

# The New Morality

MORAL FREEDOM:  
*The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice.*  
By Alan Wolfe. Simon & Schuster. 256 pp. \$24.95

Reviewed by Jean Bethke Elshtain

If sociologist Alan Wolfe is right about where our culture stands on moral matters, we're in trouble. Americans embrace what he terms "moral freedom," which means tailoring moral norms to the moment. It means considering *all* the options before choosing a course of action, because the process of choosing is itself the overriding good. It means being faithful to who you *really* are, because in that fidelity lies a salutary honesty. And it means rejecting every fixed standard of right and wrong, every norm, rule, law, and belief that is external to yourself.

For this book, as for his earlier *One Nation, After All* (1998), Wolfe helped design a public-opinion poll and then oversaw in-depth interviews with randomly chosen Americans—in this case, two dozen people from each of eight "distinct communities," including the Castro district in San Francisco, Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and Fall River, Massachusetts. Methodological choices invariably slant research results, and it's telling that some of Wolfe's questions provided a narrow range of options on complex matters. Are people born with character, he asked, or do they acquire it? The vast majority of respondents said character is acquired, which Wolfe takes to mean they're opposed to the notion of original sin. One prevailing tradition of moral thinking in the West, however, holds that although we are born with an inheritance of sin, we are nonetheless called to conform to moral norms. Cultures pay special attention to families, churches, schools, and other institutions of moral formation precisely so that children can be made decent, kind, and responsible. Wolfe's options bleach out that complex view. Your choice is either original sin, which Wolfe equates with determinism, or acquired character. You're not permitted to mix the two.

Take a second example. In Wolfe's poll, nearly three-quarters of respondents agreed

that "all people are born inherently good." By contrast, the Western tradition to which I've alluded argues that we are born neither good nor bad. At birth, we lack a developed norm of conduct and moral culpability. But we're born with free will—divided will—and so moral conflict is inevitable. Over time, we come to know moral norms, and we orient ourselves toward either good or evil. Eventually, as adults, we can be held morally responsible. The whole process underscores once again the importance of moral development through key institutions. But Wolfe's prototypical Americans mistrust the basic institutions of their society. They "look with suspicion" on families, churches, and schools. And why not? There's nothing to aspire to if you're simply born good. You just do what comes naturally.

Throughout this briskly written work, the interview data are often so seamlessly interwoven with Wolfe's commentary that it's hard to tell where one strand ends and the other begins. What's clear is that those who speak of loving their neighbors as themselves, who enjoin us to "think of an entire community," who believe that it's possible for people to make the wrong choices—and that they should be called to account when they do—are a distinct minority. They are the people Wolfe calls "conservatives."

The understanding of moral freedom reflected here makes it difficult, if not impossible, to chastise those who violate even the moral mean, however modest it may be. So long as people consider "all possible actions before deciding which one to take," they're acting in moral freedom, according to Wolfe. It follows that a person accused of a moral violation can reply that he was abiding by the standard he chose, so what's the problem? From time to time, Wolfe asks pointed questions about America's slide downward to the lowest common moral denominator, but for the most part he seems to march in time with his respondents.

The majority of respondents equate our capacity to make judgments with small-minded judgmentalism, and the articulation of moral norms with narrow moralism. If you harm only yourself or other consenting adults (as in sadomasochistic experimentation), what you do is nobody else's business. Harm, for folks who think that way, is direct injury only. The social costs of patterns of behavior go largely uncalculated.

So, for example, "the divorce rate" isn't "necessarily a bad thing," in the words of one interviewee. Wolfe depicts divorce as a last resort "when abuse and violence spin out of control." Of course divorce seems a good thing under such circumstances. But those who lament a divorce culture, Wolfe's moral conservatives, do not argue that divorce should be impossible—and certainly not impossible in cases of terrible cruelty. Rather, they worry about the social costs of divorce and criticize a culture in which it is anything but a last resort. If each individual is to be the final arbiter of what counts as cruel treatment, we sacrifice serious reflection on when divorce is an agonizing necessity and when it is more akin to a consumer option.

**W**olfe's respondents on the whole believe that one should tailor moral norms to "the needs of real people," and that "any form of higher authority" should conform to the same needs. But how can we think intelligibly about needs without a way to think as well about distorted desires? In Wolfe's account, moral freedom requires you to be faithful to what you "really are," and puts a premium on subjective claims about personal authenticity. It's not surprising that an interviewee who's exploring sadomasochism opposes "limits on the right of a person to engage in explorations that might teach him more about his desires." If we accept that as an instance of authenticity in practice, and agree that authenticity is a good thing, how do we oppose those who "really are" something quite harmful—pedophiles, for example? They, too, will claim the right to "engage in explorations" that "teach" about "their desires." If we take pains to prevent people from engaging in destructive behavior, we're imposing outside norms—and that's moral conservatism for Wolfe, and antithetical to moral freedom.

Even as most of Wolfe's respondents express the belief that you should not make moral demands of people, they retain what he calls a "nostalgic longing for the old days," when moral matters were judged differently. But why is it nostalgia to find genuine worth in past human patterns of behavior? Why not think of it instead as the product of tough-minded, historically grounded social learning?

Moral freedom, the heart and soul of what it means to hold human beings responsible for their actions, isn't a new idea, despite Wolfe's claim that no generation before our own was morally free. Surely the pithiest statement of moral freedom remains St. Paul's: "That which I would, I do not. That which I would not, that I do." We have a choice. Perhaps we fall down on the job. That's called "backsliding," and I, like many other Americans, heard a good deal about it while growing up. You may fail, but you have another chance. You need not repeat your infraction. You need not capitulate to the lowest common denominator. To be sure, not all our great moral teachers have emphasized the opportunity we have to put things right, but without exception all have raised up a standard to which we can aspire. If we reduce moral norms to "actual behavior," we lose any standards that call us to something higher.

Too many Americans have a flawed and confused understanding of freedom. They believe, at once, that people should be free to "choose how to live" *and* that people should not consider themselves "unbound by moral rules." But once you opt for such rules, you risk being called "judgmental" and "Victorian." So you don't criticize how people actually behave because only they can judge whether they're bound in any way.

If Wolfe is correct, we Americans have become a nation of moral free-riders. We're glad that some people still adhere to a moral standard we ourselves find narrow, limiting, stuffy, and, worst of all, judgmental. And we live off the moral capital such folks continue to generate. But thank goodness we're not one of them.

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