

Why We Want Everyone to Be Like Us

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We Americans believe that there is basically one rational way to live: ours. There is one legitimate path of development, which leads toward democracy, transparency, and a competitive market system. Our dealings with the rest of the world are based on this assumption. We reinforce the point by dispatching economists, foreign aid workers, and religious missionaries to teach the world how to live and think like us.

Universalism is characteristic of Western cultures in general but is nowhere stronger than in the United States. It rests on a tacit assumption that everyone is basically the same inside. World cultures differ on such surface features as language, cuisine, and custom, but any further differences are due to the level of development rather than fundamental divergence. Other peoples are simply less advanced, a condition that can be overcome in time, perhaps with some advice and assistance from us.

Universalism sustains our interest in the world, motivates us to lend a hand, and allows us to accept immigrants as equals. But it too often blocks our comprehension of what other cultures are all about, because we cannot acknowledge how fundamentally different they are. It prevents us from seeing that countries can flourish without democracy, transparency, or capitalism. It leads us to encourage or impose forms of governance and commerce that are inappropriate to the local culture and that are likely to fail for this reason. It handicaps our efforts to negotiate internationally. It persuades us that globalization is the order of the day, when, in fact, a fundamental process of *deglobalization* is reshaping the world economic order.

It is important for us Americans, and for the world, to understand why we are like this. It is not necessarily due to arrogance or imperial ambitions. We are universalists because we must be. It is necessary to make our culture work.

Others are Different

People around the world are, of course, very different inside. One of the greatest differences between Americans and many others is that we deny these differences. We fail to see that other societies have a logic of their own. Cultures represent radically different and yet workable ways of putting things together. Just as vastly different ecosystems occupy the same planet, so do vastly different

cultural systems. Each system has its own checks and balances that allow it to function.

Most cultures, for example, have some mechanism for making rulers accountable for good performance. The mechanism need not be democratic. Arab sheiks traditionally convene a council or *majlis* (from the Arabic for “sitting place”) to negotiate policy with tribal leaders or receive petitions from the public. King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, for example, held such meetings constantly. Even Genghis Khan ruled his Mongolian followers in a similar fashion. The Bantu peoples of southern Africa, like many other peoples, traditionally expect their leaders to show generosity to subjects. The practice helps to redistribute wealth from the fortunate to those who have a bad year, making the economy more resilient. The ideal Confucian leader commands obedience but, in return, must display good character and produce results. One thinks of Deng Xiao Ping, who reformed the Chinese rural economy and paved the way for today’s economic growth, or Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, an autocrat who built a prosperous and peaceful nation on a small, resource-poor island. One also thinks of Chinese emperors who failed to deliver and were consequently viewed as losing the mandate of heaven, which cleared the way for legitimate challenged of their authority. None of these cultures are democratic, because the rulers, not the people, are sovereign. But the rulers are nonetheless subject to some kind of accountability.

Nondemocratic systems, no less than democratic ones, can be corrupted from within or without. The ruling Saud family has by many accounts lost touch with its subjects, which creates dissatisfaction in the kingdom. Genghis Khan had little inclination to counsel with conquered peoples. European colonization of Africa displaced men from villages to commercial enterprises and government offices, separating them from the traditional incentives and opportunities to live up to their leadership responsibilities. Today Africans struggle to control the widespread corruption that resulted. In troubled times, Chinese authority can create great havoc before it is checked, as during the Cultural Revolution.

It is not easy for less powerful countries, buffeted by global forces, to maintain the integrity of their cultures. When critical Westerners see an unresponsive government, they should not conclude that the culture provides no mechanism for responsiveness. Rather than impose parliamentary institutions that may have little support in the culture, they can give people space and opportunity to develop their own solution. Internationally supervised elections, for example, do not necessarily legitimize the winners, as recent experience in Iraq reminds us. Then what does legitimize a leader in the Middle East? It is symptomatic of the problem before us that few Americans have any idea.

Even when an alien parliamentary system seems to be working, as in India, it fortuitously rests on local cultural traits. India conducts elections, but governance relies heavily on a network of personal connections among important families that fill government posts. Note for example, that when the ruling

Congress party finally yielded power to the Hindu nationalist BJP in the 1990s, they chose as prime minister Atal Vihari Vajpayee—one-time secretary to Rajiv Gandhi, a former Congress prime minister. Vajpayee was in the wrong party but had the right connections. The quasi-British legal systems of India and Pakistan are functional and respected, if slow, due again to the peculiar cultural traits of those countries. There is a strong and highly verbal intellectual tradition, with an emphasis on mental discipline, that supports legal reasoning and argument.

There are likewise viable alternatives to a Western-style commerce that is based on law and transparency. Most of the world's business is relationship-based. Business people build long-term trust relationships with individuals, rather than doing business with strangers and trusting the system to make everything work. Relationship-based commerce may be less efficient in the short run, because it takes time to build the right kind of relationship, and the process can slip into bribery. But it is remarkably stable and has built great civilizations. China's economy, famous for its reliance on a particular kind of relationship building known as *guanxi* (a Mandarin Chinese word for "relationship"), was the world's largest economy for eight of the last ten centuries, and will soon regain this status, even though its government was incompetent, corrupt, or fragmented through much of this period. Rule-based economies, on the other hand, rely heavily on a potentially fragile superstructure, because people must trust the system. Corruption of East German institutions during Soviet domination practically destroyed the productivity of one of the world's most industrious peoples. A few corporate scandals in the United States make investors justifiably nervous, and a hiccup in the world monetary system, which is built along Western lines, could precipitate a global crisis.

We must again beware of misinterpreting dysfunction that we observe in relationship-based countries. The Asian financial crisis, for example, was due to the failure of Western, not Asian, practices. Too many investors abandoned time-tested financing through family and cronies for fast, Western-style debt and equity financing, which require a degree of transparency that is not supported by regional cultures. Everyone's surprise when it all collapsed indicates the depth of our ignorance of how cultural factors work. Even today, few Western observers remark that China and Taiwan largely escaped the effects of the crisis because they continued to rely primarily on traditional family-based financing, particularly from overseas and Hong Kong-based Chinese—the financial engine that to a great degree capitalized Chinese economic growth over the last three decades.

We Americans have been too hasty to recommend our own way in the economic as well as in the political sphere. One thinks of the American consultants who flocked into Russia, after the fall of the Soviet Union, to set up a competitive, laissez-faire business system that ran counter to local history and culture. It soon failed. While Russia's current prosperity rests to a great degree on high oil prices, Putin's authoritarianism is much closer to the Russian model (historically rooted in two centuries of Mongol rule) and provides a culturally

appropriate context for Russian economic redevelopment. While competition may seem to us the obvious and sensible way to organize an economy and much else in life, Russian and other Slavic cultures are uncomfortable with giving it so central a role.

The best known economic missionary efforts to come out of the United States are, of course, the Chicago-school structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. They have become infamous for their insensitivity to local cultures and consequent unpopularity.

Negotiation

Universalism hobbles our efforts to negotiate across cultures. We tend to view bargaining as a game in which players may scheme and bluff, but in which everyone plays by universally acknowledged rules of good faith. The goal is to arrive at an agreement or contract, which will presumably be enforced through an institutional mechanism.

This perspective is alien to many relationship-based cultures. They do not see human affairs as governed by universal rules writ in the sky. Rather, one negotiates with either friends or foes. If with foes, negotiation is war, with no Geneva Convention. Many Australian businessmen read Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* to prepare themselves to deal with their neighbors in the region. The opposite party may sign an agreement, but there is no reliable institutional mechanism to ensure compliance.

If one negotiates with friends, then the goal is not so much an agreement as a working relationship. The proceedings are governed by personal bonds rather than rules, and Western-style negotiation may be seen as disrupting harmony. Plans are laid, but the opposite party may want to alter them the next day. Why slavishly adhere to a written compact when the situation constantly changes? Follow-through is vouchsafed by a personal trust relationship in which the parties have invested over the years.

The obvious lesson is that one should negotiate with friends, not foes. This requires cultivation of long-term relationships. It creates a problem for Western governments, which see themselves as consisting of offices (defined by rules) rather than persons (who define the rules). When individuals rotate through an office, as when another political party is voted into power, the relationship with negotiation partners is lost.

Some relationship-based cultures, such as those of the Middle East, acknowledge universal rules of justice and morality, and they may take formal agreements seriously. Yet truth in other matters is negotiable along with the price. In December 2005, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran referred to

the genocide of the Jews as a “myth.” From the Western point of view, anyone who opens the discussion with such outrageous statements instantly loses credibility and cannot be taken seriously as a negotiation partner. But a Middle Eastern negotiator may very well open with such a position, much as one might start bidding at an unrealistic price. When the opposite party recoils, one retreats to a less outrageous claim. Ahmadinejad did precisely this one month later, a fact scarcely reported in the West. Without giving advice on how to deal with Ahmadinejad in particular, one can observe that a certain kind of universalism—the idea that factual claims should be treated as such—can lead one to miss opportunities for fruitful negotiation.

Deglobalization

We Americans not only believe in universalism, but we see it happening around the world. We see everyone moving toward our style of technology, government, law, entertainment, and finance. McDonalds restaurants are everywhere. Moneyed classes in every country buy the same consumer goods, and communications technology accelerates cultural homogenization. We may not go so far as to say it, but we all know that globalization is a euphemism for Westernization.

In a fundamental sense, this is exactly what is not happening. Western influence has been pervasive for at least five centuries, but the global economy is now moving away from Western hegemony toward a multi-polar equilibrium. This phenomenon involves much more than “outsourcing” to countries with cheap labor. Many countries have cheap labor, but only a few have become economic powerhouses, and some of these no longer have cheap labor.

The change is fundamental because it is based on *cultural comparative advantage*. Japanese quality, Korean manufacturing, Indian information technology, Chinese entrepreneurship, German engineering, and American technological innovation reflect unique cultural strengths of each country. Many countries import Western ideas, just as we imported key Japanese ideas in manufacturing. But non-Western countries are likely to retain and emphasize the home-grown cultural traits that bring them success. The result is cultural deglobalization, a phenomenon we cannot see through our universalizing spectacles. We persist in the illusion that the world is flat.

Japan provides a clear case of cultural comparative advantage. Its manufacturing sector established the world standard for quality during the 1980s, due in part to some Western ideas imported by W. E. Deming, but primarily to techniques rooted in Japan’s unique relationship-based culture. The concept of continuous improvement, which resulted in the famous *kanban* inventory systems and lean manufacturing, relies on the cumulative effect of worker ideas that are too small to measure individually. It grew out of Japan’s long-term perspective and group orientation, in which motivation derives more

from loyalty to the group than individual incentive. The importance of group harmony ensures that every idea is honored. In the traditional practice of *nemawashi*, for example, decisions are made by circulating memos that are modified and eventually approved (with one's personal stamp or *hanko*) by every member of the group. Decisions that are reached by consensus and ratified, rather than dictated, by the boss are still common in Japanese business. The importance of honoring everyone's suggestion paid major economic dividends at companies like Toyota, where ordinary workers made small suggestions for improvement, often submitted through the company's famous suggestion boxes. Few of these suggestions, taken individually, had sufficient impact to show up in the manager's quarterly report, but this is relatively unimportant in a Confucian culture that values a long-term perspective more than fast results, and group harmony more than personal incentive. The result was the famous Japanese concept of continuous improvement, which made Toyota quality the envy of the world.

Another Japanese business innovation, just-in-time inventory management, is equally grounded in culture. Business dealings between Japanese executives are typically conducted through old-boy relationships, perhaps formed during student days at Tokyo University and cemented during countless karaoke sessions and golf games. These trust relationships formed the basis for vertically-integrated *keiretsu*, or groups of closely affiliated companies organized in a supply chain. Executives who trust each other personally can allow engineers from one company to have intimate knowledge of product specifications and operations at another, which is necessary for the close coordination presupposed by just-in-time delivery and the radical reduction of stockpiles. The Japanese were the first to realize the substantial savings of reducing in-process inventory, a key component of lean manufacturing. They applied the principle with equal success to assembly lines within a plant, resulting in *kanban* (card) systems that regulate production at each stage.

India's fabled information economy likewise rests on a cultural worldview that is quite different from the Western one. The West historically believes that God sits above a secular world and allows, even requires, humans to manipulate nature. We Westerners obtain a sense of control over our fate by applying reason and science to engineer our environment—whence the central role of technology. We excel at technology, not because we are smarter, but because we rely on it so completely. Indians traditionally see a pantheistic world that is inhabited by God rather than managed by humans. Their sense of security is partially rooted in the extended family, as in much of the world, but equally important is an ancient habit of mental discipline, historically reflected in such practices as yoga and meditation. Today that discipline often takes the form of academic study and intellectual achievement. There is no more fitting activity for the Indian intellect than to create a world of the mind in the form of computer software. Indians also benefit from their highly verbal (English-speaking) culture and their mastery of networking skills, which not only provide a sense of security but facilitate the dissemination of technical know-how that is not easily learned from manuals.

The Korean economic miracle began in the 1960s when Park Chung Hee, taking advantage of a culture where his authoritarian rule was possible for two decades, shaped the large Korean corporations known as *chaebol*. Initially modeled after Japanese *keiretsu* (known as *zaibatsu* when Park was studying in Japan), the *chaebol* depended on a cozy relationship between the government and leading industrial families. This allowed Korea to build large private corporations, which normally do not evolve in a relationship-based culture. Highly disciplined Korean manufacturing firms continue to perform well on the world stage due in part to strongly age-related hierarchical power relations; a highly competitive, masculine culture (to use a term from the cross-cultural literature); and a focus on loyalty to the boss, rather than short-term profitability, that favors long-term success.

Although Confucius rated business as one of the lower professions, entrepreneurship is a salient trait of many coastal Chinese. These relationship-based subcultures are not only masculine and competitive, but uncertainty tolerant as well (to use another term from the literature), meaning in part that they are comfortable with the risk of starting new business ventures. In addition, self-esteem has for eons been closely tied to wealth and status, a factor that drives achievement, and the country's famous long-term perspective results in a high savings rate, as compared to the current negative savings rate in the United States. Filial loyalty, perhaps the most fundamental Chinese cultural trait, provides a solid foundation for highly disciplined family businesses. While we Americans have been fixated on our misadventures in the Middle East, Chinese businessmen have been making inroads in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and increasingly Latin America, taking advantage of the fact that peoples in those regions may be more comfortable with their relationship-based style of doing business than Western transparency.

Finally, we Westerners have a cultural advantage of our own. Our knack for technological innovation grows out of our secular interpretation of nature, as already noted, and our individualism. We are permitted and encouraged to rethink the world for ourselves. We ask students to verify Euclid's theorems by working through the proofs, and to check the physics textbooks by performing experiments in the laboratory. Most cultures consider it foolish for young amateurs to presume to validate time-tested wisdom. It is also an expensive way to teach, and many students balk. Yet some re-examine the world and germinate ideas for new technology. Think about the Wright brothers, who reconceived fluid dynamics to design a propeller for their aircraft.

We see communication technology as homogenizing the world, but it actually supports cultural divergence. An early example is the mobile phone, which was initially popular in Finland due to frequent snowstorms that break land lines, but quickly became a smash hit in Asia. Ideally suited for relationship-based cultures, mobile phones allow friends to remain in constant contact, parents to monitor their children, and bosses to supervise employees

while away from the workplace. Satellite television channels are relatively easy to install, and they proliferate worldwide. As of this writing, for example, Wikipedia lists 331 Arabic-language channels in 27 countries of the Middle East and north Africa. A casual spin of the Middle Eastern television dial will convince one that the content is primarily indigenous, not dubbed Hollywood fare. Even such Western broadcasters as CNN provide regionally-specific content to attract listeners.

Local-content web sites are even easier to set up. They provide an electronic infrastructure for maintaining established relationships as well as for conversing with strangers in the Western mode. An example is the portal orkut.com (developed by a Turkish employee of Google), which was for years wildly popular in Brazil, as well as in Iran before the government shut it down. Its masthead describes the site as supporting “an online community that connects people through a network of trusted friends”—a textbook definition of relationship-based culture. The Internet offers a wide variety of search engines, social networking sites, and blogs oriented to specific cultures, such as Baidu and RenRen in China and Live Journal in Russia. Future communications devices may empower relationship-based intercourse in ways that are difficult to imagine today. From an American perspective it is easy to see the world moving toward generally accepted accounting principles, Western-style finance, and other rule-based practices. Yet the countervailing trend is also strong. The jury is still out on which, if either, will prevail. Both receive a boost from communications technology. Western countries and Western-style multinational corporations will remain important islands of transparency, but relationship-based interactions have the advantage of resiliency in what could be a very unstable twenty-first century environment.

Rules and Relationships

To understand the roots of Western universalism, we must probe more deeply the fundamental distinction between rule-based and relationship-based cultures, which has implications that go far beyond business. The world’s rule-based cultures are by and large those with a European heritage, while the rest are relationship based. This is not to say that one part of the world is superior to or more “developed” than another, only that one part is very different from the other. The United States offers a particularly clear case of a rule-based culture, whence the strength of its universalism.

Most cultures have rules, but only in rule-based cultures are rules the ultimate authority. Leaders derive their legitimacy not from who they are, but from the laws that govern their selection and guide their decisions. People obey the rules despite minimal supervision, even to the point of stopping at a traffic light in the middle of the night when nobody is looking. People feel guilty when they break the rules, a form of enforcement that carries psychological costs. As a German proverb acknowledges, *Ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen* (a good conscience is a soft pillow).

The wellspring of universalism is deep, because it derives from an underlying philosophy of human nature. Human beings in rule-based cultures construct themselves as autonomous, rational individuals who are therefore fundamentally equal. Because no individual can ultimately have authority over another, people obey the rules rather than each other. The highest ethical priorities are justice and fairness.

Respect for the rules permits a society to build systems based on transparency. Business people make deals with persons they hardly know, draw up a detailed contract, and rely on the legal apparatus to enforce the contract. Large, private corporations can develop in this environment. It is possible to obtain jobs and benefits by following procedures, rather than through cronies. When misfortune strikes, people rely on medical and social welfare infrastructures as well as on their family and friends, and as a result extended families play a relatively unimportant role.

Relationship-based cultures, by contrast, are fundamentally governed by rulers rather than rules. Leaders derive their legitimacy from who they are—perhaps members of an important family, endowed with extraordinary talents, or even chosen by God. People subject themselves to flesh-and-blood superiors rather than abstract laws of conduct. Children even obey their parents, incredible as this may seem to many Americans. Employees are closely and constantly supervised, and they pay attention to what is enforced rather than what is written down. Behavior is controlled primarily by shame (humiliation, punishment, loss of face, dishonor), and guilt may be an alien concept.

The underlying philosophy is that human beings do not exist apart from their relatedness to others, whether it be the family, the group, or the village. As the Shona people of Zimbabwe put it, *Kunzi munhu vamwe* (to be a human being is to be named by others). This leads to an ethic of care. Taking care of one's elders, children, and cronies is the highest moral virtue.

This is why people can rely on family and connections and need not trust the system to nearly the same degree as in the West. They do business after building a long-term relationship with business partners, which can be personal friendship in Latin America, *guānxì* in China, or some other type of bond. Transparency is relatively unimportant, and it can even be insulting to ask a business partner to see his balance sheet. People get things done by working through family and friends rather than (or in addition to) following procedure. In times of stress, people fall back on these same family and friends, not the system. Such Western institutions as law courts and bureaucratic government may become dysfunctional in this context, not because the locals are less developed, but because they have other ways.

The Origins of Universalism

We are now in a position to understand why rule-based cultures are universalizing. We need only ask the question: how can mere rules command the allegiance of autonomous, rational individuals? The rules must *appeal to reason*. They must be self-evident, based on logic that any individual can see with Cartesian clarity. (Perhaps one can understand why the French vie with Americans as the most strongly universalizing people.) If we take turns by obeying the traffic signal at an intersection, we can all get through safely. It only makes sense. If we lack unanimity on social policy, majority rule seems a logical way to get a decision. The rules must, however, have the character of natural law. If Americans frequently break the speed limit or underpay their taxes, it is because there is no self-evident speed limit or tax rate.

Natural law is equally important in the marketplace. Not every business can succeed, and some mechanism must determine which ones survive. Americans would not allow any human being to make these decisions. The law of supply and demand, however, is respected because of what is seen as its inherent logic. Tyranny is tolerable if it is the tyranny of the marketplace.

If the rules are based on logic, then it is a short step to universalism. Since logic is universal, the rules are universal. They should be as evident to Albanians and Afghans as to Americans. Peoples everywhere should recognize that democracy and transparency are good for them. They should infer from the laws of economics that a free market economy is the only rational system for the world.

The United States is particularly committed to universalism because Albanians, Afghans, and practically all other peoples live within its borders. They must somehow get along, without relying on a shared ethnic heritage. The answer lies in universally valid rules. Americans eat tacos, pierogies, and *jiǎo zi*, but they recognize a common rulebook.

Curiously, Americans sometimes point to an opposite trend, toward a mindless cultural relativism that they see as becoming regrettably fashionable in the country. People may in fact pay lip service to such ideas, and the developmental psychology literature tells us that adolescents may go through such a stage. People frequently say that they have no right to judge others. But they don't mean it. If your fashionable friends seem to endorse cultural relativism, ask them what they think about the practice of female circumcision in certain cultures. Their underlying universalism will quickly reassert itself.

Does not my rejection of universalism imply an equally mindless cultural relativism? If there are no universals, then there are no universals of right and wrong. My quarrel, however, is not with universals as such, but with finding them where they do not exist. I have made several universalizing statements

about cultures—they organize themselves around rules or relationships, they are grounded in concepts of human nature, and so on. But these universalizing statements imply that cultures have fundamental differences. As for right and wrong, there is again something universal about them, as well as something that differs radically across cultures. A relativism that sees moral judgment simply as a matter of opinion is indeed mindless and stupid. Moral judgment, like culture generally, is rooted in how we construct human nature. If we understand ourselves as autonomous, rational individuals, then this commits us to justice and equality, because anything else denies who we are. If we understand human existence as relatedness, we are committed first and foremost to the family, the group, or the village. Moral judgment is therefore not arbitrary but is bound up in the kinds of beings we essentially and irrevocably are. However, if I am right in my claim that members of different cultures can be fundamentally different beings, they are committed to fundamentally different moral sensibilities. These sensibilities lead to similar judgments on many issues, because they all achieve the same purpose of allowing human beings to live together. But they can also diverge.

Universalism and World Peace

Even if the kind of universalism I reject is a cultural assumption, rather than fact, Americans nonetheless see it as the only secure road to world peace. Ethnic and religious differences inspire endless cycles of war and the most horrible atrocities of which human beings are capable. The only remedy, to the American mind, is to find or create an underlying unity in all human beings, all religions, and all cultures.

Yet this kind of unity would require suppression, not reconciliation, of cultures. The differences are too deep, rooted as they are in differing conceptions of human nature. In any case, there is no evidence that reducing cultural difference reduces conflict. Consider the ethnic conflicts that have appeared in the headlines over the last ten or twenty years—Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Muslims and Christians in the Balkans, Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, and so forth. A glance down this list reveals that most of them are between peoples who are culturally very similar, in some cases almost indistinguishable. If we are to avoid conflict by reducing cultural difference, we must reduce that difference practically to zero, a hopeless task.

Erasing cultural difference is as unnecessary as it is impossible. People of different cultures live alongside one another peaceably all over the world. There is no reason to believe that different cultural systems are less capable of coexistence than ecosystems. Human beings sometimes slide into ethnic and racial hatred, but specific conditions give rise to these attitudes. We can learn to avoid them, much as we avoid conditions that spread disease.

Radically divergent cultures not only coexist but provide complementary strengths through cultural comparative advantage. For centuries, the exchange of goods and ideas among vastly different civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley contributed significantly to their mutual success, and this dynamic continues in the modern world. As we place ever greater strains on the natural environment, cultural diversity can perhaps promote survivability no less than species diversity. Individualistic cultures can learn lessons of sustainability from traditional African cultures, for example, which kept the human species alive through countless millennia with a communal approach. They demonstrated that the complexity and richness of a society can express itself in cultural institutions and social activities rather than physical artifacts and profligate resource consumption. Already we are beginning to see hints of a shift, in postindustrial societies, away from material consumption and toward lifelong learning, artistic creation, and group activities that are as satisfying as they are environmentally friendly. Perhaps communal cultures can point the way to further development in this direction (an instance, by the way, in which development does not entail economic growth). Conversely, the systems technology and rule-based approach of individualistic cultures can provide tools that help relationship-based cultures to deal with the complexities of trade and public administration in a large population—tools that should, however, be integrated into the culture, as were mobile phones.

Can We Change?

If a thoroughgoing universalism is as central to American culture as I say, how can we abandon it? I believe we can, at least to the extent necessary to avoid the pitfalls I have described. America's overbearing role in the world makes a change in our perspective particularly urgent.

We are, on the whole, a tolerant people. We reconcile ourselves to different lifestyles in our midst by assuming that everyone is basically the same inside. Perhaps few of us acquire a taste for chitterlings or *kimchi*, but most of us regard our neighbors who eat them as subject to the same self-evident rights and rules as ourselves. We must now, however, expand our social philosophy to embrace the world beyond our borders. We must reconcile ourselves to different conceptions of human nature, to the idea that we are not basically the same inside. We can do so with a more tolerant, and more accurate, universalism. We can regard all human beings as *solving basically the same existential problems*. We must all survive on the planet, get along without our fellows, and somehow find meaning and reassurance in an uncertain and brief existence. Other peoples find solutions that are even harder to swallow than chitterlings and *kimchi*, because they presuppose a reconstruction of who we are. But we can understand why their solutions work for them, and why we must conform to them, at least in the essentials, when we live abroad.

There is enough universalism in this stance to serve our cultural purposes. We can insist that insofar as one as one interprets oneself as an autonomous individual, and demands the rights that go with it, one must acknowledge certain principles as self-evident. While not a social contract in the usual sense, it is a kind of cultural contract. We are a culture of individuals. Immigrants are welcome to maintain subcultures with the taste and feel of the old country, but their descendants must become individuals at least within a couple of generations (they almost always do). We can continue to respect the rules in this new regime, because the argument for the legitimacy of rules presupposes only that they apply to individuals. But we can now recognize other conceptions of human nature, in other societies, as legitimate and fascinating alternatives that enrich the human community. They may even ensure its survival.