

Character traits

by [Gordon D. Marino](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

Moral Freedom. By Alan Wolfe. Norton, 256 pp., \$24.95.

Everyone, to live in this world, has to become something of a moral philosopher," Alan Wolfe states halfway through this book. For the past decade, Wolfe has been diligently studying the moral philosophies of workaday Americans. For his best-selling *One Nation After All* (1998), Wolfe and his cadre of graduate students and assistant professors polled and interviewed 200 self-described middle-class Americans. Wolfe learned that the only culture wars taking place in the U.S. were in the halls of academe. Middle-class Americans are centrists.

In this sequel, he tries to ascertain what Americans think about the virtues. In cooperation with the *New York Times Magazine*, he disseminated a large poll in which he asked Americans questions such as, "Are people born with character or do they acquire it?" Afterwards, Wolfe conducted and/or supervised in-depth interviews with two dozen randomly selected people from all over the country.

While many of those polled and interviewed found the term "virtue" archaic or even mildly repugnant, Wolfe learned that for the most part we still highly prize the character traits that our forefathers and mothers treasured: loyalty, honesty and self-discipline. In the crucible of difficult choices, some of Wolfe's respondents thought it was more important to be loyal to oneself than to outside authorities. Nevertheless, most of us continue to think of loyalty as a trait that we should nurture in our children. Almost everyone agrees that honesty is an essential part of the good life, though Americans tend to think that truth telling is a transgression when the truth causes unnecessary pain and that honesty is not as important in dealing with institutions as it is with neighbors. In short, we prefer our virtues with more restrictive clauses than our forbears did.

There are not many surprises in *Moral Freedom*; still, the author registers some interesting nuances in our moral philosophies. For instance, while Americans continue to applaud self-control, they tend to see extreme self-control as a form of self-indulgence. Those who have the most rigid command over themselves are often

seen as people commanded by their own upward mobility. In other words, someone who works 12-hour days to get ahead and ignores his children may be self-disciplined, but he is also self-involved.

When teaching ethics, I always press my students to list the character traits they take to be essential for the good life. Without fail, compassion and tolerance are among the first virtues they name. Wolfe argues that this new emphasis on the kinder and gentler virtues has a deeper grounding than we often acknowledge. A passionate respect for others and for moral equality undergirds what might superficially seem to be a shrugging attitude toward moral standards.

Wolfe, who has of late become one of the country's most visible sociologists, is eager to point out that our faith in the ethics of self-fulfillment is deep. Whereas our grandparents may have told the truth because the Bible commanded it, we are honest because we believe that honesty is the best policy for ensuring our own happiness. Similarly, we believe that absolution is important not because Jesus commands us to pardon others but because forgiveness helps the person doing the forgiving to get on with his or her life.

Wolfe's book illuminates the connections and contradictions between our moral beliefs. He is adept at uncovering the ironies of the American superego. For instance, most of us believe that we more or less write our own destinies and yet we are "addicted to the language of addiction." We seem simultaneously to believe that we can be whatever we resolve to be and that serotonin levels account for much of what we feel and do. Similarly, we think that forgiveness is great, but we also approve of executions.

Wolfe argues that the idea of freedom has entered a new era, the era of autonomy. "Now, for the first time in human history, significant numbers of individuals believe that people should play a role in defining their own morality as they contemplate their relationship to God, to one another, and to themselves," he writes. In the past we made our choices within the parameters of a fairly rigid set of assumptions about the meaning of life. Those who were born Christian tended to remain Christian. Now we shop around for our faiths, denominations and moral standards.

Years ago, another prescient sociologist, Philip Rieff, informed us that we Americans had used psychotherapy to talk ourselves out of our relationship to authority. Unlike Rieff, who made these observations with downcast eyes, Wolfe makes his pronouncements with the optimism he finds characteristic of Americans. I find his

interpretation of his data hyperbolic and his well-crafted book a mite naïve. He seems convinced that we can have the moral virtues and civility that he so cherishes without genuflecting before anything outside of ourselves. I am not so sure.