



THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF ANGLO-AMERICAN CULTURE

Posted on September 1, 2022 by Nicholas Capaldi



Introduction

The purpose of my address is to retrieve and to make explicit the moral foundations of Anglo-American culture.

What is Anglo-American culture? By Anglo-American culture, we understand the kind of culture that emerged in North-Western Europe, especially England, in the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation period and eventually spread to the United States. The most distinctive institutions of Anglo-American culture are individual autonomy, the rule of law, a republican form of government, and a market economy.

Why ought we to engage in this task of retrieving the moral foundations of Anglo-American culture? To be begin with, Anglo-American culture is the greatest force in the modern world; it has transformed and continues to transform the moral landscape by improving the material conditions of life and by institutionalizing individual freedom. One would think, therefore, that such a phenomenon deserves special attention.

The **second** reason is that Anglo-American culture is not understood even by those of us who are surrounded by it, and that is why we are engaged in an act of retrieval. One explanation for why Anglo-American culture is not understood is, ironically, that it has been defined largely by its critics; so much so that even the defenders of Anglo-American culture have unwittingly adopted the framework of their critics. **At present, there exists no positive, internal, comprehensive framework for understanding Anglo-American culture as a whole.**

The **third** reason is that Anglo-American moral culture is under attack even by its ignorant beneficiaries.

The institutions and practices of Anglo-American culture do not exist in a vacuum. Little attention has been given to understanding the relation between Anglo-Americanism and the totality of our culture. What is not usually made clear even in very illuminating discussions of specific institutions is that Anglo-American culture depends upon and presupposes a framework of **moral presuppositions**. Conflicts within our own culture often reflect ignorance, misunderstanding, or deep disagreement over what those moral presuppositions are. To provide a comprehensive framework that would identify the

moral presuppositions of Anglo-American culture would be to fill a great lacuna in the contemporary intellectual environment.

The **final** reason for embarking upon this explication is that given the attempts on the part of others around the world to emulate Anglo-American culture we are concerned that they often fail by copying the form without the spirit.

In what follows, we identify three key moral presuppositions:

1. a claim to **universality**
2. the assertion of the fundamental moral worth of the free and responsible **individual**, and
3. the recognition of the role of the **nuclear family** as the key institution in nurturing free and responsible individuals.

We shall then proceed to explain how those three moral presuppositions, namely, universality, individuality, and family, inform **the major institutions of Anglo-American culture**, specifically:

- a. a market economy,
- b. a limited/or republican government,
- c. a conception of world order,
- d. toleration, and
- e. a modern form of civic virtue

B. Universality

We turn now to the moral presuppositions. The claim to universality is the claim that Anglo-American culture embodies "a" or "the" fundamental moral truth that is universally applicable to all human beings in every culture. This claim to universality has two components: one formal and the other substantive.

The **formal component** consists in the recognition that if there were no universal truth there would be no rational basis for resolving disagreements or even for discussing them. Without a universal truth, neither the validity nor the invalidity of a particular cultural matrix could be an issue. The recognition of

this formal or logical component of universality allows both for self-criticism and for cross-cultural criticism. To fail to recognize this logical or formal component is to exclude oneself and one's culture from consideration within the substantive debate. To be a legitimate contender requires recognition of the formal component.

Historically, the formal component is articulated **only within Western Civilization**; it originated in those eastern Mediterranean societies that saw themselves as instantiating a cosmic order, most specifically in the Judaic monotheism of the Old Testament, in classical Greek drama, and most clearly in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

C. Individuality

It is, however, not enough to recognize the formal component. Recognizing the need for a universal moral truth is not the same thing as having identified in any substantive way the actual universal moral truths. Logic can take us only so far.

The **substantive moral truth** that is embodied in Anglo-American culture is the inherent worth and dignity of the free and responsible individual. This is a substantive claim inherent in all of Western Civilization.

Let me spell out the content of this concept before discussing its history.

Individuality means:

a. that human beings possess the rational capacity to recognize the universal moral truth; There is a difference between an argument in the sense of what the ancient Greeks called an "*eristic*," the point of which is to vanquish/embarass one's opponent (e.g., accusing them of a micro-aggression), not to find the truth. A *rational* argument is oriented solely towards discovering the truth. The ancient Greeks saw *eristic* as an "*agon*" (the root is the same as that of the English word "agony").

In his dialogue titled "*Euthydemus*" Plato holds an *eristic agon*, the standard practice of the

ancient Greek Sophists, up to ridicule. The Sophists were, roughly, a band of pseudo-philosophers, "mouths for hire" that used deceptive techniques to win arguments and make money, not to find the truth. Plato was, in this dialogue and others, attempting for the first time in human history to create the sort of refined conceptual apparatus needed to distinguish between a mere *eristic* contest (*agon*) and a rational argument governed by the sort of rules designed to lead to the truth.

b. that human beings have the internal capacity to be unconstrained or self-disciplined in their decision to act in accordance with the universal truth, i.e., **free will**;

c. that true freedom and dignity consist in the inner or self-discipline that comes with the exercise of these capacities; and

d. that these capacities can only be discovered retrospectively by their exercise.

The upshot of this conception of individuality is that **the freedom and dignity of individuality cannot be understood except by those who exercise it**, that the self-discipline to exercise it cannot be mechanically induced from the outside and that even the exercise of our rational capacity is a matter of self-discipline. The choice to use one's reason and to use it to the fullest extent, to pursue the argument to its logical conclusion and not merely to the convenient conclusion is not made by reason but by an inner act of self-discipline. **Intellectual virtue presupposes moral virtue.**

This conception of individuality has evolved throughout the history of Western Civilization from the Greek philosophers through the Stoics, Cicero, and Christianity. What I want to call attention to is the specifically **Christian component**.

What Christianity added to our conception of individuality is the recognition that human beings have self-destructive impulses as well as wholesome ones, that the self-destructive impulses can only be overcome by conscious self-discipline, and that we are not fit to assume responsibility for ourselves or others unless we have developed the inner discipline of self-restraint. It is this moral dimension that is needed to supplement the rational insights of classical philosophy. Integrally related to Western Civilization, therefore, is some conception of the human person and its spiritual dimension.

The essence of the Christian insight is that the locus of freedom is within the individual. Self-discipline is not a matter of conformity to some external social or political structure; rather it is conformity to an inner vision. Salvation exists only within the individual conscience; and no moral, social, or political theory is to be taken seriously if it fails to recognize this insight.

There is an enormous difference between cultures of conscience and cultures of shame

How significant is this point? Let me answer with an example. When you have a chance take **two identical maps of Eur-Asia**; draw a line on one of the maps. On one side of that line are all of the communities that have been defined historically by Western Christianity; on the other side are all of the others even including some non-Western versions of Christianity and Islam. Then take the second map of Eur-Asia and draw a line through it. On one side of that line are all of the communities that easily embrace market economies, republican government, and the practice of toleration; on the other side are all those who define themselves by hatred and intolerance of others. You won't have to look very far, for such maps appear every day in the newspapers telling us of new ethnic conflict. What may surprise some of you is that the two lines I have asked you to draw neatly coincide.

The point of my example is that respect for the individual, market economies, and limited/or republican government exist as an integrated trio only in communities historically defined by Western Christianity. Christianity has encouraged the development of the inner-directed individual; such individuals thrive in market economies; and republican government maximizes respect for the inner spiritual domain.

The road to the modern conception of individuality has not been a short and smooth one. It has taken at least two to three millennia. That is why it is important to tell the story. We remind ourselves of how we got to where we are in order to understand where and who we are. It is, therefore, not surprising to observe the struggles of other societies some of whose leaders and critics promise or demand or expect the same results in two weeks of demonstrations or who suppose you can have a plan to implement this sort of individuality.

I want to stress that Anglo-American culture is not simply the product of Athens and Jerusalem. A more nuanced history (subject of another essay) will show that individual autonomy, the nuclear family, etc. were peculiar features of Germanic tribes (recognized by Tacitus) and ultimately Indo-Europeans who migrated from the Steppes (even into Greece and Rome), that certain peculiarities of the market economy, limited government (Magna Carta has no analogue in the rest of Europe) and especially the

'rule of law' were unique to England and to the Anglo-American world. Terms like "Western" or "Occidental" or "Nationalism" do not fully capture this uniqueness. Nor can this phenomenon be explained and understood in terms of some theory like 'liberalism' or 'conservatism'.

What is also crucial for us to remember is that even within our own Anglo-American culture going back as far as the Renaissance and the Reformation **many people have not made the transition to individuality**. There is a whole complicated history behind this, but what is important is to recognize that the most serious problem within modern Anglo-American societies is the presence of the failed or **incomplete individual**. Being an incomplete individual is a state of mind. It is not directly correlated with income, intelligence, or how articulate you are. Some incomplete individuals are highly intelligent. Either unaware of or lacking faith in their ability to exercise self-discipline, the incomplete individual seeks escape into the collective identity of communities insulated from the challenge of opportunity. These are people focused on avoiding failure rather than on achieving success. Phenomenologically speaking, the incomplete individual can identify himself/herself by feelings of envy, resentment, self-distrust, victimization, and self-pity; in short, an inferiority complex.

What really inhibits these people is **not** a lack of opportunity, **not** a lack of political rights, and **not** a lack of resources but a character defect, a **moral inadequacy**. Having little or no sense of individuality they are incapable of loving what is best in themselves; unable to love themselves, they are incapable of loving others; incapable of loving others, they cannot sustain life within the family; in fact, they find family life stultifying. What they substitute for love of self, others, and family is loyalty to a mythical community. Instead of an umpire they want a leader, and they conceive of such leaders as protectors who relieve them of all responsibility. This is what makes their sense of community pathological. What they end up with are leaders who are their mirror image: leaders who are themselves incomplete individuals and who seek to control others because they cannot control themselves, who seek the emasculation of autonomous individuals, who prize equality and not competition. In place of a market economy and limited government, we get collectivity as well as economic and political tyranny.

D. Market Economy

The single most important event that has made modern Anglo-American culture possible is the rise of the market economy. While market economies existed in embryonic form in the Middle Ages, it was in the sixteenth century that the market economy began to transform the world. That transformation was aided and abetted by the appearance of the modern individual. What happens when a market

economy is understood as the expression of an **individualist moral culture**? To answer this question, let us look at two things, the concept of wealth and the role of the family.

1. There are two ways of defending a market economy, one instrumental and one moral. Some will defend the market economy on the basis of its greater productivity and power. We choose, however, to defend a market economy on moral grounds. **Wealth is a good thing because:**

(a) it enhances the human condition. Income is not merely a means to consumer satisfaction, nor merely an incentive. Rather, income is **a means to accomplishment**. Participation in a market economy informed by an individualist moral culture actually promotes a variety of forms of virtuous behavior. This is a point that is lost on those, especially intellectuals, whose hostility to the market leads to a pervasive ignorance and misrepresentation of the operations of the market economy.

(b) Wealth liberates us from the culture of poverty. Whereas in the medieval world it was wealth that created a scandal, the scandal of the modern world is the existence of poverty.

(c) Private wealth provides a check on the power of the government, and leads to the expansion of individual liberties.

(d) Finally, wealth provides the dynamic of social reform.

(e) The family is a private social security system.

2. We turn now to the family. **The nuclear family is the key institution in a market economy understood as the expression of an individualist moral culture. It is the family that provides the cultural context of individuality.** It has performed this function in a number of ways:

(f) The family provides support for mobility, a common pattern being that the first established member creates a base to which other family members can come later and thus ease the burden of transition; in poorer families the pattern is one of concentrating savings on giving a special advantage, such as education, to one member; and surely the most

common pattern is seen in the sacrifices parents make for the education of their children.

(g) One of the greatest motivations that energetic and creative people bring to the marketplace is not only the desire to found a fortune but the desire to have a durable and substantial legacy to pass on to their children.

(h) Individuality is grossly misrepresented when it is pictured as greed, as lack of community, and as failing to provide binding moral standards. It is from the family that our individual imbibes his emotional support and it is the improvement of the material and moral prospects of one's family that sustains him/her. **Individuality is not a private matter, it is a family affair.**

(i) I do not speak of the family in a timeless context, but rather as family life has emerged in modern Anglo-American culture. For most of history and in most cultures the human being has had a collective identification, but in modern Anglo-American cultures the attitude of the family to its members is remarkably different. For example, **one looks very differently on a child perceived as a subject of cultivation** as opposed to a child perceived as the inadvertent product of a biological process or as an object of utility.

E. Limited Government

The second most important event in the development of Anglo-American culture has been the concept of limited government. By limited government or republican government is meant a government where all power is checked, balanced, or limited in some way. Our founding fathers created such a Republic and not a democracy. The difference is significant, and they knew what they were doing.

Limited government is a good thing. It is a good thing because it maximizes respect for the inner spiritual domain. One of the great and lasting contributions of Christianity is that it has **de-divinized the state**, that is, it has transferred the locus of the ultimate good from the state to the spiritual domain of the individual.

What modern individuality stands opposed to is the idea of a communal or collective good over and

above the good of the free and responsible individuals who make up the society. Some have seen in this the loss of a common purpose and moral foundations. May I suggest that what has been missed is the different sense of what is common and what is moral. **What we share in common is not an interest but the need to realize our individuality.** A great threat to modern Anglo-American culture is the use of the rhetoric of communal interest to mask private agendas.

The consequence of allowing individuals to pursue their individuality in their own way is a society consisting of diverse and contending interests. **The function of political activity is to defend and advance particular contending interests.** It is a form of advocacy and negotiation.

The function of government in modern Anglo-American culture is to facilitate political negotiation within the confines of the inherited moral framework. It requires statesmen not leaders.

As we have already argued, the cultivation of individuality is not within the province of political or governmental agencies. Good governments do not create great societies or even try to; it is the mark of a great society that it demands good government. A government is good not when it tries to pursue the mythical collective good but when it focuses on removing evil. Thus, while the function of politics is to protect and to advance interests, the function of government is to control corruption. Controlling corruption cannot be done when government serves one interest (mythical, grandiose, or otherwise) or itself becomes an interest group (deep-state bureaucracies).

How do we deal with corruption? We deal with corruption in two ways:

(a) First, we adhere to the principle of **checks and balances** not just as a political principle but as an economic and social one.

(b) Second, we **separate the intellectual elite from the political elite**; this allows intellectual elites to check political elites as well as each other; as a rule, the brightest and the best do not go into government, and that is all to the good; if we find members of the intellectual elite who have well developed political skills we make them deans, provosts, and college presidents, but nothing more.

Specifically, what the intellectual elite can contribute to this process is the on-going explication of the inherited framework of principles. Neither managerial nor public relations skills, neither legal nor

economic expertise, neither social science nor technical thinking of any kind is a substitute for common-sense moral intuitions about our intersubjectively held principles.

F. World Order

What we have discovered so far is that the major moral concept of Anglo-American culture is individual autonomy. We have also seen that the economic system most compatible with an individualist moral culture is a market economy, and that the political system most compatible with it is a republican form of government. What would happen if every society in the world were to adopt a market economy and a republican form of government based upon an individualist moral culture? **Immanuel Kant** asked this question at the end of the 18th century, 200 years ago. His answer, which is our answer, is that there would be world peace. Rather than present a detailed argument for this thesis, **I shall ask one simple question: how many of the major international conflicts in the last 200 years have occurred between two sides both of which had market economies and republican forms of government based upon an individualist moral culture? The answer is none!** Societies with market economies, republican forms of government, where both are based upon an individualist moral culture do not go to war with each other. What they do is negotiate trade pacts.

You may be tempted to ask at this point, what right do we have to proffer our views as a model for others? That is a good question. How do we know that our ideas of freedom are the right ones? Shouldn't we allow others to decide for themselves how they want to understand freedom?

Merely stating this objection shows that the objector already accepts our notion of freedom as individual autonomy. To let others decide for themselves is precisely to treat them as ends and not as means. When we talk about others deciding for themselves we most certainly do not mean letting a self-appointed elite decide for all. Is there anyone who believes that when one person, one economic interest group, one gender, one religion, one race, one ethnic group does the deciding for others that it makes sense to call this letting "them" decide for themselves? **"Deciding for themselves"** means, if it means anything at all, allowing each autonomous individual to decide for himself/herself, and when applied to a state this has to mean a public, unrigged and free election with universal suffrage and without reprisals. That is, it means a republican form of government.

The issue we face today is not whether there should be some kind of global culture. Events are already pushing us in that direction. **The issue is not whether but what kind of global culture**, what kind of

unity, and what will be the parameters of diversity within that unity. **I know of no serious alternative to Anglo-American culture as the model**; Anglo-American culture is self-critical, characterized by its striving for universality, has as its great strength the power of assimilation, and it is a fertile source of adaptation of what has been and still can be absorbed from other historical cultures. Hence, this is all the more reason that we understand it, deal with its problems intelligently, and that we not experience a failure of nerve lest the world lapse back into barbarism as a result of our negligence.

G. Toleration

The most obvious feature of Anglo-American culture is its tolerance. The most obvious feature of non-Anglo-American culture is the lack of toleration, usually seen as strife between or rejection of what is different. It is not freedom that unleashes hate; it is tyranny that has prevented the growth of that individuality which overcomes **the pathology of communalism**.

What we tend to forget is that **tolerance is not neutrality, and it is not nihilism**. It is not the case that every view is as true as every other; it is not the case that every way of life is just as legitimate as every other. We tolerate precisely that with which we disagree, otherwise we misunderstand the word. **To tolerate is not to legitimate**. Nor does tolerance mean that we cannot speak out against what we take to be wrong. We hear so much about listening to the other side that we tend to forget that we also have an obligation to speak out and to challenge that with which we disagree.

Tolerance is itself based upon a principle deeply embedded within Christianity, namely, that the only way to truth is through **individual inner conviction**, and inner conviction cannot be coerced from the outside. Tolerance is thus based upon moral principles, principles that stress the centrality of individual autonomy. Given its origins in Western Christianity, again it is no accident that tolerance is found only on one side of the map that I earlier called to your attention.

Moral conflicts are best handled through persuasion and civility rather than coercion. But one thing we must not do is to confuse patience and civility with self-doubt or tacit consent.

There is only one thing that cannot be tolerated: we cannot tolerate those who do not subscribe to the principle of toleration, and we cannot tolerate those whose practices or policies frustrate or undermine the capacity of others to become autonomous and responsible. We cannot tolerate those who fail to

discern the difference between the art of persuasion and coercion, and we most especially cannot tolerate those who would seek to undermine the major institution where the arts of persuasion are honed, namely the university.

H. Civic Virtue in an Anglo-American Culture

The most serious complaint of those who feel uncomfortable with modern Anglo-American culture is that we have lost a sense of civic virtue. What is usually meant is that individuals are focused upon private matters concerning themselves, or their families at best, instead of getting involved in public business. In short, Anglo-American culture is frequently accused of having surrendered its soul to self-interest.

I want to answer this serious complaint in the following ways.

First, the only public business worthy of the name is the business of providing the context within which individuals can have greater and greater control over their own lives. It is a contradiction in terms to think that giving greater and greater control to public agencies increases individual freedom. While relief is an unquestionable social obligation which the demise of traditional communities, responsible aristocracies, and Church wealth has devolved onto the state for want of any other agency, it is open to discussion whether **redistribution** policies can be effective, whether they are the best means of dealing with the problem, and whether policies of **redistribution** conflict with other legitimate social objectives.

Second, it is a misunderstanding of individuality to see it as opposed to the notion of a cultural whole. You cannot be an autonomous individual on your own, rather individuality requires the support of a Anglo-American culture in general, and family life in particular. In seeking this context for myself, I seek it necessarily for others. To the extent that others do not share it, my own is less secure.

There is yet **another reason**. A truly autonomous individual is one who defines himself or herself. The perception we have of ourselves as self-defining cannot be sustained if we are constantly dealing with those whom we think of or have to treat as inferiors. The double standards that prevail in many institutions, standards that demand less of some than of others invariably reconfirm the perception that we are dealing with inferiors. It takes an enormous act of bad faith to ignore this.

A true individual can maintain his autonomy only by interacting with other autonomous beings, that is by interacting with equals. It follows from this that **civic virtue in a modern Anglo-American culture requires us to help others, and we help others primarily by helping them to achieve autonomy. Equality has to be understood as the moral capacity for being autonomous** not as an equal division of the spoils or redistribution of social badges of prestige. To feel slighted in the recognition of others, to be obsessed with keeping up with the Joneses instead of maintaining your own internal standards of integrity, is to reveal oneself as lacking in personal autonomy.

Those who feel alienated are precisely those who are incomplete individuals. We cannot help them to achieve autonomy by reinforcing the **misperception** they have of themselves as victims. This is a cop-out, and a symptom of the pathology of communalism. We cannot help others by discouraging them from helping themselves.

The great internal challenge that we face is to help these incomplete individuals to mature into truly autonomous individuals. The only way to become an individual is to become conscious of one's own power for self-discipline. This is a moral task, not a technological one. Hence it cannot be mechanically induced from the outside. That is why nation-building always fails! All we can provide in the way of policy are opportunities to learn autonomy. But opportunities are not opportunities if there is no risk of failure, no standard of success.

On the level of public policy this means expanding the market economy, for it is the market economy that drives social reform; it is the market economy that empowers individuals. But we all know that this is not enough, especially if incomplete individuals cannot be brought to test themselves within that context. How do we help them to get that far? There is only one social institution within which it seems possible to learn self-respect and the glory of self-discipline, and that institution is the family. Those who mourn the loss of traditional communities ignore the most important and original community, the family, and they ignore as well the prolific growth of voluntary communities.

Even here we must be observant of the flawed character of so much of modern family life. There are no positive formulas here, but there is **one negative formula: anything which weakens family life undermines the only institution we know of that encourages development of free and responsible individuals**. It is only within the nuclear family that an individual can be valued in and for himself/herself. And it is only within the nuclear family that an individual is encouraged to make the kind of self-disclosures and self-examination that will enable him or her to recognize the need for

change and develop the self-discipline to do so. The increasing threat to the family is its loss of function as more and more is taken over by public agencies who thus compete for the attention and esteem of children.

You cannot help others achieve autonomy by creating public institutions which wield greater and greater power over individuals. All of our attempts to do this so far have resulted in economically undermining the rich and middle income citizens without improving the lot of the poor; instead of transferring income from the richer to the poorer we have transferred power from the individual to the state; instead of helping fragile families we have encouraged them to abdicate a fundamental social responsibility, that of contributing in their private capacity to the advancement of their dependents and surroundings; and most especially we have impoverished the spirit of our commonwealth. In short, I would suggest that most if not all of the programs designed to redistribute income have had as an inadvertent consequence the undermining of the family. In undermining the nuclear family we undermine the one institution needed to sustain the individuality which is the heart of Anglo-American culture. Those who are concerned with the flawed character of American family life have missed and continue to ignore this dimension of the problem.

In order to help others to achieve individuality we must begin by treating them as beings capable of being rational and responsible. We treat them as rational equals by telling them, when we think appropriate, just how silly, how dead wrong, and how dangerously irresponsible their perception of Anglo-American culture is. An equal is someone who does not have to be patronized but to whom we can say "your argument sucks!" And we treat them as responsible equals by insisting that they be held responsible for both their silly arguments and their destructive behavior

A free and equal citizen is one who lays no obligation upon fellow citizens that he (or she) does not himself (or herself) assume. **It is thus only in Anglo-American culture that the false dichotomy of self and others is overcome. There is no serious moral alternative to Anglo-American culture in the modern world; and I do not believe that there are fundamental moral flaws in Anglo-American culture; there are only pockets of people still unwilling to accept the challenge and the burdens of being both free and responsible.** Are we up to that challenge?

If we succeed in encouraging incomplete individuals to become autonomous ones in our own culture, then we can serve as mentors to other cultures.

Let me conclude by saying that: just as ancient Athens strove to be the school of Hellas so America can strive to be the mentor—not the ruler—of the modern world.

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Featured: "The Great Rapprochement," a poster for the United States and Great Britain Industrial Exposition, ca. 1899-1900.

