collective well-being is simply passé. Headlines are taken up by the likes of Jeffrey Skilling, Jack Abramoff, Duke Cunningham, and Bernie Madoff. We see appalling images of the New Orleans Superdome and

shoppers on “Black Friday” after Thanksgiving, and hear scandalous courtroom proceedings involving entertainers, professional athletes, or other famous people. But these big stories obscure the more mundane symptoms of this crisis that affect and implicate ordinary people in direct and immediate ways. And the main problems are not simply a matter of a bad economy or a bad presidency.

To acknowledge that many of us are repeatedly making bad choices is to recognize a breakdown of morality. To understand such choices, though, requires the fundamental insight of sociology, that each individual’s biography must be understood in the context of society’s history. People make decisions in the context of certain perceived choices, which are determined by broader forces, and in so doing participate in those forces. In pondering how such forces will shape the biographies of my three young children, Emilia, Anabelle, and Peter, the intellectual topic of a sociologist becomes the urgent concern of a parent. What hopes will they nurture? What challenges will they face? What dreams will they realize? With such questions constantly on my mind, I have become preoccupied with the moral disorder of our time and found the dominant discourse among commentators associated with the Left and the Right to be largely unhelpful.

Few Americans think of themselves as immoral or bad, but many are stuck making unappealing decisions among choices they regard as problematic, with real costs to themselves and others. And many more feel intense pressure in managing their lives, which include some burdens that are largely distinctive to this time and place. Overworked parents, overscheduled kids, unhealthy personal choices, fears of the dangers in public spaces, and weakening commitment to community are all interconnected pieces in this story. For individuals the effects include anxiety, exhaustion, anger, depression, obesity, addiction, debt, rudeness, and violence, each of which has obtained startling levels of incidence.

From a broader perspective, confidence in core institutions is thinning. Moral authority has waned in government and religion. The social functions historically served by key institutions such as the media, organized labor, and academia are increasingly viewed with skepticism. Each of the issues in this litany is in fact complex and may be framed in terms other than morality. Indeed, moral choices are always shaped by



forces that are not moral, whether psychological, economic, political, or technological, for instance.

The reason our current crisis can be characterized as moral, though, is that it involves consequential choices made by many people, including powerful leaders of major institutions as well as countless individuals of no special standing. Just as such choices have led to this situation, different choices could lead to its amelioration. In other words, the trouble we are facing does not require the resolution of unanswered questions like the cure for cancer or the confrontation of some maniacal tyrant. Rather, this set of problems can be resolved through reprioritizing principles and reorganizing current resources, through different choices.

Such reconfiguration, however, would require profound unsettling of how we live and committed engagement with the possibilities for serving the greater good. At the moment, not enough people are setting aside short-term self-interest for our common life. Through laziness, narcissism, and willful ignorance, some of us are failing to make the hard choices that serve the long-term well-being of others and, to a large extent, our own selves. For many of us with the best intentions, the confusing cultural circumstances in which we live make us uncertain of what the right choices are. The loss of moral grammar has rendered us incoherent in attempting to script our lives with some meaningful order.

Morality is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down. That said, the ongoing struggle to clarify moral guideposts is healthy for society, and healthy society is good for individuals. This basic premise has been clear to sociologists since Émile Durkheim illuminated the topic more than a century ago.<sup>4</sup> In recent decades, however, we have become distinctly unintelligible in articulating such lessons. As indeterminate as it often is, moral reasoning is a vital, useful endeavor that could and should be productively renewed in public discourse.

More of us should wrestle with the question of what our society—our family and neighborhood as well as our coworkers and fellow citizens in general—needs from us. What standards of decency, integrity, and accountability must I observe and protect? Durkheim showed that the payoff for thinking in terms of sacrifice, compromise, generosity, and social solidarity in general, at least in modern society, is a much more

psychologically vibrant setting for individuals. In effect, the healthier my community is, the healthier I will be.<sup>5</sup>

The focus of this inquiry is on those Americans who have been able to take advantage of the unique strengths of our society, the “middle class,” or more accurately, middle classes. Those who know real poverty are entangled with some of these issues but also face other challenges. The rich have a different story as well. Most among the truly rich have inherited the bulk of their wealth. They too are connected to these problems, but their motivations and pressures are also distinctive.

I am especially interested in those who have purportedly been able to succeed themselves, what might be thought of as the roughly three-quarters of the population who are winners of the American Dream.<sup>6</sup> Their fate is tied to the particular opportunities and burdens distinctive to our society. They comprise the vast majority of the electorate and in some meaningful way define the core of the American experience. Within this group is a diverse set of people with vastly varying experiences and backgrounds. While the sources and implications of this moral failure are numerous and complex, though, there are broad effects comprehensive enough to affect most Americans. Some individuals or categories may contribute disproportionately to the problems and some may suffer inordinately, but the big picture is one that few can escape fully.<sup>7</sup>

Some might think that the problems of affluent people who work unnecessarily hard and consume too much reflect a previous era before the recent economic crisis, or a narrow segment of our population, that is, the truly rich. Certainly, part of the goal here is to understand and report on the experience of middle-class Americans during the last few decades. However, this is not just a matter of chronicling history.

First of all, our economy will in all likelihood stabilize eventually and much in American life will return to the way it was before the recession began. Second, the problems underlying our current moral crisis are largely still in place. It appears that most Americans have not abruptly altered their consumption or work habits in any profound way. The economic crisis guarantees that we will seriously rethink some things, but how intensive that reflection is and how substantive our response is remains to be seen.

## THE ARGUMENT

In this book, I seek to bear witness to this mess—an important project in its own right since, as with all cultural problems, this moral crisis is sort of hidden in plain view. We breathe in and contribute to this atmosphere without even knowing it. The key to addressing this problem is to see it clearly and understand how it developed in the first place.

There once was in our republic a balance of institutional forces consisting of the state, the market, and civil society.<sup>8</sup> At first, the market and civil society acted in concert to contain the exertion of government authority. Over time, the market's influence grew, shaping government to serve its interests and nudging civil society to the side. The key development was the relative weakening of noneconomic social institutions, which accelerated decisively in the second half of the twentieth century.

Three forces converged in the 1960s to decisively destabilize this balance, enhance the market's leverage and weaken that of civil society, which has led to the moral collapse unfolding now. The most fundamental factor was the logic of the market itself, which is inherently expansive. Through its many agents—policymakers, boards of directors, executive managers, stockholders, advertisers—the market always seeks to spread its influence. Whether it is the experience of outdoor adventurers, the adoption of babies, or emotional nurturing, the market fosters the buying and selling of all kinds of things once considered genuinely priceless. In some sense, all of us who participate in production and consumption are involved in such agency and therefore in such expansion.

The second factor was the gap between our nation's stated ideals of equality and democracy and the reality of injustice and exclusion, which has been a contradiction since the founding of this country. This inconsistency became more conspicuous after World War II, and led to heightened tension during the rigid assertion of authority during the 1950s and the unrest that followed.

The third factor, which was activated to some extent by that tension, was the diminished credibility of authority produced by the turmoil of the sixties. The protest movements confronted normative expectations of "success" and even at times the idea of anyone being in charge. The

notion of institutional moral authority would thereafter remain a problematic, precarious ideal, more often interrogated than not and never taken for granted again.

The influence of countervailing institutions in government and civil society has since deteriorated. This is true of a large range of organizations, voluntary associations, and small groups. The most serious effects related to the spread of market logic, though, involve just a few major institutions, including religion, organized labor, media, education, and government, each of which has a special character that has at times enabled it to serve this valuable counterbalancing function relative to the capitalist economy. During different periods, each compelled people to think about and commit to other values beyond narrow self-interest. These institutions cultivated moral habits among a wide range of people that provided balance and leverage in economic life. Because of the three factors that converged during the 1960s, as described above, and due to particular circumstances in each case, these countervailing institutions all lost their ability to contain market logic.

In serving as the *moral hardware* of our society, such institutions provided settings in which moral authority is publicly and credibly committed to the common good. In so doing, these institutions conveyed to people *moral software*, the values, sensibilities and support necessary for making wise, judicious decisions. As they deteriorated, little was left to inhibit the intrusion of market logic, the gist of which is that everything is for sale, that we must always strive to produce and consume more.

This transformation of our values has led to the crumbling of moral order. They are no longer American values, at least in the original sense, nor simply a matter of market logic, since they have not emerged in the same way in other market societies. We might think of these themes in terms of *American market culture* that is derived from American history, market logic, and refracted through the events of the last several decades.

The ambiguous character of this new culture reflects the complexity of social life in the modern world. Somehow nebulous and fluid but also potent and unrelenting, it seeps in to every space of our lives, contaminating all. Like water when it is contained and kept at the right level, market logic is extremely useful, even life-giving. As it leaks in to other places in sufficient amounts, though, market logic

begins to corrode other aspects of society. The American Dream now strains under the weight of its own success as the market economy has become the market society. It is life in the market society with its hyper-individualism and obsession with money that is, in some ways, analogous to the Death Zone.

For some, entry into this Death Zone is intentional and active. The competition and potential returns hold great allure. For many others, life in the Death Zone is involuntary—either a matter of necessity or misunderstanding. That is, we work frantically because we feel that we must or we consume stupidly because we know no other way.

## OVERVIEW

Firsthand observation, journalism, and especially social scientific research provide the main evidence for this argument.<sup>9</sup> I begin, in the next chapter, by reviewing key concepts in the debate about such matters, such as it is. There is a moral crisis embedded in our society, maintained through key social institutions and cultural values. While many on the Left and on the Right would agree with this statement, there is a striking lack of insight about this problem from either side. Although it is clear that there is much more that unites Americans than divides us, there do seem to be polarized ideological camps, each of which controls a swath of rhetorical ground and each of which is reluctant to seriously consider or borrow from the arguments of the other side. In chapter 2, I suggest that serious people from across the ideological spectrum can and should engage in productive discourse about how cultural values and social institutions both contribute to the moral crisis of our era.

The central values that have defined what it means to be American are as old as the country, or at least the terms have been with us that long. But their meaning has evolved in fundamental ways that are quite distinct from their original sense. In chapter 3, I trace the historical development of such values and the institutions that keep them alive. In particular, progress, freedom, prosperity, productivity, equality, and authority emerge as key concepts whose meanings have evolved in consequential ways that shape our current culture.

While this kind of incremental change has been significant, there were particular events and institutions that were especially important to the market culture that developed during the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing from the historical review of the previous chapter, I emphasize in chapter 4 the importance of these specific factors. How the expansion of market logic combined with the decline of civic life in general, and central countervailing institutions in particular, is the main story. Chapter 4 highlights how this shift began to unfold after World War II and came to fruition in the 1980s.

Since then, we have seen how market logic undermines morality in numerous institutions. Three particular areas of behavior in moral disarray bespeak a grave situation. While there are certainly some positive trends, each of these categories, what I respectively designate as economic life, civic life, and family life in chapters 5, 6, and 7, include a number of specific kinds of problematic behavior. And underneath the “moral malnutrition” in each case, we find seeping, unbounded market logic eroding the foundations of our society.<sup>10</sup> As Americans spend the bulk of their time and develop their most important relationships in these three kinds of settings, we can see how far-reaching this crisis is likely to be.

The growing pressures Americans feel to work, compete, and consume have become a kind of Death Zone, which is undermining our engagement in meaningful relationships. The only way this crisis can be resolved—and with it all the attendant problems of narcissism, corruption, greed, and waste—is to reconceive and rebuild the civil institutions that hold communities together. As grim as this picture is—and the reality is much more ominous than most people realize—there are hopeful signs. Even amid the power of expanding market logic, the human resources of anger and hope among ordinary people suggest such heartening possibilities are viable. Chapter 8 provides a brief summary of the argument and some preliminary thoughts about how such resources might be channeled into transformative ways to reorder our lives.

## 2

# MISSING THE FOREST AND MOST OF THE TREES: WHAT'S USEFUL AND WHAT'S NOT IN CURRENT CONVERSATIONS

**C**risis is a strong word. Or at least it used to be. Somewhere along the way, the breaking news of catastrophe, the e-mail warnings of imminent peril, the familiar mantra of emergency shouted by doomsayers, have all run together to form the background noise of our time. Disinterest, disbelief, or “tragedy fatigue” provoke many to cover their ears. With the way it smacks of arrogance and self-righteousness, invoking failed morality in particular is risky business. “Every generation,” Alan Wolfe contends, “finds the morality of previous generations better than its own.”<sup>1</sup> Robert Bork cautions, “one must not discount the great reservoir of self-interest that underlay much of the rhetoric of morality.”<sup>2</sup> Obviously, great acts of idiocy and cruelty have been perpetrated throughout history in the name of morality.

Nevertheless, as flawed as many efforts to defend moral order are, there are real and powerful threats to our way of life that can rightly be thought of as moral. Our common life requires that individuals comply to a certain extent with standards of conduct not captured in law or utilitarian incentives. Society has needs.<sup>3</sup> We can neither surrender the notion that important ideals must be protected to serve the greater good nor ignore the fact that those principles are at times betrayed. And, of

course, great acts of wisdom and compassion have also been carried out in the name of morality.

With these premises in mind, many of the conservative claims lamenting moral decline make perfect sense; Americans are behaving badly in ways that are destructive to themselves and others. It is quite possible, though, to view with compassion and empathy those persons suffering most from these problems, as some on the Left suggest, including those people making immoral choices themselves. Despite widespread commentary to the contrary, Americans of different political persuasions agree on the values of our society much more than they disagree.<sup>4</sup> Even around issues of serious dispute, such as abortion and gay rights, we have a great deal of (unpublicized) common ground. Most of us are very concerned about the same problems.

## **BRINGING MORALITY BACK IN**

“Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative is a helpful starting point for understanding western morality. The notion that each of us should behave in a way that would not be harmful if everyone acted that way makes eminent sense and has proved an enduring principle. Thinking this rule a bit too rigid, though, John Stuart Mill proposed we should act in a way that produces the greatest happiness for all people.<sup>6</sup> The ideal moral order would be a setting where all are happy. Pursuing such a goal must necessarily involve a deep, abiding preoccupation with what is best for the common good, recognizing that the elusive ideal involves a delicate balance of collective and individual interests.<sup>7</sup>

In practice, of course, figuring out what is best for the greatest number of people is difficult. Any working definition of morality is functionally imperfect.<sup>8</sup> Émile Durkheim describes the moral framework of society as the “collective conscience.”<sup>9</sup> It is comprised of shared cultural meanings and moral rules that most people accept as guideposts for ordering their behavior. The collective conscience is created by individuals, each of whom has a degree of influence over what is considered normal and right. By overtly affirming or simply living in accordance



with the established moral rules, each individual contributes to the collective conscience. A person expresses, often implicitly, that, “this is the way things are done.” Likewise, when enough individuals depart from such norms, even without much overt protest, they bring into question the legitimacy of the framework, which is one of the ways collective conscience changes.

On the other hand, the collective conscience also has profound influence on the individual. That is, individual conscience develops in the context of social groups. Our sense of what is right and wrong is shaped by what others communicate to us. As people around us declare, explicitly or implicitly, “this is the way things are,” each individual comes to believe and ultimately internalize that understanding of the world.<sup>10</sup> This is true even in a culture like ours that celebrates “individuality” through specific gestures and symbols of independence. Thus we see everywhere huge cars, racy T-shirts, tattoos, trendy haircuts and other iconic expressions of rebelliousness even in the most milquetoast settings—that is, a patterned, predictable expression of “individuality.”

In contrast to behavior driven by the threat of force or utilitarian gain, the moral sphere is based on normative, emotional, and symbolic incentives. It is comprised of the choices we make that are in some essential way voluntary. That is not to say that such incentives are trivial. Quite the contrary is true. Think of the power of guilt and humiliation or pride and respect. But it does mean that (unlike most of the behavior of, say, prisoners or slaves), our moral choices—whether they are sound or not—always implicate our own will.

In short, the “moral voice of the community” affects the “inner moral voice” of individuals, and vice versa.<sup>11</sup> Individuals are moral when their behavior reflects an expansive commitment to certain convictions they believe are valuable for their group, which they believe others should also follow. Society is moral when it protects the autonomy of individuals. Being moral thus means paying attention to those voices and encouraging others to do so as well. It involves grappling with the questions of what those voices are saying and who is in one’s group. Interpreting moral principles, simply put, is an ongoing challenge and the boundaries of one’s community or society are a moving target.

This sense of morality is neither universalistic nor absolute. But the wisest choices tend to consider the interests of the largest number of

people possible over the long run. Needless to say, of course, some people do not share this understanding of morality. However, just because mainstream American values may be contradicted by those of the Taliban, to take one example, surely does not mean we should not try to articulate our defining morals. Furthermore, the same is true even, perhaps especially, when we are wrestling with moral shades of gray. While the practical challenge of such considerations is very difficult, the age of precarious environmental sustainability, global markets, and weapons of mass destruction offers no other choice. The stakes are simply too high for moral indifference to society's needs.

Our society has accomplished extraordinary feats in offering its members unprecedented wealth and freedom. Yet the collective conscience has deteriorated in its ability to shape the choices of individuals to the greater good.<sup>12</sup> The main result is consuming self-absorption and a related obsession with money. Contradicting Kant's and Mill's wisdom, many of our choices are completely unsustainable for the social collective. Under such favorable circumstances, that we are so far from realizing such ideals raises an obvious question: Why?

## **THE IRONIC NEGLECT OF MORALITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE**

A wide range of social scientific studies critique various problems in contemporary society. In examining politics, education, family, religion, medicine, media, art, sports, popular culture, recreation, work, and consumption, such analyses have yielded numerous insights about how and why we live the way we do. They illuminate the strains and challenges in our lives and propose various solutions. All of this reflects great success in contemporary social analysis. We know a lot.

Despite the generally critical approach of most social research—the recognition that various arrangements in society are problematic and unnecessary—the issues are usually not couched in terms of morality.<sup>13</sup> Although most social scientists believe in personal responsibility and accountability—I have met very few who do not—they write little about it.<sup>14</sup>

The main emphases for progressives as well as sociologists—the latter being mostly a subset of the former—have been on material

and structural arrangements in society.<sup>15</sup> There is scant indication in mainstream social research that we are facing a moral crisis that implicates not only institutions but also individuals, an unexpected trend in the discipline that historically has had the most to say about civic life.

In addition, the respect for how morality varies across cultures—which any thinking person has to grasp to some extent—sometimes leads to “moral colorblindness” in general.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, such complexity motivates many social scientists to never seriously think about the concept of morality. One problem here, as I have repeatedly argued with numerous colleagues reluctant to use the term at all, is that once we stop talking about morality, it is difficult to find a lexicon for describing what society needs from its members. That is, we stop speaking in ambitious ways about our common life.

A starting place for understanding our moral crisis is first establishing that there is one. And, as we will see, there is plenty of blame to go around. This situation is caused by numerous institutional failures, problematic cultural norms, as well as countless poor choices on the part of individuals. Moreover, one cannot really talk about patterns of individual choices and the operation of institutions in ways that are separate from one another. They are almost always necessarily entangled. Individuals make choices in the context of institutional pressures and incentives. History does not just happen; it is carried out by people.

## THE PROBLEM OF VALUES

In the commentary that does recognize trouble, the explanations most prominent in public discourse today emphasize cultural values, clearly an important part of this story. Though preceded by a rich tradition of social criticism sometimes called “conservative,” contemporary appraisals of cultural values suffer from several common shortcomings.<sup>17</sup>

The first is that the terms “values” and especially “culture” are used so indiscriminately as to provide little in the way of robust explanation. A good example of this problem can be found in the bestseller *Slouching*

*Towards Gomorrah* by Robert Bork. “‘Culture,’ as used here, refers to all human behavior and institutions, including popular entertainment, art, religion, education, scholarship, economic activity, science, technology, law, and morality.”<sup>18</sup> The concept of culture is complex and has been defined in numerous ways by social scientists. But this all-inclusive sense of the term makes its use in *explaining* any particular thing difficult. In general, the many uses of the term *culture* necessitate clarifying its specific meaning in any particular application.

A related issue is the emphasis on “values” in accounting for the lousy choices people make. A deadbeat dad neglects his children because he lacks family values. A promiscuous young woman secretly sleeps around with countless partners because she never learned proper values. In one sense, the problem here is that these indictments sort of state the obvious. Of course someone who behaves badly is expressing some kind of poor judgment. More importantly, though, this kind of reasoning does not really account for where the values came from. The same is true with the cultural argument. The values, norms, beliefs, and symbols of a given social context, one of the common definitions of culture among social scientists, come from somewhere. That is, if we use cultural values to explain some kind of behavior, the question still remains, why? Why does this culture function this way? How did this culture develop this way?

Linking values to behavior is therefore the *first* step in a historical investigation. Inevitably, such inquiry leads to other kinds of factors, what social scientists call social structure, for example. In contrast to culture, this may include social organizations such as the family, schools, the legal system, or polity.<sup>19</sup> The strong links between culture and structure motivate many to treat them as one force.<sup>20</sup> Francis Fukuyama explains in his book, “I will not make use of this distinction between culture and social structure because it is often difficult to distinguish between the two; values and ideas shape concrete social relationships, and vice versa.”<sup>21</sup> Fair enough. Despite this recognition of the linkages between culture and structure, though, the rhetorical emphasis often then shifts to just the component of values in culture, as in both Bork’s and Fukuyama’s work.<sup>22</sup>

I share the concern that many critics have regarding the importance of social virtue and its decline in our society. I also think cultural val-

ues are a useful starting place for understanding such matters. To fully explain this problem, though, we must necessarily grasp the historical development of particular social structures, including economic and political institutions, which have contributed to the rise and transformation of specific cultural values.

The other big problem with the dominant explanations that rely on cultural values is that they emphasize the wrong values. A common foil is the corrupt liberalism brought about by the 1960s, especially the sense of egalitarianism that developed at that time.<sup>23</sup> Certainly there were many important consequences of what transpired during that decade. But the protest movements and counterculture of the sixties did not emerge in a vacuum. And, contrary to various claims, they were the result of something more than a narcissistic generation spoiled by parents and agitated by rock and roll. The focus on radical egalitarianism is sometimes overstated. There are too many other societies with stronger traditions of social equality who have the same or less dramatic problems as the United States in terms of moral order.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, despite the substantial rhetoric about equality and opportunity in this country, the bulk of resources are distributed in tremendously and increasingly unequal ways.<sup>25</sup> There is significantly more mobility in American society compared to many other industrialized societies, but there is also more extreme inequality, which partly motivates the ongoing advocacy of egalitarianism as an ideal. Identifying this ideology as the main cause of moral decline in this context, therefore, does not make much sense.

## **SHE STARTED IT! HOW FEMINISM WRECKED SOCIETY**

Another element of modern liberalism fingered as a culprit behind moral decline is feminism.<sup>26</sup> The women's movement did facilitate broadening opportunities for women outside the home and engender more varied and ambitious sensibilities among women in terms of fulfillment and self-realization. Leaders like Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Hillary Clinton have at times belittled women who work (only) in the home. And just as there have been thoughtful, courageous activists seeking fairness

and empowerment, there have surely also been narrow-minded, dogmatic ideologues willing to say and do anything. “Unspoken Traditional Family Values: Abuse, Alcoholism, Incest.” “Don’t Cook Dinner Tonight; Starve a Rat Today.” Polemical messages found in slogans or bumper stickers, like these, reflect such extremism.<sup>27</sup> Partly as a result of such intemperance, two-thirds of women now refuse to identify themselves as feminists.<sup>28</sup>

Some may say feminists are simply narcissistic and unconcerned about the collective good of society; what we need is to restore the conventional nuclear family that thrived during the fifties.<sup>29</sup> Both these arguments ignore some basic facts. The idealized family of the 1950s never really existed. There was clear structure in the roles of bread-winning fathers and homemaking mothers, which three-fifths of all families had in 1950.<sup>30</sup> Children “knew their place.” But underneath this visible facade was a more complex reality of intensely repressed individuality. The actual experience in many families of the fifties, especially among women, was painful and unjust.<sup>31</sup>

Zealots like Pat Robertson have used broad strokes redolent of Joseph McCarthy to attack any activity contrasting the idealized family of the fifties. “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”<sup>32</sup>

Certainly some thoughtful feminists are socialistic, alienated by traditional family norms, critical of capitalism, and willing to abandon repressive relationships. As any serious historical account shows, however, there are good reasons why the women’s liberation movement occurred in the first place, issues that implicated power relationships in advanced capitalism and the patriarchal family. It was and is at its core a fight for freedom and equality.

The change has been unsettling and not without costs, especially in the family, more so than many on the Left have been willing to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the conditions against which the women’s movement fought were untenable. Violence against women, unequal economic opportunities and political representation, and repressive social norms were justly confronted.<sup>33</sup> And to the extent that such injustice persists, the battle rightly continues.

Despite the widespread aversion to feminist labels and rhetoric, a 1989 *New York Times* survey revealed that two-thirds of women and a majority of men agreed that “the United States continues to need a strong women’s movement to push for changes that benefit women.”<sup>34</sup> A recent CBS poll indicates that two-thirds of women believe the women’s movement has made their lives better.<sup>35</sup>

Linking claims that are accurate (e.g., attributing critiques of family norms and of capitalism) to some that are outlandish but terrifying (e.g., accusations of intentions to murder children), as in the case of this denunciation of feminism, was exactly how McCarthy was able to do so much damage. However, the main problem with this kind of assault, which has somehow become a normal part of mainstream political discourse now, is that it neglects the underlying forces that gave rise to and persist in motivating the women’s movement.

## THE HOMOSEXUAL ASSAULT ON FAMILY

“Moms and dads, are you listening? This movement is THE greatest threat to your children,” James Dobson warns.<sup>36</sup> Another moral scapegoat for society’s problems revolves around gays and lesbians, and especially the goal of legalized same-sex marriage. Gays and lesbians are often lumped together with feminists as the offenders responsible for everything from moral decay to God’s wrath. Two days after September 11, Jerry Falwell exclaimed, “God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.” Why? “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”<sup>37</sup>

More recently, John Hagee declared that, “All hurricanes are acts of God, because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that . . . there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came. And the promise of that parade

was that it would be going to reach a level of sexuality never demonstrated before in any of the other gay pride parades.”<sup>38</sup>

Such preposterous claims could be dismissed if they were not spoken by influential people who command the attention of tens of millions of conservative Christians as well as important and mainstream conservative leaders like George Bush, Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, and John McCain. In April of 2008, the Religion News Service released a list of the ten most influential GOP “King Makers” who had influence on the Republican campaign. It included Dobson, Tony Perkins, Rod Parsley, and others who proclaim militant antihomosexual stances.

By 1980, one estimate suggests, some 61 million people were tuning in to evangelical television and radio programs.<sup>39</sup> While the likes of Falwell and Robertson speak for many fundamentalist Christians, they are some of the most reviled figures in public life and do not speak for more sophisticated conservatives. However, there are other more nuanced but nevertheless problematic assertions about the role of gays and lesbians in the decline of moral order in America. “Gay marriage is not some sideline issue,” the columnist Maggie Gallagher recently declared, “it is the marriage debate.”<sup>40</sup> Once the third-ranking Republican leader of the Senate, Rick Santorum wrote that advocacy for gay marriage represents just “the latest liberal assault” on the “natural family.”<sup>41</sup> The result of this “dangerous social experiment,” Zell Miller suggested of “same sex marriage,” will be disastrous. “Over time, if not stopped, this practice will destroy the traditional family. It will affect our children in a terrible, harmful, and lasting way for generations to come.”<sup>42</sup> America will lose a common set of values if same-sex marriage is legalized.<sup>43</sup> In that event, “Losing this battle means losing the idea that children need mothers and fathers. It means losing the marriage debate. It means losing limited government. It means losing American civilization. It means losing, period.”<sup>44</sup> Expanding the rights and amplifying voices of gays and lesbians in our society would no doubt be enormously significant. But civilization does not rest on this single issue. Regardless, this kind of hyperbole detracts from the most serious threats to the family, and it is strident enough to make some wonder whether there is at least some truth in it.

The assault on gay and lesbian rights neglects several important issues. First, other factors are much more important in determining the vitality



and moral order of the American family. This small minority—gays and lesbians comprise perhaps 3 percent of the population—hardly has the power to determine family norms across the land in a way that can account for the transformation of the last fifty years.

Insofar as the gestures directed against gays and lesbians are really just about bigotry—which certainly appears to be the case for some but not all adversaries—its expression will have little impact on the well-being of the family. The real forces behind changes in the family involve external pressures and internal choices of family members that have almost nothing to do with sexuality (as outlined in chapter 7).

Second, from a practical point of view, homosexual Americans are simply here to stay. Whether they are comfortably situated in the context of legal marriage or formal definitions of family, or openly embraced in our communities, they are in fact part of who we are. Recent research suggests that most Americans are increasingly tolerant of gay and lesbian lifestyles but still resistant to legalized marriage and adoption rights.<sup>45</sup> Even that opposition is shrinking. One poll reports a decline in the number of Americans who “strongly oppose gay marriage”—down from 42 percent in 2004 to 28 in 2006. The proportion that supports same sex marriage has grown to more than 42 percent.<sup>46</sup>

Third, gay and lesbian parents are as effective as straight parents.<sup>47</sup> As Bill O’Reilly has rightly acknowledged in his book, *Culture Warrior*, “A variety of scientific studies have shown that kids raised by gay parents usually turn out the same way children in traditional homes do.”<sup>48</sup> Despite a huge body of research confirming this finding, we continue to hear the warnings of alarmist propaganda charging gays and lesbians as morally unfit caregivers.

What seems puzzling about the outrage expressed over homosexual rights is that the issue has so little to do with the most extreme problems of moral decline. That is, deteriorating community life, increased violence and incivility, unhealthy lifestyles, substance abuse, greed, and consumerism have no connection. The real problems in the family, certainly the increasing rates of divorce, have nothing to do with gay and lesbian rights or lifestyles.

Even the vast bulk of cruddy entertainment is unrelated to either same-sex relations or the subcultural norms among gays and lesbians. If anything, most of what we see and hear in popular culture—raunchy

MTV videos, nudity on programs like *NYPD Blue* and vulgar shows like *The Bachelor* and *Temptation Island*—all affirm a kind of heterosexual degradation.

Overall, despite all the attention that the issue of gay and lesbian rights generates—including in almost every major religious denomination—it is not a significant force in causing the moral failures of our time. If the issue of gay marriage somehow disappeared along with all its advocates and exemplars (were such an imagined purge possible), virtually all the strains that other families face today would still be in place.

It appears that the fuss about homosexuality is the *result* of moral disorder rather than the *cause* of it. For some, this particular encounter with the “other” has provided a convenient peg to mistakenly hang fears associated with the transformation of the family. More broadly, the complexity and uncertainty of modern life, which is genuinely overwhelming for many of us, motivates a profound sense of protectiveness regarding what order we are able to discern. Certainly that includes the natural order or God’s plan.

Setting aside biological and theological questions about sexuality, which are in fact quite substantial and unsettled, the main problem with this defensive crouch is that it will not provide any shield from the real issues. As with the taboos of intimate relationships that cross class, religion, and race, we will in time recognize that stability, respect, community, and love are the bases of a viable family, not the particular characteristics of the individuals involved.

## MARKET MORALITY

Another argument about modern liberalism’s contribution to society’s ills pertains to disruption of the market. Echoing Adam Smith, champions of free-market fundamentalism maintain that the market has the capacity to harness individual incentives in the service of the collective good. The premise is that rational self-interest guides all behavior.<sup>49</sup> The core principles of supply and demand enable the production of what is desired while facilitating the eradication of that which is not.

According to this perspective, this organizational logic can help institutions meet the collective needs of society. In a vastly complex modern

world, the market's ability to arbitrate among the many different interests of people—some 300 million of them in the United States alone—is critically important. Businesses, banks, schools, hospitals, government, and most other large organizations can all benefit from rational market logic.

One version of market morality links “economic and spiritual freedoms.” “God is in favor of freedom, property, ownership, competition, diligence, work and acquisition. All of this is taught in the Word of God, in both the Old and New Testaments,” Jerry Falwell once declared, “people should have the right to own property, to work hard, to achieve, to earn, and to win.”<sup>50</sup> The “prosperity gospel” preached by new generations of Christian leaders argues the same thing.

The purely free-market-oriented understanding of this connection goes further in attributing capitalists with special intrinsic virtue. Dinesh D'Souza argues in *The Virtue of Prosperity* that to participate in the market, especially as an owner of a business, is to contribute to the well-being of society.

The moral argument for capitalism is that it makes us better people because it puts our imagination and our efforts at the behest of the people. Success is defined as the ability to serve the needs and desires of others. There is no reason whatsoever for businessmen and businesswomen to feel guilty about being successful, because their success is the proof that they have effectively met the wants of their fellow human beings and thus earned a just reward. More than any social type, except perhaps the clergy, the capitalist is, in his everyday conduct, oriented to the task of helping and serving others.<sup>51</sup>

Conversely, according to this perspective, anything that inhibits successful business is viewed as a moral problem. The most consequential interference with the moral order enabled through market processes, therefore, is government intervention.<sup>52</sup> It exacerbates bureaucratic inefficiency, causes dysfunctional social dependence, undermines creativity and ambition, serves narrow interest group priorities, and politicizes otherwise rational economic processes.

For these reasons, Milton Friedman argued that government should not control minimum wage rates, economic output, rent parameters, or tariffs. It should not maintain social security, public housing, municipal or national parks, or toll roads. There is no need for it to draft people

into the military or restrict private mail systems. And of course government ought not to regulate industries.<sup>53</sup>

This yarn is not without merit, not entirely. Rationally organized economic firms can be very effective. Historically, they were critically important in establishing the rule of law and the possibilities for democracy.<sup>54</sup> In countless cases, well-run corporations have proven to be extremely efficient, creative, and valuable in the advance of human civilization. Think of the wonders produced by General Electric, McDonnell Douglas, and Microsoft.

And it is no chore to recognize the enormous failures of government. The lumbering bureaucracy and corrupt interests embedded in Washington make front-page news every day. The main problem with the connection drawn between market logic and moral order, however, is that it only holds for some of the people some of the time.

In particular, it holds for the “haves” on a good day. That is, those who enjoy profits in a competitive system by definition receive the greatest returns. They benefit from the industriousness of capitalist firms, the richness of civic life, and the security of prosperity. The others, the “have-nots,” do not have the same access to such gains. For a host of reasons, restricted competition and incomplete information, which are regularly part of market transactions, guarantee that markets will not function in the same beneficial way for everyone involved.<sup>55</sup> Whether a small number of firms dominates an industry, as so often happens (e.g., computers, mass media, soda), or consumers lack basic knowledge about how to shop (e.g., medical expertise, banking), some people are systematically disadvantaged.

In any case, the ethos of competitiveness itself is not really the best basis for moral order.<sup>56</sup> But even when it fosters imagination and ambition, since markets are not always competitive or profitable, there are inevitably some on the short end. Moreover, there is now a common practice of socializing costs and privatizing benefits of certain enterprises.<sup>57</sup> Whether it is public financing of stadiums, the overuse of natural resources in business, government bailouts of failed corporations, or the taxpayer-funded U.S. Air Force training of pilots who end up with jobs for commercial airlines, there are plenty of examples. There has never been a market system that did not encompass significant poverty. Sometimes the poor are out of sight, perhaps in a foreign country, as in

the case for much of America's producing class today, but that does not mean they are not a part of the system.

Another problem here is that not every day is a good day. Market logic can only serve moral order when the system is profitable.<sup>58</sup> When desirable goods and services cannot be bought, for whatever reason, they are not offered. The needs they would serve go unmet. Unpurchased food or unrented apartments help no one. A depression therefore creates problems for everyone, especially those without any reserves.

More importantly, goods and services that are intrinsically difficult to sell, such as sound inexpensive housing or drugs for rare diseases, are less likely to be produced in the first place. The system does not reliably produce that which is not profitable. Since there are so many worthy aspects of meaningful life that are not in any way lucrative or cannot be easily shown to be profitable, this creates serious problems. Think of safe public parks, engaging art, attractive architecture, long-term environmental viability, preventative medical care, public television, enlightened education, active religious life, amateur sports, or just plain old free time.

Even on a good day, most beneficiaries of a competitive market system are not likely to dwell on these matters since they are not the forces that created their success. And if they do invest in the public good (beyond the goal of exchange D'Souza celebrates), their focus is likely to be quite local. That is why we see such lovely parks, buildings and streets in affluent neighborhoods, but not run-down schools or sprawling retail stores.<sup>59</sup>

None of this is to suggest that government has all the answers or that another kind of economic system has demonstrated itself to be superior to capitalism. Rather, I simply want to clarify here that the link between market logic and moral order is very limited. "Distrustful of compartmentalization, inclined toward expansion, resentful of the limits imposed by time, space, and culture," Alan Wolfe observes, "the market is a poor instrument for sensitizing individuals to the complexities and paradoxes of moral obligations under modern conditions."<sup>60</sup> Such concerns would distract from what Milton Friedman holds to be the "one and only social responsibility of business," to increase profits.<sup>61</sup>

As a CBS vice president for television explained to the sociologist Todd Gitlin, “I’m not interested in culture. I’m not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That’s whether people watch the program. That’s my definition of good, that’s my definition of bad.”<sup>62</sup>

Rational economic behavior certainly contributes mightily to the well-being of society. But to really understand what makes for sane and healthy moral order, most of our attention should be directed elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> Moral authority is not championed by capitalists. As they themselves know, that is not their job. Nor is it, necessarily, undermined by those who critique the operation and practices of our economy.

For those urgently concerned about moral decay, the unquestioning defense of the free market is a strange commitment indeed.<sup>64</sup> The confusion is derived from two misguided rationales. The first is treating socioeconomic status and merit as the same qualities.<sup>65</sup> In this vision, society is already appropriately ordered because the most moral and deserving people receive the greatest returns. The most worthy are the most wealthy.

The conflation of these correlated but discrete forces thereby enables the neglect of other factors that contribute to achievement (e.g., family, neighborhood, education, employment, discrimination). Even on its own terms, this argument confuses competitiveness and performance for moral worth. People are not paid a lot because they are generous and compassionate.

The other rationale attaches inordinate value to rules and laws, which many capitalists are quite diligent in following. But such a view strips people of moral agency.<sup>66</sup> By this logic, it is the law that is moral, not the individual. Shifting focus away from personal responsibility or values diminishes the possibilities for moral order in the face of new challenges unaddressed in law. Plus, as noted above, the market serves the collective good only in limited ways.

There will always be vitally important aspects of social life not subject to market logic and not attended to by agents of the market, no matter how conscientious they are in following the rules<sup>67</sup>—just like the bonuses AIG executives recently paid to themselves out of government monies offered to bail out the investment firm.<sup>68</sup> Some commentators recognized the actions as legal, but most observers found them to be morally dubious.

One of the problems with the contention that capitalism is the main basis for moral order is the conceptualization of capitalism itself. Most discussion of the matter, whether from critics or advocates, suggests that capitalism represents a single condition that is present or absent. A society is capitalistic or not. We are the United States or the Soviet Union. And within the scholarship that studies the variation among capitalist countries, there is often little more than lip service paid to the importance of culture and history.<sup>69</sup>

However, as Robert Kuttner contends, “Contrary to both Marx and to Chicago economists, there are huge aspects of socioeconomic life that are culturally conditioned, and cannot be usefully comprehended as merely material calculations at one remove.”<sup>70</sup> It makes more sense to recognize that the dynamics of culture and other institutions affect the character and consequences of capitalist economies in meaningful ways. Blind commitment to market logic and its expansion, without any concern for other factors, is economically short-sighted and morally disastrous.<sup>71</sup>

There is great risk (and opportunity) as the country comes to terms with the recent economic crisis. The attempt to repair the damage to our economy, to restore business confidence, and reestablish growth is an understandable focus. Certainly, those are important objectives. But the risk is in believing that our problems fundamentally revolve around market value. Thinking about how to fix our economic system without any attention to the ethics and values people in the system hold will not address the underlying fault lines that led to this upheaval in the first place.

## **CONSIDERING THE EFFECTS AND CAUSES OF CULTURE**

Despite these problems with its common uses, the notion of culture is a promising concept for explaining some of our choices. Fukuyama’s initial definition, “inherited ethical habit,” is a credible one.<sup>72</sup> Contrary to some misuses of the term, when applied appropriately to the behavioral norms of a given social setting, the concept is very useful. It allows for sympathetic critique of certain people without demonizing them. It empowers individuals and groups with agency. They act in history;

they make history. And culture, properly understood, allows for change. It involves contingent actions that shape the historical trajectories of a people.

Focusing on culture allows us to recognize that if “we” were exposed to the same lessons and material conditions as “they,” we would likely develop similar ethical habits. Such an empathetic perspective allows us to evaluate the collective sanity or character of an unfamiliar people without reifying their differences, demonizing them, or reducing them to a caricature. But studying history with an emphasis on culture also enables us to recognize the importance of agency or free will. That is, individuals and groups have the capacity to make choices in any given moment that may shape their future.

A cultural approach is more likely to avoid one of the main pitfalls of strictly “structural” approaches in social science, which emphasize the durability and power of large institutions and neglect the importance of human agency. The actions of people do matter. Most significant turns in history were the result of such action. Respecting the freedom of all individuals to make that kind of choice, to recognize each person as a potential player in history, is another strength of cultural analysis.

By definition, culture is subject to change but not easily given to it. The symbols and stories developed in a certain culture are typically robust and well defended enough not to melt under the first offensive assault. Over time, though, the choices people make in serving particular priorities can shift.

What is constructed can be deconstructed. Studying the continuities in culture facilitates insights into this kind of ambiguous development in which things change but stay the same. To understand culture, though, we necessarily must also pay attention to the important institutions in a given context. This allows us to explain the development of specific values and the actions derived from them.

Only by examining these different pieces of the puzzle over time—that is the landscape of a society’s way of life—can we have any confidence that we have identified the causes of the current problems in question. These are critical elements in grasping the historical processes which have led to the habits we have now inherited, the topic of the next chapter.



## CONCLUSION

A lot of conversations about morality lead nowhere. The Left avoids using the vocabulary of morality for the most part (except in reference to those who wield power). There is little discussion of bad choices or good choices, of character. The problem here is in neglecting the power and autonomy of individuals. We almost always have choices. Consciousness guarantees that. Some choices are terribly costly and some are like falling off a log. Understanding probabilities, though, does not exclude the possibility that extraordinary choices could be made. At any given moment, you could drive your car off the road, or not; you could just stay on the conveyor belt, or not. The choice is yours, always.

On the Right, the problem is more about the underlying explanations. Comfortable, even exuberant, in the use of moralistic rhetoric, the Right often ignores the basis of morality. In this approach, individuals seem to make choices in a vacuum, either because they are inherently noble or inherently base. That is, individuality is essentialized. The problem here is neglecting the ways different choices become available and understood. This error is most commonly made among proponents of market fundamentalism who reduce success, ability, merit, and morality to the same element of individuality.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the problems with these various arguments that currently dominate public discourse, the basic point that a crisis of cultural values underlies our moral disorder is dead on. The key to understanding how this situation came about, however, requires a bit of investigation. It cannot be casually explained by the specific flaws of those acting most immorally.

On the other hand, we do not have to identify the sweeping arc of history, acknowledge the death of God, or seek the Second Coming for any hopes of moral order. Rather, my modest argument is that particular choices can be made that will foster morality. Specific institutions can play a large or small role in shaping our ethical habits that will enable different kinds of choices.<sup>74</sup>

History is composed of both powerful, long-term forces that are difficult to derail as well as meaningful choices that are highly contingent and consequential.<sup>75</sup> The incredible, abrupt shifts in the currents of history resulting from specific decisions illustrate this point. Think of the

American Revolution, the assassination of Lincoln, or the development of nuclear power, for instance, or all the other decisive events that were neither inevitable nor predicted.

That we should arrive here, at this moment, certainly does not represent any kind of inevitable course of history. There is hope in the elusive, conditional logic of history because it means that whatever current trajectory we discern is likely not an accurate projection of the possibilities. Such potentialities surely encompass grim scenarios but also some heretofore unimagined future of promise and opportunity.

With this premise in mind, we can recognize that there was once a balance of institutional influences in American life that facilitated greater concern for relationships and the common good. I do not suggest that we should—or could—return to a previous era. But we can learn from such success, as well as the failures, in seeking better balance in the future. First, though, how we lost that balance is the topic of the next chapter.