

DAVID BROOKS

How Democrats Can Win the Morality Wars

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I'm a fan of FiveThirtyEight, a website that looks at policy issues from a data-heavy perspective, but everyone publishes a clunker once in a while. In February, FiveThirtyEight ran a piece called "Why Democrats Keep Losing Culture Wars." The core assertion was that Republicans prevail because a lot of Americans are ignorant about issues like abortion and school curriculum, and they believe the lies the right feeds them. The essay had a very heavy "deplorables are idiots" vibe.

Nate Hochman, writing in the conservative National Review, recognized a hanging curve when he saw one and he walloped the piece. He noted that "all the 'experts' that the FiveThirtyEight writers cite in their piece are invested in believing that the progressive worldview is the objective one, and that any deviations from it are the result of irrational or insidious impulses in the electorate."

He added: "All this is a perfect example of why the left's cultural aggression is alienating to so many voters. Progressive elites are plagued by an inability to understand the nature and function of social issues in American life as anything other than a battle between the forces of truth and justice on one side and those of ignorance and bigotry on the other."

There's a lot of truth to that. The essence of good citizenship in a democratic society is to spend time with those who disagree with you so you can understand their best arguments.

But over the last few decades, as Republicans have been using cultural issues to rally support more and more, Democrats have understood what's going on less and less. Many progressives have developed an inability to see how good and wise people could be on the other side, a lazy tendency to assume that anybody who's not a social progressive must be a racist or a misogynist, a tendency to think the culture wars are merely a distraction Republican politicians kick up to divert attention from the real issues, like economics — as if the moral health of society was some trivial sideshow.

Even worse, many progressives have been blind to their own cultural power. Liberals dominate the elite cultural institutions — the universities, much of the mainstream news media, entertainment, many of the big nonprofits — and many do not seem to understand how infuriatingly condescending it looks when they describe their opponents as rubes and bigots.

The Republican Party capitalizes on this. Some days it seems as if this is the only thing the party does. For example, Republican candidates could probably cruise to victory in this fall's elections just by talking about inflation. Instead, many are doubling down on the sort of cultural issues that helped propel Glenn Youngkin to the governor's office in Virginia.

They're doing it because many Americans believe the moral fabric of society is fraying, and the Republican messages on this resonate. In a recent Fox News poll, 60 percent of Hispanic respondents favored laws that would bar teachers from discussing sexual orientation or gender identity with students before the fourth grade. Nearly three-quarters of American voters are very or extremely concerned about "what's taught in public schools."

Documents this year from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee recognized that the Republican culture war issues are "alarmingly potent" and that some battleground state voters think the Democrats are "preachy" and "judgmental."

The fact is the culture wars are not a struggle between the enlightened few and the ignorant and bigoted masses. They are a tension between two legitimate moral traditions. Democrats will never prevail on social issues unless they understand the nature of the struggle.

In the hurly-burly of everyday life, very few of us think about systemic moral philosophies. But deep down we are formed by moral ecologies we are raised within or choose, systems of thought and feeling that go back centuries. We may think we are making up our own minds about things, but usually our judgments and moral sentiments are shaped by these long moral traditions.

In this essay I'm going to try to offer a respectful version of the two rival moral traditions that undergird our morality wars. I'll try to summarize the strengths and weaknesses of each. I'll also try to point to the opportunities Democrats now have to create a governing majority on social and cultural matters.

The phrase "moral freedom" captures a prominent progressive moral tradition. It recognizes the individual conscience as the ultimate authority and holds that in a diverse society, each person should have the right to lead her own authentic life and make up her own mind about moral matters. If a woman decides to get an abortion, then we should respect her freedom of choice. If a teenager concludes they are nonbinary, or decides to transition to another gender, then we should celebrate their efforts to live a life that is authentic to who they really are.

In this ethos society would be rich with a great diversity of human types.

This ethos has a pretty clear sense of right and wrong. It is wrong to try to impose your morality or your religious faith on others. Society goes wrong when it prevents gay people from marrying who they want, when it restricts the choices women can make, when it demeans transgender people by restricting where they can go to the bathroom and what sports they can play after school.

This moral freedom ethos has made modern life better in a variety of ways. There are now fewer restrictions that repress and discriminate against people from marginalized groups. Women have more social freedom to craft their own lives and to be respected for the choices they make. People in the L.G.B.T.Q. communities have greater opportunities to lead open and flourishing lives. There's less conformity. There's more tolerance for different lifestyles. There's less repression and more openness about sex. People have more freedom to discover and express their true selves.

However, there are weaknesses. The moral freedom ethos puts tremendous emphasis on individual conscience and freedom of choice. Can a society thrive if there is no shared moral order? The tremendous emphasis on self-fulfillment means that all relationships are voluntary. Marriage is transformed from a permanent covenant to an institution in which two people support each other on their respective journeys to self-fulfillment. What happens when people are free to leave their commitments based on some momentary vision of their own needs?

If people find their moral beliefs by turning inward, the philosopher Charles Taylor warned, they may lose contact with what he called the "horizons of significance," the standards of truth, beauty and moral excellence that are handed down by tradition, history or God.

A lot of people will revert to what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls "emotivism": What is morally right is what feels right to me. Emotivism has a tendency to devolve into a bland mediocrity and self-indulgence. If we're all creating our own moral criteria based on feelings, we're probably going to grade ourselves on a forgiving curve.

Self-created identities are also fragile. We need to have our identities constantly affirmed by others if we are to feel secure. People who live within this moral ecology are going to be hypersensitive to slights that they perceive as oppression. Politics devolves into identity wars, as different identities seek recognition over the others.

The critics of moral freedom say that while it opens up lifestyle choices, it also devolves into what Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid modernity." When everybody defines his own values, the basic categories of life turn fluid. You wind up in a world in which a Supreme Court nominee like Ketanji Brown Jackson has to dodge the seemingly basic question of what a woman is. I don't blame her. I don't know how to answer that question anymore, either.

Under the sway of the moral freedom ethos, the left has generally won the identity wars but lost the cosmology wars. America has moved left on feminist and L.G.B.T.Q. issues and is much more tolerant of diverse lifestyles. But many Americans don't quite trust Democrats to tend the moral fabric that binds us all together. They worry that the left threatens our national narratives as well as religious institutions and the family, which are the seedbeds of virtue.

The conservative moral tradition has a very different conception of human nature, the world and how the good society is formed. I'll call it "you are not your own," after the recent book by the English professor and Christian author Alan Noble.

People who subscribe to this worldview believe that individuals are embedded in a larger and pre-existing moral order in which there is objective moral truth, independent of the knower. As Charles Taylor summarizes the ethos, "*independent of my will* there is something noble, courageous and hence significant in giving shape to my own life."

In this ethos, ultimate authority is outside the self. For many people who share this worldview, the ultimate source of authority is God's truth, as revealed in Scripture. For others, the ultimate moral authority is the community and its traditions.

We're in a different moral world here, with emphasis on obedience, dependence, deference and supplication. This moral tradition has a loftier vision of perfect good, but it takes a dimmer view of human nature: Left to their own devices, people will tend to be selfish and shortsighted. They will rebel against the established order and seek autonomy. If a person does not submit to the moral order of the universe — or the community — he may become self-destructive, a slave to his own passions.

The healthier life is one lived within limits — limits imposed by God’s commandments, by the customs and sacred truths of a culture and its institutions. These limits on choice root you so you have a secure identity and secure attachments. They enforce habits that slowly turn into virtues.

In the “moral freedom” world you have to be free to realize your highest moral potential.

In the “you are not your own” world you must be morally formed by institutions before you are capable of handling freedom. In this world there are certain fixed categories. Male and female are essential categories of personhood. In this ethos there are limits on freedom of choice. You don’t get to choose to abort your fetus, because that fetus is not just cells that belong to you. That fetus belongs to that which brings forth life.

Researchers Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt and Brian Nosek found that liberals are powerfully moved to heal pain and prevent cruelty. Conservatives, they discovered, are more attuned than liberals to the moral foundations that preserve a stable social order. They highly value loyalty and are sensitive to betrayal. They value authority and are sensitive to subversion.

The strengths of this moral tradition are pretty obvious. It gives people unconditional attachments and a series of rituals and practices that morally form individuals.

The weaknesses of this tradition are pretty obvious, too. It can lead to rigid moral codes that people with power use to justify systems of oppression. This ethos leads to a lot of othering — people not in our moral order are inferior and can be conquered and oppressed.

But the big problem today with the “you are not your own” ethos is that fewer and fewer people believe in it. Fewer and fewer people in the United States believe in God. And more Americans of all stripes have abandoned the submissive, surrendering, dependent concept of the self.

This is the ultimate crisis on the right. Many conservatives say there is an objective moral order that demands obedience, but they’ve been formed by America’s prevailing autonomy culture, just like everybody else. In practice, they don’t actually want to surrender obediently to a force outside themselves; they want to make up their own minds. The autonomous self has triumphed across the political spectrum, on the left where it makes sense, and also on the right, where it doesn’t.

Both of these moral traditions have deep intellectual and historical roots. Both have a place in any pluralistic society. Right now, the conservative world looks politically strong, but it is existentially in crisis. Republicans will probably do extremely well in the 2022 midterms. But conservatism, especially Christian conservatism, is coming apart.

Conservative Christians feel they are under massive assault from progressive cultural elites. Small-town traditionalists feel their entire way of life is being threatened by globalism and much else. They perceive that they are losing power as a cultural force. Many in the younger generations have little use for their god, their traditional rooted communities and their values.

This has produced a moral panic. Consumed by the passion of the culture wars, many traditionalists and conservative Christians have adopted a hypermasculine warrior ethos diametrically opposed to the Sermon on the Mount moral order they claim as their guide. Unable to get people to embrace their moral order through suasion, they now seek to impose their moral order through politics. A movement that claims to make God their god now makes politics god. What was once a faith is now mostly a tribe.

This moral panic has divided the traditionalist world, especially the Christian part of it, a division that has, for example, been described in different ways by me, by my Times colleague Ruth Graham and by Tim Alberta in *The Atlantic*. Millions of Americans who subscribe to the “you are not your own” ethos are appalled by what the Republican Party has become.

So is there room in the Democratic Party for people who don’t subscribe to the progressive moral tradition but are appalled by what conservatism has become?

First, will Democrats allow people to practice their faith even if some tenets of that faith conflict with progressive principles? For example, two bills in Congress demonstrate that clash. They both would amend federal civil rights law to require fair treatment of L.G.B.T.Q. people in housing, employment and other realms of life. One, the Fairness for All Act, would allow for substantial exceptions for religious institutions. A Catholic hospital, say, wouldn’t be compelled to offer gender transition surgeries. The other, the Equality Act, would override existing law that prevents the federal government from substantially burdening individuals’ exercise of religion without a compelling government interest.

Right now, Democrats generally support the latter bill and oppose the former. But supporting the Fairness for All Act, which seeks to fight discrimination while leaving space for religious freedom, would send a strong signal to millions of wavering believers, and it would be good for America.

Second, will Democrats stand up to the more radical cultural elements in their own coalition? Jonathan Rauch was an early champion of gay and lesbian rights. In an article in *American Purpose*, he notes that one wing of the movement saw gay rights as not a left-wing issue but a matter of human dignity. A more radical wing celebrated cultural transgression and disdained bourgeois morality. Ultimately, the gay

rights movement triumphed in the court of public opinion when the nonradicals won and it became attached to the two essential bourgeois institutions — marriage and the military.

Rauch argues that, similarly, the transgender rights movement has become entangled with ideas that are extraneous to the cause of transgender rights. Ideas like: Both gender and sex are chosen identities and denying or disputing that belief amounts to violence. Democrats would make great strides if they could champion transgender rights while not insisting upon these extraneous moral assertions that many people reject.

The third question is, will Democrats realize that both moral traditions need each other? As usual, politics is a competition between partial truths. The moral freedom ethos, like liberalism generally, is wonderful in many respects, but liberal societies need nonliberal institutions if they are to thrive.

America needs institutions built on the “you are not your own” ethos to create social bonds that are more permanent than individual choice. It needs that ethos to counter the me-centric, narcissistic tendencies in our culture. It needs that ethos to preserve a sense of the sacred, the idea that there are some truths so transcendently right that they are absolutely true in all circumstances. It needs that ethos in order to pass along the sort of moral sensibilities that one finds in, say, Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address — that people and nations have to pay for the wages of sin, that charity toward all is the right posture, that firmness in keeping with the right always has to be accompanied by humility about how much we can ever see of the right.

Finally, we need this ethos, because morality is not only an individual thing; it’s something between people that binds us together. Even individualistic progressives say it takes a village to raise a child, but the village needs to have a shared moral sense of how to raise it.

I’ll end on a personal note. I was raised in Lower Manhattan and was shaped by the progressive moral values that prevailed in the late 1960s and the 1970s. But as I’ve grown older I’ve come to see more and more wisdom in the “you are not your own” tradition.

Is there room for people like us in the Democratic Party? Most days I think yes. Some days I’m not sure.

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