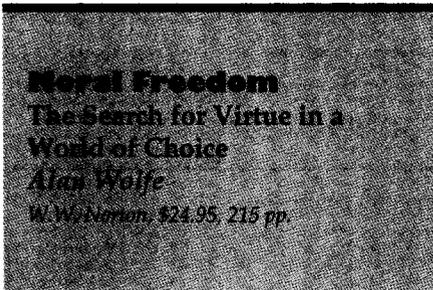


# Beyond authority



**R. Bruce Douglass**

**T**he idea that individuals should be allowed to make up their own minds about matters of right and wrong is not new. A high regard for individual conscience has been a part of Western culture in one form or other since at least the days of Socrates, and it has been particularly influential since the advent of modernity. Advocacy of such freedom has figured so prominently in modern thought, in fact, that it is almost appropriate to regard the acceptance of moral autonomy as one of the defining elements of what it means to have a modern outlook. But it is one thing to affirm such an idea and quite another to adhere to it consistently in practice. Even in so-

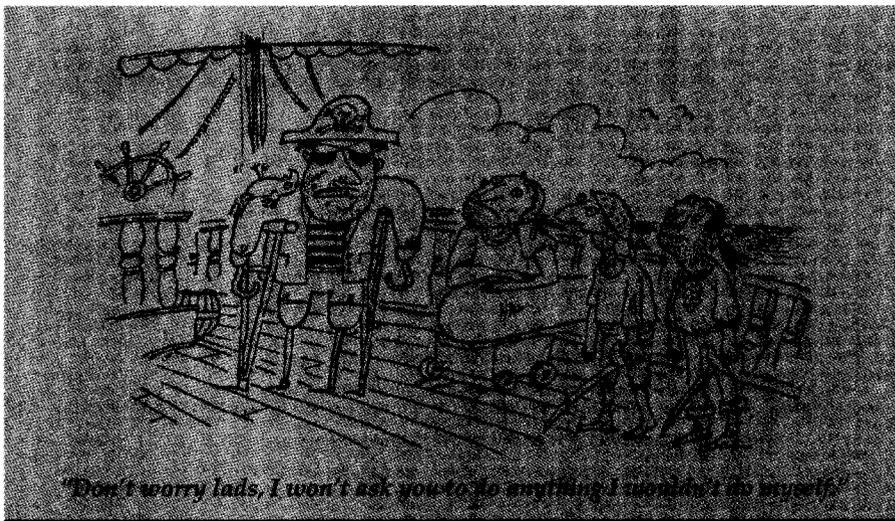
cities like the United States that have long prided themselves on their commitment to individual liberties, the ideal of freedom of conscience has often been compromised in practice. Over the course of modern history the advocacy of such freedom has routinely been combined with beliefs and practices that were in tension, if not outright contradiction, with it. So the same people (Kant, for example) who argued eloquently that individuals have a right to decide things for themselves also insisted that everyone has a duty to comply with the dictates of one or another moral authority.

The more radical implications of the idea of moral freedom have been slow in being realized. In our time, says sociologist Alan Wolfe in this new book, this has begun to change, and it will change even more dramatically in the years ahead. The old sources of authority (churches, families, neighborhoods, economic elites, civil authorities, etc.) that once strongly influenced people's thinking about right and wrong are losing their ability to do so. A situation is emerging in which individuals are free to decide such matters for themselves. The more people do so, the more they

can be expected to assume that they have a right to decide for themselves by what standards and ideals they will live. This is a revolutionary development, Wolfe contends, and it will drastically change our way of life.

Most moral and social thinkers have not been comfortable about where such moral autonomy will lead. Wolfe concedes that our changing notions of moral freedom could have adverse consequences. But he is optimistic about how we are handling our freedoms. Having devoted much of the last decade to a series of empirical studies designed to clarify the current moral condition of middle-class Americans, Wolfe is convinced that, at this stage at least, the people of this nation are responding reasonably well to the challenge. This does not mean, of course, that he approves of everything that has happened since the old authorities lost credibility. But he disagrees with those who think that nothing but harm can come of this development. He insists, against conservative critics, that the matter is complex. The more one knows about the ways in which ordinary Americans handle the moral issues they confront in this new situation, the more evident that complexity is.

For it is just not the case, Wolfe argues, that Americans today are any less serious than previous generations about living morally responsible lives. Nor is it true that the old (bourgeois) virtues are being abandoned. Americans today tend to be somewhat less doctrinaire about their views on moral matters. They are also inclined to be more respectful of beliefs and practices that differ from their own. But that does not mean that they have no standards or are much less concerned about whether the values they espouse are observed in practice. If you make any serious effort to find out what the people actually think about matters



of right and wrong, it soon becomes evident, says Wolfe, not only that most individuals want to live good lives, but that they continue to uphold many of the old middle-class values as well. This is especially true of such values as loyalty, self-discipline, and truthfulness, which are clearly important to the effective functioning of modern institutions.

The difficulty, however, is that people tend to be wary of making the standards they claim to uphold into "absolutes." They insist on bending the rules as "circumstances" dictate. Loyalty is said to be a good thing in principle, but not at the price of unhappiness in a bad marriage. Similarly, honesty is the best policy, but not if telling the truth inflicts unhappiness on others. And so on. Much of Wolfe's book is devoted to analyses of the fate of particular virtues, and what this inventory shows is that Americans now tend to uphold the old virtues in principle while in practice turning them into "options" that have little real capacity to compel compliance.

It is easy to be cynical about a morality that so obviously avoids requiring anyone to do anything costly, but Wolfe is not. He is at pains to put the best face on what his data reveal. He accepts the premise that the changes in mores he documents are not only necessary but also desirable. "Americans are not going to lead twenty-first-century lives based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century moral ideals," he says. "They will not subject themselves to the severe and demanding tests of character imposed on individuals by one or another version of the Protestant ethic. But that does not mean that the morality by which people now live makes them soft. It means only that the new morality is different, making up in the bewildering array of temptations it must face what it lacks in rigor and unswerving self-confidence."

Wolfe is a serious thinker with a generous spirit, and the grace of his prose makes it easy to accept his description of the moral landscape as the obvious truth of the matter. But surely his conclusions beg the very questions at issue. For what is a morality that can accommodate people's desires

in almost every situation if not a recipe for "soft" thinking about moral issues? The fact that this morality must cope with a "bewildering array of temptations" hardly makes up for its lack of rigor and self-confidence. If anything, such a circumstance calls for more rigor, not less, and the lack of it only makes it more likely that people will find it difficult to resist the temptations in question. It is reassuring, admittedly, to learn that Americans still want to have lives that are moral as well as free.

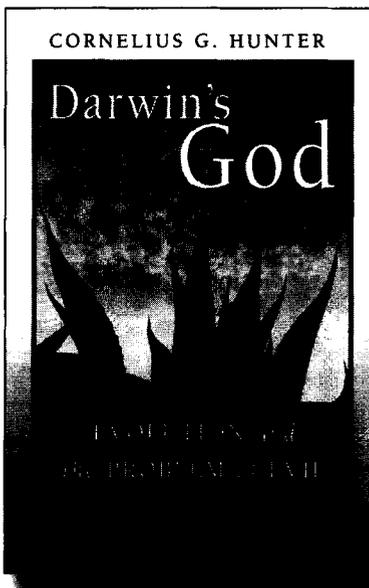
It is understandable that certain adjustments in anachronistic moral codes be made. But in the absence of a stronger sense of morality as the fulfillment of duties, it is difficult to see why such a process of revision will not produce just the complacent self-indulgence that has been the fear of those who have resisted the idea of moral autonomy all along. □

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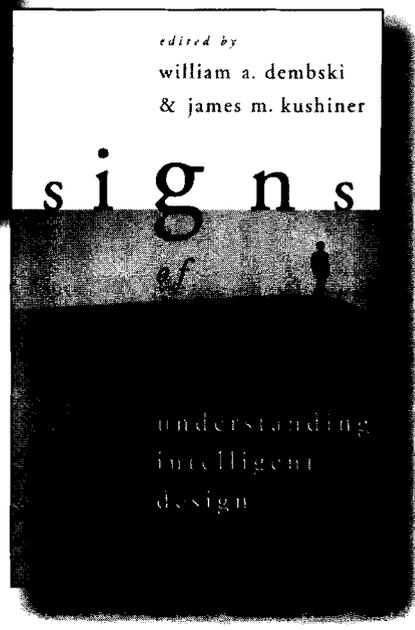
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