Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Thomson, Irene Taviss.  
Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas. 
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Observers since the time of Tocqueville have noted Americans’ propensity to “see the world in moral terms” (Robin M. Williams 1957, 397). The dominant Protestant denominations have called on people to follow their consciences, and even agnostic and atheistic reformers have tended to be “utopian moralists who believe in the perfectibility of man and of civil society and in the immorality, if not specifically sinful character, of the opposition” (Lipset 1975, 144). Perhaps Americans share this view because the “founding myth” of the United States is that of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Bay Colony rather than merchants in Boston, planters in Virginia, or inventors in Philadelphia. American political discourse has often been a matter “not of tariffs and raw metals but of a Cross of Gold, not of a rival hegemonic power but of an Evil Empire” (Leege et al. 2002, 41). Contemporary Americans are more likely than Canadians to think that “raising moral standards” is a highly important goal (Hoover et al. 2002, 361). The language of morality so dominates discourse in the United States that even a writer decrying the “God-drunk society” in which 240 million of the 300 million Americans believe in the return of Jesus Christ contends that Americans have “a moral responsibility” to give up such “abject superstition” (S. Harris 2007, 44).
Far from one side advocating moral judgments while the other eschews them, all sides in the culture wars frame issues in the language of morality while speaking disparagingly of their opponents as either immoral or “moralistic.” No one argues in favor of “moral relativism.” Conservatives tend to lump together moral and cultural relativism (see Arkes 1989; J. Gray 1992; Lipman 1991b; Mansfield 2000) and to accuse the Left of espousing relativism, but progressives argue that the cultural relativism that they endorse does not imply that “there are no ultimate moral principles” (di Leonardo 1996, 29). And all agree in principle that it is foolish to attempt to legislate morality, even if such legislation might be the outcome of their preferred policies.

**Through the Lenses of Morality**

Although their understandings of morality may differ, both Left and Right clearly see their perspectives as moral. The Right speaks of the “moral foundations of capitalism” (Gilder 1986, 31) and suggests that capitalism breeds virtues such as honesty, achievement, and cooperativeness (Hyde 1990b, 53). The Left talks of the “moral principles” underlying progressive programs for economic democracy, antiracism, feminism, and gay rights (di Leonardo 1996, 29) and suggests that some immorality—such as the intolerance of social differences—is espoused by those “who claim the mantle of God” (Judis 1999, 56).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the progressive movement railed against the immorality of individual greed and wealth acquired through financial manipulation rather than hard labor (Rhys H. Williams and Alexander 1994, 10). In our more conservative era, a connection is often made between the free market and religious fundamentalism. Evangelicals share a conviction that “economic and spiritual freedoms go hand in hand” (J. D. Hunter 1991, 111). Regardless of the ideology, ideas “without explicit ethical support risk appearing individualistic to an immoral degree” (Hicks 2006, 508).

Well-known conservative and liberal commentators have long seen economics and morality as intertwined. Both sides see extramarket forces as important in shaping the economic system. Conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama (1999) argue against the frequently heard allegation that the
amoral drive for profit and efficiency undermines the moral basis of capitalism. Rather, he suggests, people who repeatedly do business with each other establish norms to ensure trust. Self-interested individuals seek to acquire a reputation for honesty or fairness. Religion may help, but it is not required. In this view, contemporary conservatives hark back to the observations of Tocqueville, who saw “the principle of self-interest rightly understood” as disciplining people “in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, self-command” (1848/1961, 2:131).

Liberals such as Paul Krugman, conversely, see an immorality in contemporary economic life because of the permissiveness that has altered earlier understandings of fair compensation. The norms of fairness that had been in place since the New Deal began to unravel in the 1980s and the 1990s. In their stead, a new “anything goes” ethic has arisen, allowing for soaring rates of executive compensation and generating extreme social inequality (Krugman 2002). While Fukuyama and other conservatives see the sexual revolution as the root of immorality, Krugman here appropriates the “anything goes” idea to explain financial rather than sexual licentiousness and self-indulgence.

If Krugman and other liberals decry the excesses of executive pay, conservatives, too, see moral failure in the absence of self-restraint. But their concern is a broad one about the decline of the work ethic, and their targets of criticism are lower down in the class hierarchy. Thus, a National Review editorial argues that our system is “in deep trouble because it lacks the traditional moral imperatives of self-restraint and delayed gratification.” The result is “non-competitive shoddy workmanship, an underclass locked in dependency, and widespread cultural vulgarity” (Editorial 1988a, 21). To the contrary, says a more progressive analyst. Consumer hedonism has transformed the old Protestant Ethic values. But “what is at stake is not the decline of morality but its redefinition” (Judis 1999, 56).

Commentators on the right portray themselves as the defenders of “‘bourgeois morality’ (which is drawn in the main from classic Jewish and Christian morality)” while labeling the Left as devoted to “a radical and thoroughgoing moral relativism” (Hyde 1990a, 25). The Left has created an “upside-down moral world” in which free choice is all that matters (Chiusano 1996, 56). Individual freedom is the supreme concern, even among children. Thus, the sex education supported by liberals is “unin-
formed by any value base but the moral autonomy of the child and the purported objectivity of the educator” (Nadler 1997, 50). Children are taught “the value-free science of sex” and are “trusted to make sexual decisions all on their own, rationally, using the evaluative and normative criterion of personal comfort” (Mindus 2000, 46).

Conservatives in our sample of political commentary contend that the firm exercise of authority is required to make people good. One writer in National Review notes that this statement is perfectly obvious but must nevertheless be voiced because authority is currently on the “Index of Prohibited Concepts and Words” (Martin 1991, 26). For their part, those on the left characterize many conservatives as “authoritarian” (Ehrenreich 1993b; Hitchens 1985). The New Left that emerged in the 1960s, as progressives see it, was all about questioning authority. The New Right, in contrast, developed to defend authority—whether legal, familial, religious, or military—in distinction to the Old Right, which had an antiauthority streak, as represented by the likes of Ayn Rand (Ehrenreich 1993b, 74).

The Left rejects the accusation that its programs are based on “license or rebellion” (di Leonardo 1996, 29), just as the Right rejects the idea that an inherent opposition exists between the workings of the capitalist marketplace and adherence to traditional values. All agree that individuals can and do make moral choices. “Blaming ‘the system’ for the moral failures of individual Americans is a cop-out,” says a well-known conservative (Hyde 1990b, 53). All of us “must subject our choices to moral criticism,” says another (Lipman 1991b, 53). Both sides face difficulties here, however, as a writer in Time points out: “Just as conservatives think they can restore a moral center without making concessions to government activism, liberals think they can revive the language of morality without being judgmental” (R. Wright 1996, 45).

Writers on the left see themselves as espousing causes of benefit to all. Movements in support of women’s rights or gay rights, for example, do not simply serve the interests of these groups. Ideally, “every outgroup carries with it a critical perspective, forged in the painful experiences of rejection and marginalization.” The aim of the women’s movement is “to improve an imperfect world,” not just to have women exchange places with men (Ehrenreich 1990, 15; see also Gevisser 1988). Feminists are called on to reaffirm “the moral legitimacy of women’s liberation” and to recognize that “a repressive sexual politics “ makes people “feel guilty about aspiring
to freedom and happiness, and thus more inclined to bow to corporate and governmental authority” (Willis 1981, 495).

Disputes over the university canon and political correctness have also been seen through the lens of morality. One conservative sees the debates as representing a “moral divide” where one side is wrong and the other is right (Teachout 1992, 54). Political correctness “in its purest forms is evil,” and liberalism is unable to “supply the moral basis for effective resistance to evil.” Liberalism entails radical tolerance of all competing values; it insists that “opponents of right reason are never evil but merely misinformed” (55). On the other side, a progressive criticizes “political correctness” for failing to support true diversity, though “morally, it may pose as a compliment to pluralism and ‘diversity’” (Hitchens 1991, 472). Since critics on the right similarly note that the claim of “diversity” is often used to enforce conformity to certain ideas, a Left-Right consensus exists against the ills of political correctness.

Popular culture fare presents both moral issues and the difficulties of weighing considerations of morality against those of censorship. Media companies that do not censor rap artists’ violent messages are accused of exhibiting “moral irresponsibility,” but companies that restrict such messages are accused of “corporate censorship” (Kinsley 1992c, 88). Several commentators advocate media self-censorship regarding sex, violence, and drug use (C. P. Alexander 1990; Kinsley 1992c). Conversely, a progressive argues that given our culture’s violence, obscenity, sexism, and racism, smothering the messages we do not want to hear with “morally bankrupt, politically self-serving Muzak” also is not desirable. Isn’t it odd, he observes, that the free market reigns “except when rap music captures a lion’s share of the multi-billion dollar music market. Then, in the name of decency and family values, we’re duty bound to regulate it” (quoted in Sachs and Washburn 1995, 33). But The New Republic takes liberals to task for failing to recognize that “lives are ruined by the ethos of ‘anything goes.’” Since licentiousness in popular culture harms children, and liberal activists support government intervention for the public good, why not here? (Editorial 1988b, 7). During the controversy surrounding rapper Ice-T’s album, Cop Killer, a progressive argued that “our free market of ideas and images . . . shouldn’t be any less free for a black man than for other purveyors of ‘irresponsible’ sentiments” (Ehrenreich 1992a, 89). And a writer in Time contended that “X-rated pop deserves its First Amendment cloak” because
“it speaks from the gut of disenfranchised America.” One cannot argue, he said, that the material offends “community standards” because its popularity means that “a lot of the community is laughing and singing along” (Corliss 1990, 99).

If those on the right decry the immorality and depravity of television talk shows, those on the left find it “morally repulsive” that the guests “for the most part . . . are so needy—of social support, of education, of material resources and self-esteem—that they mistake being the center of attention for being actually loved and respected” (Ehrenreich 1995, 92). Thus, the Right appears to criticize the immorality manifest in popular culture, while the Left focuses on the structural injustices that it sees as the underlying causes of immorality.

Aspects of the feminist movement are likewise fraught with issues of morality. A conservative attacks the feminist “gender sliming” that labels all men rapists or potential rapists (Morrow 1994a, 55). Such a contention is not only outrageous but also “a moral stupidity,” since it eliminates the distinction between decent men and rapists (57–58). A progressive assails the “difference feminism” that seeks to portray men and women as having different needs and accuses it of selling women domestic labor “as a badge of moral worth” (Pollitt 1992b, 805). A conservative notes that feminist concerns about women’s health issues that have the effect of portraying women as ill might reflect “a subconscious way of saying that they want their moral superiority back”—a superiority women had in the days when they used illness as “a protective coloration” (King 1992, 64). From the perspective of the Left, of course, this alleged moral superiority came at the cost of economic and social inequality. And “there is no moral justification for treating women as having lesser rights than men” (Etzioni 1993, 76). A critic of radical feminism, however, sees earlier “first wave” feminism, which had an equity agenda, as carrying a “moral authority” that is lacking in newer, more radical, feminism, which seeks to eliminate all hints of male dominance (Sommers 1992, 32).

For some conservatives, “the woman’s morality is the ultimate basis of all morality.” Most of what we define as humane and individual “originates in the mother’s love for her children,” and “the woman in the home with her child is the last bastion against the amorality of the technocratic marketplace when it strays from the moral foundations of capitalism” (Gilder 1986, 31). In the battles between the feminists and the traditionalists,
women will decide what happens next, since “women transmit culture” (Charen 1984, 27).

Conservatives also assert that gender traits “make a tremendous difference in the way people can and will act. Any worldview that pretends otherwise is either dishonestly or maliciously inviting human misery” (Marshner 1988, 39). While feminists assert that the real differences between men and women are “merely cultural” and therefore are amenable to elimination, this idea is clearly false. No society really believes that women could be as aggressive as men or men as nurturing as women (S. Goldberg 1993, 34–35). The behavioral and emotional differences between men and women “are rooted in male and female physiologies,” and “all social systems conform to the limits imposed by that reality” (S. Goldberg 1991, 30). An editorial in National Review that advocates single-sex schools because they boost girls’ achievement notes that feminists view sex as a socially constructed category, like race. “But sex is not at all like race. Sex matters a whole lot, particularly for adolescent girls, who are wont to exchange concern over grades for concern over appearance in the presence of boys. That’s not an artifact of sexism; it’s a fact of life” (1998b, 17–18). In the dominant conservative view, biology trumps culture and has great significance for human behavior and morality.

Progressives are more likely to see behavior and morality as rooted in cultural realities, though at least one article on the progressive side cautions against the currently fashionable view that denies that “any biologically based commonalities . . . cut across cultural differences” (Ehrenreich and McIntosh 1997, 12). It is too simple, the authors contend, to see biology as deterministic while viewing culture “as a domain where power relations with other humans are the only obstacle to freedom.” In truth, culture is not “a realm of perfect plasticity” (15). A similar concession is made on the other side, as a conservative writer concedes that however much the reality of male and female behavior is biologically based, cultural definitions matter: “the attitudes and values held by men and women do determine whether they live their lives on a dance floor or a battlefield, and this is not such a little thing” (S. Goldberg 1993, 36).

While liberal feminists early on sought to improve women’s standing in the public spheres of business and politics, more radical feminists argued that one could not separate the public and private in this way. As one progressive writer in our sample has explained, radical feminists have always
“emphasized the connection between women’s exclusion from full participation in the public world and their subordination in the so-called private sphere of familial and sexual relations” (Willis 1981, 494). Of course, the idea that marriage is not a purely private matter is also endorsed by a conservative who sees “the increasing privatization of marriage” as “a key legal and cultural factor contributing to our current marriage crisis.” Government must recognize, protect, and strengthen marriage in much the same way that government acts with respect to private property (Gallagher 1999, 40). To be sure, Left and Right have different perceptions about what marriage should look like.

Abortion and Homosexuality

On abortion and homosexuality, the issues most closely associated with morality in the public mind, a surprising degree of complexity exists. The arguments of both supporters and opponents are more nuanced and ambivalent than one might expect in a “culture war.”

Unsurprisingly, those on the right see abortion as immoral and express grave concern about the “lack of moral revulsion” regarding abortions (“The America We Seek” 1996, 38), while those on the left question whether it can “ever be moral for a woman to be pregnant against her will” (Houpert 2000, 7). Yet the antiabortion side is willing to consider matters of personal interests and happiness, and the proabortion side is willing to engage with issues of morality and “sin.”

Most Americans, suggests one writer in National Review, “deliberately refuse to face up to the moral character of abortion because morality no longer seems to serve our interests.” But since the “new morality” of feminism has not made most women happy—“many of them are poorer and more lonely”—“the missing piece of the puzzle is the link between the moral life and the happy one. Life without abortion is often more difficult; life with abortion promises to be easier. But in the end it creates its own problems. And in a sense not meant by whoever coined the phrase, living well is the best revenge” (Cunningham 1992, 48). This statement represents a thoroughly American blend of moralism and pragmatism.

Supporters of abortion rights disagree internally on the issue of morality. Some feminists consider abortion to be essential to women’s freedom
and therefore view abortion as a moral demand. A “feminist moral vision proposes to extend to women—and to the entire realm of familial and sexual life—the democratic principles of self-determination, equality, and the right to pursuit of happiness.” Feminists should therefore not accept the terms dictated by the Right but should “assert women’s moral right to autonomy and sexual love, and therefore their moral right to kill an unwanted fetus” (Willis 1981, 494–95).

In contrast, another supporter of abortion rights argues that women are entitled to feel a “sense of sin” regarding their abortions (Wolf 1995, 34). We need to “mourn the evil—necessary evil though it may be—that is abortion” and to treat the decision to abort the fetus with the “moral gravity” that it deserves (28). The abortion decision is “a place of moral struggle, of self-interest mixed with selflessness” (32). Abortion rights should be defended “within a moral framework that admits that the death of a fetus is a real death.” The failure to address the moral issues of abortion puts us in danger “of losing what can only be called our souls” (26). Another pro-choice writer proposes that abortion should be legal in the first two trimesters but banned in the third, when the fetus exhibits full brain activity. Banning third trimester abortions “would harm the rights of American women, but the harm would be small, while the moral foundation of abortion choice overall would be strengthened” (Easterbrook 2000, 25). A feminist responds with disdain to this suggestion, however, noting that abortion is “an issue of sexual politics and morality” and that the fetus is, after all, “being carried inside a woman’s body” (Houppert 2000, 7).

Another attempt to support abortion as a moral right contends that abortion may be seen as a pro-family and pro-social act, since under some circumstances choosing to give birth “may be socially dysfunctional, morally irresponsible or even cruel.” Whereas the right-to-lifers believe it is “a moral imperative” to keep an anencephalic infant alive, those who support middle-class family life believe fertility must be effectively and rationally controlled using all the technologies available, including prenatal screening and abortion. The issue is not the furtherance of individual freedom but the needs of the family (Muller 1995, 27). The idea that abortions might be necessary for the benefit of the family of course runs directly contrary to the assumptions of those in the pro-life movement who view the pro-choice arguments as a manifestation of excessive individualism. They see the rights of the autonomous individual, embedded in court decisions,
as threatening “to give us an America in which the only actors of consequence are the individual and the state; no other community, including the community of husband and wife, or the community of parents and children, will have effective constitutional standing” (“The America We Seek” 1996, 38–39). Some abortion rights advocates contend that the issue is not individual privacy but rather the larger society’s responsibility to help women with both child rearing and abortion (Petchesky 1990, 734).

Issues of class are pervasive in the culture wars, and advocates of abortion rights are mindful of class differences. One of them differentiates between the “middle-class vision of family life”—one that assumes that fertility is to be rationally controlled, with a repertoire that includes abortion—and those of other social classes. An “elite culture” emphasizes career advancement for both men and women while conceptions of family life among the lower-middle and working classes are more fatalistic (Muller 1995, 28). A conservative writer characterizes the abortion debates as a “class-based Kulturkampf” (Neuhaus 1989b, 42). And a progressive writer decries the use of individual privacy claims in abortion disputes as “a class-biased and racist concept” because it fails to provide the economic and social conditions under which poor and nonwhite women would be able to exercise their individual rights (Petchesky 1990, 734).

The Left also criticizes the moral stance of such “antichoice militants” as Operation Rescue, which commits violence to rescue the helpless “unborn.” These groups see themselves as engaged in a moral protest akin to the antislavery or anti-Holocaust movements. Yet their targets, likened to slaveholders or Nazis, are women who enter abortion clinics. These women “are to be treated as being without rights or freedom from assault: that is the moral sensibility of Operation Rescue” (Green 1989, 178).

Some who see abortion as morally abhorrent greet with derision the idea that there can be any moral complexity attached to abortion. What, then, is “the source of the intellectual and moral difficulty?” one such critic asks. “Is a mortal assault on a fetus something on the order of assault and battery? Or is it no different from stuffing a tomato into a blender?” (Buckley 1990a, 62). Americans should “consider the possibility of a connection—cultural as well as legal—between the virtue deficit in contemporary American life and the abortion license” (“The America We Seek” 1996, 41).

Commentators of all persuasions recognize the ambivalences and hypocrisies attendant upon abortion decisions. Americans appear to favor
both pragmatic and moral responses to the issue. As one commentator per-
ceives, “Americans want to register their moral disapproval and keep the
procedure available at the same time” (Caldwell 1999, 15). Most Americans
say that they oppose abortions for lifestyle reasons, such as not wanting an-
other baby now, not being able to afford one, and not being married. Yet
they use abortion for precisely such reasons. Because abortion has become
an “indispensable part of the normal middle-American toolkit,” there is “a
rock-solid, European-style support for abortion, with American moral pos-
turing plastered on top” (16). “A pro-life regime is not really something
Americans want—it’s just something they feel they ought to want” (14).
Most Americans see abortion as a “necessary evil” (Forsythe 1999, 42).

For many Americans, the way to resolve this dilemma is to avoid think-
ing or talking about abortion. We fear that “to voice any doubts might
jeopardize our tenuous hold” on the issue “and could give aid and succor
to the other side” (Carlson 1997, 40). “Not thinking about the issue is the
way a majority of the public can say that abortion is ‘murder,’ but not feel
obliged to do anything about it” (Ponnuru 1999, 43). Americans agree with
the idea that the fetus is a human baby and killing it is wrong, but they also
accept the idea that a woman has a right to choose (Mathewes-Green 1997).
The abortion issue has made “hypocrites of us all” (Kinsley 1989, 96). The
majority of Americans clearly want to keep abortion legal, but they are
“passive and quiet.” Shifting the debate to partial-birth abortions gave mo-
mement to the pro-life movement. “By failing to acknowledge the moral
questions raised, pro-choice leaders stilled the voices of many of their
allies, ashamed to be on their side” (Carlson 1998, 60). Yet, a pro-choice
pastor is quoted as saying, “as long as the bottom line is the protection of
the conscience of the individual woman to do what she has to do, we’re in
our tradition” (M. P. Harris 1988, 44). There is clearly recognition here of
the pulls of both moral and pragmatic considerations.

The existence of both pro-life feminists (see Gallagher 1987) and of a
well-known “Jewish, atheist, civil libertarian, left-wing, pro-lifer,” Nat
Hentoff, offers further testimony to the complexities of moral argument re-
garding abortion. Hentoff argues that abortion is, in fact, inconsistent with
“the liberal/left worldview,” since “respect for human life demands opposi-
tion to abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia and war. . . . It is out of
character for the left to neglect the weak and helpless” (1992, 24).

Antiabortion advocates who perceive “a war over the moral definition
of American culture” nevertheless recognize the significance of law and practice in influencing moral sentiment. The “pedagogical force of law” is so great that popular attitudes toward abortion will change only when Roe v. Wade is overturned, says one conservative (Neuhaus 1989b, 39). Another conservative contends that only when abortions become much more rare will a broad consensus emerge in favor of the right to life (Forsythe 1999, 45). Progressive writers likewise see changing social conditions as influencing our views of morality. For example, a progressive argues that “as an increasing number of gay people live open and honest lives, the public view of the morality of gay conduct will continue to change, ultimately influencing both the courts and the legislatures” (Feldblum 2000, 25).

Some abortion rights advocates allege that the so-called moral opposition to abortion is really opposition either to female sexuality (Tax 1989, 632) or to the “empowerment” of the young and poor women who are the main users of abortion. The availability of abortion “symbolically threatens white patriarchal control over ‘their’ young women’s sexual ‘purity’” (Petchesky 1990, 733). “Feminists are the bearers of the only authentic family values” (Gordon 1998, 5). The “postpatriarchal family” is not only more loving but also “more moral” (Wolf 1992, 25).

Abortion opponents, by contrast, maintain that abortion hurts women by encouraging male irresponsibility and contributing to the marginalization of fatherhood. (“The America We Seek” 1996, 38; Editorial 1998a, 12). Many women have abortions because they are forced to do so by their irresponsible boyfriends (W. Shalit 1998, 29).

Even those opponents of abortion who view it as “the most serious moral question facing America” may still disapprove of the tactics of antiabortion crusaders such as Operation Rescue (Editorial 1991c, 13). Nevertheless, despite disagreements about tactics, abortion opponents generally seem more unified on questions of morality than its supporters do. On issues related to gays and lesbians, however, there appears to be more division among those who disapprove of homosexual activity.

The majority of those who oppose homosexual behavior view it as immoral. They therefore assume that “hostility” toward gays “proceeds in large part from sincerely held moral beliefs” (Klinghoffer 1989, 23). There is some contention, however, regarding whether homosexuals are morally responsible for their sexual proclivities. One conservative argues that homosexuals are “fundamentally unable to change their offensive ways”
And a gay conservative takes offense at the many cruel things uttered by conservatives against “people who through no fault of their own happen to be different in their sexuality” (quoted in “Notes and Asides” 1990, 17).

Yet other conservatives balk at the idea of absolving homosexuals of moral responsibility. They argue that even if homosexuality is in some sense “natural,” it is still not right. If we found a gene for arson, we would still expect people to exert self-control, and “we would hardly waive our moral reservations about arson” (Arkes 1993, 44). It is false to believe that when something is biological, there is no volitional element. Nor is it true that the degree of volition determines “the moral status of homosexuality” (Editorial 1993b, 16–17). Furthermore, “the precise mix of genetic and environmental influences is morally irrelevant. They can cause a predisposition toward homosexuality; they cannot cause homosexual conduct itself” (Editorial 1998c, 16).

How to translate a moral distaste for homosexual behavior into practice is unclear, however. The conservative movement is split between those who advocate “institutionalized repression of the homosexual community” and those who prefer what one writer considers “a more sensible and less strident way.” Before the gay rights movement, a kind of “tolerance contract” was in effect whereby homosexuals agreed to be discreet and the law left them alone. Now that such is no longer the case, conservatives in some communities are taking repressive measures against what they perceive as subversive elements. The “sense of the community” must be respected (Teachout 1983, 1412).

Conservatives find the gay rights movement offensive because it is “an attack on privacy and on the very idea of sexual morality. It seeks public approval for every variant of sexual activity.” Behaviors that are socially harmful may be tolerated in private life—a matter of discretion, not hypocrisy. Gay people who are conservative “neither hide nor proclaim what they are.” Their friends know; others have no business knowing (Short 1990, 44). Many conservatives see the public acceptability of homosexuality as a challenge to the whole “moral tradition.” God judges nations, says one conservative, “less on what the nation does in private than on what it sanctions in public” (Klinghoffer 1998, 26). “The demand for ‘gay rights’ is essentially a demand for respect and approval rather than for rights” (van den Haag 1991, 35).
But another conservative suggests that the gay rights movement is merely a rebellion against the persecution to which gays are subjected. Though such rebellions “are often childish and self-destructive, . . . they are also typically American reactions to moral hypocrisy and politicized lying. The persecutors of gays bear significant responsibility for gay militancy and have no right to cite it as an excuse for more persecution” (Woolman 1986, 29).

If many conservatives speak of tolerating behaviors practiced discreetly in private but not publicly flaunted, one conservative has argued precisely the reverse. The very idea of morality, John Gray contends, is that it is part of a common culture. If government must practice neutrality with respect to different ways of life, if it cannot encourage or support “some ways of life . . . deemed by . . . the moral common sense of society, to be undesirable or inferior,” the consequence “is nothing less than the legal disestablishment of morality. As a result, morality becomes in theory a private habit of behavior rather than a common way of life” (1992, 20). For Gray, then, a common morality must be understood and endorsed by social policies. In a free society, those who do not conform to the accepted morality are to be tolerated but seen as inferior. People are imperfect and are not always perfectible. In their efforts to eliminate prejudice, movements for political correctness produce “a dissociation of private thought from public life and so undermine the freedom of their institutions” (35).

Gray’s view thus differs substantially from Short’s argument that “private life is a place where faults which it is best to tolerate, but inimical to society to approve, may be abided” (1990, 44) and Klinghoffer’s notion that God judges nations more on what they publicly sanction than what they privately practice (1998, 26). Gray maintains that the gay rights movement has been brought into being by the actions of a government that does not, in fact, practice the radical neutrality that some contemporary liberals preach. In reality, the government favors and gives legal privileges to certain “fashionable” minorities. Policies of positive discrimination for members of certain cultural minority groups have meant that “some who may not hitherto have considered themselves members of a cultural minority—such as many homosexuals—are encouraged by such practices to constitute themselves as one” (J. Gray 1992, 30).

At least one progressive agrees that “the liberal neutrality rhetoric” is “disingenuous” with respect to antidiscrimination laws for homosexuals. It
is not true, she argues, that such laws merely establish basic equality and are neutral with respect to the morality of being gay. Rather, they “effectively stand for the proposition that discrimination based on homosexuality is as reprehensible as discrimination based on race or gender.” Moreover, judges who think homosexuality is immoral will continue to see discrimination against them as legitimate (Feldblum 2000, 24).

As conservatives view the matter, the law cannot and should not compel people to regard homosexuals as “morally equal” to heterosexuals (van den Haag 1991, 38). “The heterosexual community would flatly resist, and quite properly so, any demand for a modus vivendi the implications of which are that the difference between the two lifestyles is on the order of the difference between people who like Pepsi Cola and those who like Coca-Cola” (Buckley 1993a, 70). Most Americans are hostile to same-sex marriage precisely because it “constitutes the ultimate societal declaration of the moral equality of homosexuality and heterosexuality” (Krauthammer 1996, 102).

Charity and toleration toward homosexuals are desirable but should not come at the cost of “convictions rooted . . . in theological and moral truths” (quoted in “Notes and Asides” 1990, 18). There is concern that if required to interact with gay people in more intimate settings, such as in Boy Scout troops, people will be unable to express their moral views about homosexuals (Cloud 2000).

As a result of such concerns, some conservatives take a dim view of laws that compel association with gays. Such laws, one conservative argues, “redistribute rights from straights to those gays willing to use the power of the state to compel social acceptance.” Landlords must rent to them, employers must hire them, and “nondiscriminatory” school curricula have given gays “the right to have the city proselytize on their behalf” (Sobran 1986, 24). But another conservative suggests that laws requiring nondiscrimination in housing and employment do not forbid anyone from disapproving of homosexual acts. Nor do “morally neutral” descriptions of homosexuality in school curricula constitute “proselytizing” (Woolman 1986, 30).

Yet another conservative maintains that although homosexuals should have the same civil rights as heterosexuals, laws should not prohibit private discrimination. Churches, for example, have a right to discriminate. And the law should not interfere with the right of parents not to have their children taught by “persons whose conduct they abhor and who they think
will set a bad example for their children." This right should take precedence over anyone's right to be employed in a school (van den Haag 1991, 37). A well-known gay conservative, Andrew Sullivan, argues that while all public discrimination against gays should be eliminated, private discrimination is another matter. There should be “no political imposition of tolerance” (1993, 36). Indeed, argues another conservative, using state force to bar private discrimination is “immoral,” and “state immorality is much more dangerous than personal immorality” (Woolman 1986, 58).

From a strictly libertarian perspective, neither gay rights laws nor antisodomy laws are good, since government should not be used for such purposes. The same libertarian logic should apply to both kinds of laws, argues one conservative. Nevertheless, conservatives have not called for the repeal of sodomy laws (Woolman 1986, 58). Others in the conservative camp argue that antisodomy laws represent a widely shared defense of a set of “binding norms.” Thus, William F. Buckley Jr. takes Senator Barry Goldwater to task for calling the ban on gays in the military “just plain un-American.” That, Buckley says, is a peculiar way to talk about banning a practice (sodomy) that until recently was outlawed by forty-seven states (1993a, 70).

Similarly, for one conservative writer “the conservative view, based as it is on the inherent rights of the individual over the state, is the logical political home of gay men and women” (quoted in “Notes and Asides” 1990, 17–18). Not so, says another, since conservatism recognizes that “freedom also depends on moral character—on habits of self-control” (Short 1990, 44). Yet another insists that a clash arises between the Judeo-Christian tradition as a “way of life” and homosexuality as “another way of life” (quoted in “Notes and Asides” 1990, 18). He cautions that conservatives should not abandon their belief that “the practice of homosexuality is a violation of an organic moral code. Those in favor of gay rights must guard against a kind of extortionate moral egalitarianism” that sees any opposition to gay practices as bigotry (Buckley 1992b, 71).

If those on the right fear falling into the definitions set by the Left, so that opposition to gay practices is seen as bigotry, an exquisite parallel to this sentiment exists on the left, where the concern is that gays might buy into the Christian Right’s definition of acceptability. As gay images and gay culture have become increasingly visible, the national movement has become more conservative, say progressive critics. There is now the risk that gay leaders appear to be saying, “We’re just as good as any Christian, white
American family” (Ireland 1999, 16). There is a danger that the Right has a “lock on the way gay issues are framed. . . . We present ourselves as ‘just like heterosexuals,’ when most people—straight and gay—believe we are in fact quite different. . . . We argue for civil rights at a moment when the entire paradigm of that phrase has been shifted by conservatives to be equated with special rights” (Vaid 1993, 28).

Gays now have the opportunity to change American values and politics, to subvert traditional gender and sexual roles and counter the oppressive uses of male power (Kopkind 1993, 592). Homosexuals must seek to “go beyond mere identity politics to bind equality for gay people with equality for all people” (Vaid 1993, 28). To seek only acceptance by the larger society means setting “narrowly self-serving goals” divorced from “the larger battle” (Gevisser 1988, 414). While the gay rights movement adopted the strategy and tactics of the civil rights movement or of identity politics—“How else do you get ahead in America except by banding together and hoisting a flag?”—the true significance of the movement lies in making everyone aware that sexuality is fluid, that our conventional categories may not be valid (Ehrenreich 1993a, 76). The struggle for gay rights is thus, like the struggle for women’s rights, an issue with broader social and moral implications.

In disputes about same-sex marriage, both sides argue that morality is on their side. Those opposed to same-sex marriage consider homosexuality morally inferior to heterosexuality and hence see homosexuals as not entitled to the same privileges (Buckley 1992b; Krauthammer 1996). Supporters argue that legalizing gay marriage would provide a “long-overdue correction of a moral anomaly that dehumanizes and excludes a significant portion of the human race” (Editorial 2000a, 9). Marriage acts as both an incentive and a reward for “moral behavior” (Sullivan 1996, 12); “not to promote marriage would be to ask too much of human virtue” (Sullivan 1989, 20).

All in all, it is hard to fit the culture war rubric to issues regarding homosexuality. Conservatives disagree among themselves on the stance to be taken; gays are divided in their goals and the definition of their identity. There is no neat division between the “orthodox” and the “progressive.” What is apparent, however, is that all sides share the tendency to frame issues in moral terms. And when “rights” rather than “morals” are the chosen framework, sympathetic onlookers suggest that such framing is insufficient. Thus, observers argue, if gay student organizations seek not just
legal rights but “social and cultural acceptance,” they need “to confront the issue of morality more directly. . . . The possibility exists here to define the action of protecting and supporting gay students as a moral imperative as well as a legal matter of civil rights” (Miceli 2005, 609).

**Moral Decline and Relativism**

While all sides use the language of morality, they do not agree about whether the prevailing situation is one of moral decline or moral progress. Differing opinions exist even within the conservative side. Thus, Paul Weyrich, who coined the term *moral majority*, is cited as arguing at the end of the 1990s that such an entity no longer exists. “Abortion is still legal; the NEA is still funded, the Greater Adulterer is still in office; the Republican establishment still thinks social issues are too thorny to embrace; and too many evangelical leaders have been seduced by their power at the expense of their principles” (Gibbs 1999, 47). Only a few months earlier, another conservative had suggested that conservatives could claim credit for turning the tide in the culture wars. The divorce rate had fallen; the marriage rate had stabilized; births to unmarried women had fallen somewhat; the teen birthrate had dropped; the number of abortions had dropped; fewer teenagers were sexually active; and suicide and violent crime rates were decreasing (Nadler 1998, 26).

For the most part, writers on the left do not speak of moral decline. For all the “hand-wringing about moral decline,” says one, “there is surprisingly little evidence that Americans act more immorally today than they did a quarter-century ago. . . . Americans are less likely to drink too much, take drugs, cheat on taxes, drive drunk, rely on the dole. . . . They also give more to charity, volunteer more, and spend more time in church” (Whitman 1999, 18–19).

Progressives, of course, do not always accept the conservative designations of what is immoral behavior and sometimes look askance at some of the movements to improve morality. Thus, one liberal writer questions the motives of those involved in promoting “family values,” suggesting that “most of the impulses that propel people toward the right-wing profamily movement” are “nasty ones: misogyny, racism, sexual repressiveness and a punitive attitude toward young people” (Ehrenreich 1982, 305). Another
liberal argues that people “divorce for all kinds of reasons, not because they lack moral fiber.” If what people want from family life is more intimacy, sexual pleasure, and shared goals, and if single women want to be mothers, “why shouldn’t society adapt? Society is, after all, just us.” Yes, such behavior has costs, but the reasons for the suffering “lie not in moral collapse but in our failure to acknowledge and adjust to changing social relations.” Most of the harm associated with family dissolution is economic (Pollitt 1992a, 90, 92, 94). A writer in Time notes that the very idea of “family values” represents “an American warehouse of moral images, of inherited assumptions, of pseudo-memories of a golden age, of old class habits” (Morrow 1992b, 26). He also suggests that politicians and government cannot “have much to do with improving a society’s values—family or otherwise. Surely the values if worth anything, must be more deeply embedded in the culture than the slogans of transient politicians” (25).

The one clear reference to moral decline in a liberal publication occurs in the context of an argument against the “cultural conservatives” who “would have us believe that government, politics, and public policy should be instruments through which to affect a moral revival.” This writer argues that “cultural politics and the law” do not provide answers to moral problems. And “when thinking about moral decay in the inner city,” it is important to remember that “we should be embracing these people, not demonizing them” (Loury 1998, 17).

The general thrust of conservative discussions of moral decline is that the culture has become exceedingly permissive. The “moral education” of children has been shaped by rock music, with only ineffectual efforts made to deal with it, argues Allan Bloom in his best-selling The Closing of the American Mind (1987). The Left “has in general given rock music a free ride” in part because liberals “regard it as a people’s art” and enjoy its revolutionary potential (77–78). Moreover, “the uneasy bedfellowship of the sexual revolution and feminism produced an odd tension in which all the moral restraints governing nature disappeared” (105). With the help of secular liberals, the media, and Hollywood executives, an “anything goes” aura has been established.

For many conservatives, much of the moral decline in American society can be traced to the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. William F. Buckley Jr., for example, wrote a scathing piece attacking the New York Times for its praise of the counterculture. After the 1994 elec-
tion brought Republican control of Congress, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich expressed the hope that the country might finally be liberated from the counterculture. In response, the *Times* editorialized in favor of the counterculture, even praising its music. Buckley responded by suggesting that “the countercultural music is the perfect accompaniment for the culture of sexual self-indulgence, of exhibitionism, of crime and illegitimacy and ethnic rancor and victimology. We have to hope that the *Times* editor will one day grow up, like Jerry Rubin,” a famed hippie who abandoned the counterculture for Wall Street (1995, 79).

In his book on how the counterculture changed America, Roger Kimball alleges that “it is now practically taken for granted that going to college involves not so much the ‘questioning’ as the repudiation of traditional moral and political values” (2000, 129–30). Our degraded popular culture, our addiction to sensation, and our inadequacies as citizens and “moral agents” all can be traced to the countercultural revolution. But the counterculture is so much “part of the air we breathe” that even conservatives sometimes seem to deny how bad things really are. “It is both ironical and dispiriting to realize that the counterculture may have won its most insidious victories not among its natural sympathizers on the Left but, on the contrary, among those putatively conservative opponents who can no longer distinguish between material affluence and the moral good” (Kimball 2000, 282).

Yet liberals, too, are “uneasy with a consumerist, individualistic culture that often violates their sense of community, decency, and mutual obligation” (Dionne 2006, 135). And both sides see remnants of the counterculture in the arts, universities, and the media. Even a supporter of government funding for novel or experimental art concedes that there is something irritating about “people wanting to be a counterculture on the majority’s nickel” (Kinsley 1992a, 41). An opponent of such funding, conversely, argues that “countercultural crowds now gather to demand, not an end to war or the start of Revolution, but the right to a government grant” (Eichman 1990, 24).

The relativism of the multiculturalist intellectuals also comes under conservative attack as a contributor to the moral decline of American society. “The moral lesson of multiculturalism is a lazy, cynical relativism of ‘nothing matters.’” We need “to return to simple right and wrong. . . . Not all moral questions are complex” (Mansfield 2000, 26). Furthermore, if
there is really no way of distinguishing right from wrong, if there is “no rational ground for our moral judgments,” then “the enterprise of moral judgment” is “dissolved” (Arkes 1989, 36). Almost all of the discussion of moral relativism appears in National Review (see Arkes 1989; J. Goldberg 2000; J. Gray 1992; Hyde 1990a; Lipman 1991b; Short 1990). There, Hollywood is seen as celebrating “the message of moral relativism” and “the idea that we are all our own priests” (J. Goldberg 2000, 62, 64). And conventional wisdom is seen as supporting relativistic and subjective approaches to issues that deny the existence of moral truths. That we harbor different ideas of ultimate good, one conservative argues, does not mean that we cannot distinguish between good and evil. Thus, “the goods expressed in the lives of Mother Teresa and Oscar Wilde are incommensurable,” but we can “confidently assert that the life of a crack addict is a poor one” (J. Gray 1992, 36).

Yet for all their concerns with the evils of moral relativism, some conservatives acknowledge that views of what is moral are always changing, that moral absolutes are not always appropriate. Indeed, one conservative writer takes radical feminists to task for being “absolutists.” Not so long ago, he notes, many people—including women—were indignant at the idea of giving spinster schoolteachers the same pay as men who were supporting families. “Lost in a dream of absoluteness, feminists are ill equipped to face the inevitable somersaults of modern moral pluralism” (Minogue 1991, 48).

As noted earlier, writers on the Left reject the assertion that their views amount to moral relativism. The “cultural relativism” that conservatives attack as meaning “moral relativism” is simply an attempt “to empathize with the moral logics of others” (di Leonardo 1996, 29). Some conservatives appear to understand the distinction, pointing out the dilemmas faced by liberals. According to O’Sullivan, some “principled” liberals are “equally hostile to all cultures, for instance overriding both Christianity and Islam without distinction where they conflict with sexual equality.” Then there are “instinctive” liberals who are “equally friendly to all cultures, for instance embracing even those cultures that have no truck with individual rights.” The two groups have fought “over whether clitoridectomy was a horrible violation of women’s rights or a legitimate expression of Third World culture beyond our ken” (1994b, 39).

For all their disagreements, some commentators suggest that American
society has more consensus than meets the eye. Writing in *National Review,* one analyst says, “we are mostly agreed about good and bad. . . . A consistent moral relativist is hard to find” (Martin 1991, 25). Another writer in *The New Republic* contends that all of the combatants in the culture war “stand for visions of the good society and not simply the good life” (Judis 1999, 56). In the early 1980s, a writer in *Time* suggested that the “right-wing insurgency in America today . . . may resonate in a certain moral harmony with large numbers of American citizens” because there is now a movement toward “the firmer, commonsense moral ground that radicalism and experimental youth abandoned years ago” (Morrow 1981, 74). Several years later, a writer in *The New Republic* pointed out that for people under the age of forty, a return to “traditional values” does not mean a return to the prevailing middle-class values of the 1950s. Even young conservatives now “avidly pursue extramarital sex, occasionally enjoying pornography, often listen to rock music, usually tolerate and sporadically use recreational drugs, typically regard abortion as a matter of personal choice. . . . These young conservatives share the American ethic of social permissiveness that holds many of these cultural innovations to be beyond the coercive reach of government” (Morley 1986, 12).

**Moralizing and Legislating Morality**

For all their moral consciousness, writers on all sides deride the “moralism” of their opponents. Neither side wishes to be seen as imposing its values or morals on the larger population. The Left may notoriously celebrate individuals’ freedom to make their own moral and lifestyle decisions, but so does the Right: “as the party of liberty, conservatives find it hard to prescribe thought and behavior for others” (Lipman 1991b, 53).

Numerous commentators on the left take aim at the “moralistic images” of “the new family warriors” (Stacey 1994, 121, 119) and the “moralistic approaches” to family matters that conceal underlying economic realities (Pollitt 1992a, 92). These liberals consider “the packaging of sexual orientation as an issue of ‘morality’” to be part of the repressive forces operating in contemporary society (LaMarche and Rubenstein 1990, 526). They deride “cultural feminists” (who believe that “female values” are superior to male values) as engaging in “moralistic attacks on women whose
attitudes are deemed too aggressive, openly sexual or otherwise ‘male-identified’” (Willis 1981, 495). Some progressives note that appearances to the contrary, television talk shows are in fact “moralistic”—preaching the middle-class virtues of responsibility and self-control (Ehrenreich 1995, 92). In any event, “the legions of outraged moralists have little enlightenment to offer” about why these shows are so popular (Willis 1996, 19). Those on the left denounce the “moralistic scheme” of some conservatives to fight AIDS by preaching chastity and monogamy (Fumento 1988, 21). A commentator on the left suggests that the dispute over the canon is moralistic because concerns about what students read are based on the idea that “the chief end of reading is to produce a desirable kind of person and a desirable kind of society. . . . How pragmatic, how moralistic, how American!” (Pollitt 1991, 331).

Meanwhile, the Right accuses liberals of being “moralizers and uplifters” because of their efforts to combat antigay feelings (Brookhiser 1993a, 74). New Left “intellectuals” are seen as “moralistic” actors who frame policy disputes as “moral assaults” (Bork 1989, 27). And a 1996 opinion piece in Time derides Republican and Democratic politicians alike for their “politics of virtue”: “politicians have always been willing to go on the record as firmly pro-morality. But seldom have they done it so relentlessly” (R. Wright 1996, 43).

Some writers suggest that in American culture, sleaze and immorality go hand in hand with soul-searching and Puritanism. We worry about the “deterioration of American morals” but savor “every lurid manifestation of the decadence.” Perhaps moralizing has become “just another variety of entertainment,” suggests a writer in Time (Morrow 1994b, 158). Another Time writer similarly contends that tension has always existed in the United States between “the pursuit of individual liberty and the quest for Puritan righteousness.” Thus, the “crusade to reassert family values” is “a reaction to the sexual revolution” (Stengel 1986, 17). Both the Murphy Brown debates and the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings represented a kind of “moral pageant,” at once “amazingly stupid” and “somehow important at the same time” (Morrow 1992a, 29).

All sides are guilty of moralizing: “The rise of virtue-talk—which generally takes the form of communitarianism on the left and nostalgia for Victorianism on the right—has resulted in a striking re-moralization of public policy debates” (Kaminer 1996, 26). Both the “politically correct left” and
“the right wing minions of moral correctness” have attacked the arts (Brustein 1997d, 31). Unlike Europe, in America, the arts “have always had to prove how moral they are” (Hughes 1995, 64). Our “New Puritanism,” with its obsessive devotion to health and longevity, has meant that joggers and vegans have become “favored minorities” that can obtain legal privileges, while smokers and drinkers have become “unfashionable minorities . . . subjected to . . . moralistic intervention in their chosen styles of life” (J. Gray 1992, 30).

Perhaps this tendency to take some moral offenses seriously while overlooking others (and dubbing those who do manifest concern about those offenses as “moralists”) is a long-standing American characteristic. Thus, Tocqueville noted that Americans treat certain vices differently than others. Those connected with the “love of wealth,” for example, “are lightly reproved, sometimes even encouraged,” whereas “all those vices that tend to impair the purity of morals and to destroy the conjugal tie are treated with a degree of severity unknown in the rest of the world” (1848/1961, 2:248–49). In the contemporary United States, sociologists characterize middle-class Americans as favoring “nonjudgmentalism” (Wolfe 1998), while a leading conservative writer decries this development in language usage: “to pass moral judgments is to be ‘judgmental’ and ‘moralistic’” (Himmelfarb 1999, 118).

Ambivalences about morality and moralizing are well demonstrated in the popular response to the scandal involving President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. While European allies mocked the Clinton impeachment as evidence of a peculiar American Puritanism, Americans reacted somewhat curiously. To the surprise of many analysts, “Clinton’s job approval ratings climbed throughout the scandal.” When asked about this increase, “65 percent said they had adopted a more ‘realistic’ view that presidents should be judged on their performance, not on their personal lives. Yet, in another twist, 56 percent said that Clinton’s high approval ratings reflected a national decline in personal standards and morality” (White 2003, 30).

Whatever the desire to see one’s view of morality enconced in the culture, all agree that legislation is not the appropriate route for doing so. Attempting to legislate morality while behavior contradicts it leads only to cynicism, as Prohibition demonstrated (Loury 1998, 17). Moral disapproval or censure is a better technique. Most civilizations have expressed their
moral values by mobilizing social opprobrium. Such opprobrium, rather than legislation, has changed the treatment of minorities in films and television, for example (Wills 1989, 71). A gay conservative argues against using the law “to legislate culture” (Sullivan 1993, 36). A *Time* article asserts that the state should legislate morality only if there is an overwhelming moral consensus and the behavior in question poses a serious threat to social order (Church 1995, 108). A conservative argues similarly that because of our diverse views of homosexuality—specifically, of its morality or even whether any moral question is involved—attempts to legislate in this area are likely to cause more fragmentation and provoke more intolerance (J. Gray 1992, 30). Both the Moral Majority and its liberal opponents must learn that “virtue cannot be enforced by law” (Morrow 1981, 74). Translating all of morality into law would only overburden the law and bring it into disrepute (Neuhaus 1989b, 39). Yet conservatives and liberals agree that advocates attempt to use the courts to try to impose a particular sense of morality (Bork 1989; Feldblum 2000). Perhaps, indeed, the general opposition to legislating morality accounts for Americans’ ability to see homosexuality as immoral while still supporting the civil rights of gays and lesbians (Loftus 2001, 779).

**Conclusions**

Invoking moral criteria is a characteristically American pattern, by no means confined to the Right. While Left and Right may pursue different moral goals, both groups seek the moral course. And even if a misguided exit poll question in 2004 made it appear that predominantly conservatives were concerned with “moral values,” considerable evidence shows that most Americans exhibit such concerns. Indeed, an August 2008 survey found relatively little difference in this area between McCain and Obama supporters. Among those voters who said they were certain to vote for McCain, 71 percent rated “moral values” as a very important issue; among those certain to vote for Obama, 55 percent did so (Pew Forum 2008b). Neither the moral outlook nor its conflicts with pragmatism are new in American culture. Indeed, if one were to remove the culture war trappings, the critique of contemporary morals in 1980–2000 would appear remarkably similar to such a critique in the 1920s. Critics then as now attacked
“the pursuit of personal liberation, especially sexual liberation” (J. Goldberg 2000, 64). Similarities abound between the cultural currents of the Roaring Twenties and the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both were hostile to “bourgeois morality” and celebrated personal liberation—or “narcissism,” in critics’ eyes. Perhaps the one difference here is that the Great Depression of the 1930s muted or repressed the cultural changes of the 1920s, whereas aspects of the later counterculture were absorbed into the larger culture. The “moral relativism” criticized by so many at the end of the twentieth century was likewise assailed in the 1920s. In the 1920s, sociology, anthropology, comparative religion, philosophy, and “higher criticism” were seen as undermining morality and conveying the idea that “right conduct depends . . . on conditions and not on any eternal rules” (Adams 1926, 581).

What is new, once again, is the greater self-consciousness about culture and heightened attention to those attempting to shape it. That young people in the 1960s were seen as advocating a counterculture rather than simply manifesting generational wildness (as in the Roaring Twenties) testifies to the truth of this statement, as do the exaggerated responses found among culture warriors who perceive every disliked program or piece of legislation as critical to the moral stature of the society. As an example, the Catholic Church in Boston saw the presence of a birth control clinic in or near a school as establishing an “official state philosophy of situation ethics and moral relativism” (Leo 1986, 63).

A greater sensitivity to cultural difference has brought with it a reluctance to be “judgmental” in some quarters and a reaction against such sensitivity in others. Is being “nonjudgmental” a virtue or a vice? But the fundamental moralism of American culture remains evident—even in attacks on the excesses of individualism.