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Questioning America Alan Wolfe's sociological survey finds less --- and more --- than its author suspects by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice by Alan Wolfe. W. W. Norton, 224 pp., \$ 24.95.

Alan Wolfe, a distinguished sociologist and public intellectual, has been asking ordinary Americans about virtue. For his recent book *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice*, Wolfe and his research team interviewed individuals in communities around the country and from all walks of life: from the cultural center of American homosexuality in San Francisco to the wealthy Silicon Valley town of Atherton; from Lackland Air Force Base and the surrounding Mexican-American neighborhoods in San Antonio to the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and its first-generation college students; from Oakwood, a prosperous suburb of Dayton, to Tipton, a small town in Iowa; from Blue Hills, a black neighborhood in Hartford, to Fall River, a struggling factory town in Massachusetts with a growing immigrant population.

There is a venerable tradition for Wolfe's attempt to understand virtue by attending to what ordinary people say about it. Plato and Aristotle both thought that what people say and think about the moral life provides an indispensable first word on virtue. By contrast, in our own day, professors of moral philosophy and political theory tend --- despite their devotion to democracy --- to lack the interest of ancient authors in what ordinary citizens say about virtue, preferring instead to focus on the laws and public policies the people would support if they derived their views from the abstract moral and political principles the professors have concluded are reasonable and fair. Yet the pertinence of virtue, and people's opinions about it, is not open to serious doubt. At work and at play, in love and in war, during good times and bad, virtue makes the difference. Nor is it correct to suppose that individual rights, the rule of law, and impartial procedures for the administration of justice can dispense with virtue, for they depend on citizens' integrity and knowledge. The question is thus not whether virtue can be a part of our lives in a secular, liberal, democratic state, but what virtues such a state must rely on, what ends these virtues serve --- and which beliefs, practices, and institutions foster virtue, and which frustrate or weaken them.

In undertaking his interviews, Wolfe carries forward the work of his previous book, *One Nation After All*, by attempting to bring into still sharper focus ordinary Americans' defining ideas about morality. And like that previous book, *Moral Freedom* is more ambitious than

may at first be apparent. For Wolfe is not content merely to describe sympathetically our principles and virtues. He also mounts a spirited defense of them, complete with frequent broadsides aimed at critics on the right and the left --- especially the right.

Ordinary Americans' principles and virtues exhibit a flexibility and coherence suitable to our times, Wolfe contends, and are decidedly more attractive than the rigid and doctrinaire positions typically put forward in the people's name by political leaders and public intellectuals. Contrary to conservative critics (who, according to Wolfe, are ever ready to lament America's decline into permissiveness, narcissism, and social engineering), middle-class Americans recognize the centrality to their lives of a variety of virtues. And contrary to critics on the left (who, according to Wolfe, see America increasingly under the sway of Christian conservatives determined to impose through law their biblically based morals), ordinary Americans view choice as an essential ingredient of the moral life.

What underlies ordinary Americans' simultaneous embrace of virtue and choice, Wolfe maintains, "is a common American moral philosophy, and it is broad and inclusive enough to incorporate people whose views of the actual issues of the day are at logger-heads." Wolfe gives this common philosophy the name "moral freedom" and believes it arrived as a consequence of a revolutionary transformation in American beliefs and practices during the 1960s and 1970s. Moral freedom stands for the idea "that individuals should determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life."

To be sure, questions about virtue and vice in the abstract, Wolfe discovered, tended to leave respondents tongue-tied and self-conscious. The more radical among them --- particularly the gay men and lesbians he interviewed in San Francisco --- reacted with suspicion and anger. Virtue and vice smacked too much of authority and judgment and hoary tradition. But when he asked by name about specific virtues --- loyalty, self-restraint, honesty, and forgiveness --- and the specific role that such qualities of mind and character play in people's lives, Wolfe found his respondents to be articulate, discerning, and even wise. What impressed Wolfe so favorably --- even, he emphasizes, among the Christian conservatives he interviewed --- was his respondents' wrestling with virtue, their acute sense that changing times and circumstances required changing virtues, and their belief that it was up to them rather than any authority to change their virtues accordingly.

Loyalty, for example, Wolfe found, was valued by his respondents because they value other human beings. But recognizing that contemporary America exploits blind loyalty, Wolfe's respondents decide for themselves to whom they should show loyalty and how far their loyalty should reach. Workers believe that they must not be overly loyal to their companies, because corporations hire and fire solely with regard to the bottom line. Men and women still support the idea of marital loyalty, but in a qualified fashion and with greater attention to self-interest, for they take into account the heightened vulnerability of marriage today to divorce.

Wolfe admires how Americans adjust loyalty to meet the realities of social life, though he fails to see a connection between the causes that require us to scale back on loyalty's claims and the authority we enjoy to do so. If there is a culprit, Wolfe suspects it is economic relations: We adopt a more self-interested attitude toward marriage as a consequence of the cold lesson internalized in the workplace. But it is just as consistent with his interviews and more consistent with his overarching thesis that the individualism fostered by the spirit of moral freedom is what encourages spouses to understand their goods separately and permits employers to disregard the long term well-being of their employees to pursue their own short-term profits.

Wolfe finds his respondents tailoring their virtues to fit the opportunities and dangers presented by moral freedom. Americans, by and large, recognize the role that self-restraint plays in obtaining the various good things life has to offer, including the opportunity for occasional self-indulgence, which they happily seize. They believe that honesty, like loyalty, expresses respect for other human beings, and they believe that honesty, like all virtues, is not an absolute but conditional, that it must not be exercised rigidly but must be shaped to the times and made consistent with self-interest. And they honor forgiveness, whose Christian roots Wolfe perceives, through which they respect the humanity of wrongdoers. But they also are inclined to understand forgiveness as a servant of self-interest: By forgiving, one heals one's own wounds; by not forgetting what or whom one has forgiven, one avoids letting the wrongdoer off the hook too easily or letting go of one's own wounds too quickly.

In general, Americans tend to be nonjudgmental, a stance, Wolfe contends, that often enough flows not from apathy or the absence of moral principle but from the egalitarian thrust of the principle of moral freedom: We should respect choices made by others just as we wish for others to respect our choices. And our understanding of the virtues is nourished by a basically optimistic assessment of human nature: We are born neither particularly good nor bad, and good character can be developed in almost all human beings.

Such measure and balance and overall moderation in morality, Wolfe argues, reflect the principle of moral freedom. Because the old verities and traditional authorities have faded, we must define and choose our virtues in a world in which we expect others to do just the same. And this is as it ought to be, Wolfe frequently implies, for the excellent reason that moral freedom corresponds to the true human condition and represents the best of all possible moralities.

Sometimes, it is true, Wolfe sounds a cautionary note:

| moral freedom is as inevitable as it is impossible. Once people are free to choose their cars and their candidates, they will not for long be satisfied with letting others determine for them the best way to live. As correct as critics of America's moral condition are to insist on the need for shared understandings of the moral life, it is better, given moral freedom's inevitability, to think of it as a challenge to be met rather than as a condition to be cured.

So how then should we think about meeting the challenge posed by moral freedom? We could begin by taking issue with Wolfe's method, worrying, for example, that he tendentiously culls from his interviews just those individuals and statements that illustrate his preconceived notions about the virtues of moral freedom.

But it is hard to doubt that Wolfe has, in fact, identified a pervasive moral outlook. More troubling is his repeated lapse in logic. Wolfe begins with the convincing claim that moral freedom, like the traditional morality it supplants, has its virtues. But he repeatedly and casually conflates that claim with the questionable contention that moral freedom is the supreme morality --- a contention he asserts more than argues and frequently bolsters with contrasts to caricatures of classical virtue. The immoderate critique of traditional morality, from which Wolfe gets much mileage in his brief on behalf of moral freedom, leads him to blur crucial features of moral freedom and the challenge it poses.

For starters, Wolfe tends to exaggerate the novelty of our current view of moral freedom. Didn't Hobbes teach that good and evil were merely apparent, that there was no greatest good or ultimate perfection, and that the virtues should be understood as qualities that conduce to a peaceful and prosperous life? Didn't the Declaration of Independence declare life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness --- which meant the liberty to pursue happiness as individuals deemed appropriate within limits set by law --- among our inalienable rights? Didn't Mill envisage a form of political society in which each individual was sovereign, a political society that would be hospitable to, indeed depended for its vitality on, many and varied experiments in living?

Attributing to the classical view of morality a crude absolutism and cartoonish inflexibility --- forgetting that just as an ethics of freedom can have virtues, so an ethics of virtue can have freedoms --- Wolfe repeatedly insists that the practice of viewing virtue as relative to particular situations and requiring for its exercise independent thought and practical judgment is distinctive to the virtues that individuals develop in the era of moral freedom. But in fact Aristotle taught that courage, self-restraint, generosity, friendship, and the other moral virtues were always relative to the individual and the situation: They consisted in doing the right thing in the right way at the right time. And St. Augustine, who famously relates in his Confessions that "I have become unto myself an enigma," demonstrated that doubting, questioning, and seeking are central to the religious spirit. And as Wolfe certainly recognizes, the nonjudgmentalism that he associates with the spirit of moral freedom readily deteriorates into easygoing conformism.

Similarly, Wolfe is wrong to contend that the era of moral freedom reflects the absence of a "preexisting moral consensus," with the result that we have no honest choice but to choose our moralities. What distinguishes our situation is not the absence of principle but the pervasiveness of a specific principle: The lowliest thinks of himself as free, and the highest and mightiest affirm the claims of equality. Indeed, we do not choose moral freedom's root premise, the natural freedom and equality of all. It is rather our first principle and self-

evident truth, which partly justifies the latitude we claim for ourselves in making choices about right and wrong, but also partly constrains our choices by compelling us to respect the like freedom of others.

In part because he fails to give the proper weight to the preexisting moral consensus that underlies moral freedom, Wolfe understates the vulnerabilities of virtue in the era of moral freedom. While he notes that our expansive freedom can be unnerving and "is bound to have consequences we will regret," he does so mainly to reaffirm the moral and intellectual superiority of those of us alive today --- the greater courage and understanding and justice we display in living with contradictions and without the apocryphal absolutes and false certainties that gave comfort to previous generations. Yet it is an open question whether the propensity to view virtue as a kind of self-interested calculation is consistent with maintaining the qualities of mind and character necessary for calculating justly and wisely. As we become more deeply imbued with the idea of moral freedom, don't we grow restless and impatient and indignant at the constraining belief in others' equal claims to freedom? And won't we eventually, perhaps sooner rather than later, declare our freedom from that last fundamental moral constraint as well?

To understand more fully the challenges presented by the idea of moral freedom, one must investigate the passions inflamed by freedom as well as those it lulls to sleep. And one must ask whether the old verities and authorities have faded because they ran out of life or because we have grown shortsighted and forgetful and lost the ability to recognize their enduring force.

The very idea of moral freedom, however, seems to shut off these avenues of inquiry, or at least encourages us, for fear of diminishing our choices and weakening our resolve to choose, not to take them too seriously. In this way, by restricting the regions where the mind may rightly roam and by limiting the longings the heart may legitimately nourish, by giving rise to a new species of false comforts, the idea of moral freedom poses a genuine threat to our dignity as well as to our freedom.

In his introduction, Wolfe declares that he works "on the assumption that human beings aspire to the good even if they cannot escape the bad. That is why it is important to discover not only how they act, but also the standards they hold." True to his aim, Wolfe provides an illuminating portrait of our opinions about our virtues. But since by his own account human beings wish not merely to seem but to be good, it is not sufficient in searching for virtue to discover how we act and the standards we hold. It is also necessary to investigate whether the standards we hold are fitting and true.

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