God and the search for moral truths

by Reinhard Hütter in the December 2, 1998 issue

By J. B. Schneewind, The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy. *(Cambridge University Press, 623 pp.)*

Some rooms of a house are used more than others. Some we use only to entertain special guests, and some we use only to store things that have collected over the years. The texts of our intellectual history can be regarded as such a well furnished, even overly furnished, house. Some texts are encountered regularly, while others gather dust until someone ventures by chance into the attic.

In the house of moral philosophy, particular rooms have been well frequented for a long time. The most inhabited room is the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment thinkers. Hume, Rousseau and Kant constitute much of the furniture of contemporary moral philosophy. Equally well frequented is the room of Greek and Roman moral philosophy. Reflections on the moral life by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Epicureans and their Roman students Cicero and Seneca play a continuing role in current debates. In addition, thanks to a Thomistic revival and to the Luther and Calvin renaissance in the first half of this century, the moral theologies of Aquinas and of the Reformers have become well-frequented rooms.

Among the nearly forgotten rooms are those featuring developments of the late medieval period and especially the years between the Reformation and the Enlightenment. J. B. Schneewind offers a magisterial and encyclopedic account of the intense and intricate debates about morality that took place in this period, debates hidden from us in forbidding Latin, German and French tomes in baroque print. Here we encounter such unfamiliar names as Suarez, Grotius, Cumberland, Pufendorf, Thomasius, Gassendi, Crusius and Wolff next to more familiar ones such as Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Spinoza, Voltaire, Rousseau and especially Kant. Despite the seeming strangeness and even irrelevance of some of these figures, most of them are much closer to us and our struggles in late modernity than are Aquinas, Luther or Calvin. In fact, Schneewind's history shows us the birthing room of what we have learned to call "modernity."

We can begin to see what links us to a Grotius, a Pufendorf, a Cumberland, a Wolff or a Crusius by first considering a late 20th-century document. In May 1998 the Institute for American Values released a report from the Council on Civil Society titled *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths.* The document was signed by such prominent figures as David Blankenhorn, Senator Dan Coats, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Francis Fukuyama, William A. Galston, Mary Ann Glendon, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Cornel West, James Q. Wilson and Daniel Yankelovich. *A Call to Civil Society* identifies a disconcerting moral decline penetrating all aspects of an increasingly fragmented and polarized American society: "Here, then, is the public's basic judgement of our current predicament: growing inequality, surrounded and partly driven by moral meltdown. Declining morality is reflected primarily in a steady spread of behavior that weakens the family, promotes disrespect for authority and for others, and insults the practice of personal responsibility."

These problems go to the very heart of the American democratic project, for "the qualities necessary for self-governance take root in individuals essentially due to the influence of certain moral ideas about the human person and the nature of the good life." Self-governance, the very presupposition on which any democratic project rests, grows out of distinct ways of life that need to be identified by and supported through a public moral philosophy. Therefore, the Council on Civil Society calls for a revitalization of "a shared civic story informed by moral truth."

But what, we immediately ask, is "moral truth"? If it exists at all, where are we going to find it? Do we receive it via a particular internal or external act of revelation or a set of texts based on revelation? Do we receive it via an encounter with a moral law, common to all humans, i.e., a "natural law"? Do we encounter it via our feelings, expressed as moral sentiments? Or is "moral truth" a collective convention, maintained for the sake of sustaining social cohesion, a "truth" upheld by the power of a "moral majority"? Or is moral truth something essential to human flourishing, something we discover by fully engaging all aspects of being human--the personal, political and religious? Is it something to be covered by terms like "the common good" and "happiness"? Or is moral truth simply an illusion, a term that hides our idiosyncratic impulses and desires, our will for power, glory and pleasure?

These questions, which have a very contemporary ring to them, were precisely the questions with which the major moral thinkers of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were wrestling. The nature of "moral truths," the possibility of human "self-

governance," the moral character of laws and the possibility of a public moral philosophy transcending particular religious convictions were the issues on the top of their agenda. Most of Schneewind's protagonists were shaped by the moral, social and political meltdown caused by the atrocious and protracted religious wars that tore Christendom apart in the 16th and 17th centuries, mainly in England, France and Germany. Where could "moral truth" be found and how could it be assured when its main collective source, the Christian faith, was beset by obviously irresolvable conflicts about its main tenets?

We learn from Schneewind's history that the great majority of moral theorists in this period were not only Christians but theologians of rank. In other words, with the exception of explicit atheists (Bayle, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, Helvetius) and ambiguous characters (Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Voltaire), God mattered for how these thinkers understood their task--and not just for reasons of political survival. A deep and lasting issue for these early modern moralists was the Christian doctrine of God. Is God primarily goodness itself, so that God and humanity form one moral community insofar as God lets humans participate via knowledge in God's own goodness? Or is God first of all an omnipotent and inscrutable will, one so utterly different from humans that morality can be understood only as a contingent imposition from God onto God's creatures? The first position, "intellectualism," was Aquinas's position; the second, "voluntarism," was the position of Duns Scotus and William Ockham. Schneewind shows how this theological difference had a lasting and highly consequential impact on the moral systems of the early moderns.

Schneewind's account shows not only *that* God mattered but *how* God mattered from the time of natural lawyers like Grotius and Pufendorf to the philosopher Kant. Schneewind detects in this period an increasing move toward abstraction in the doctrine of God, in order--of course--to transcend the particularities of the conflicted confessional traditions. This attempt, in turn, increasingly marginalized God's presence in and importance for the moral life. Religion (how God saves us) and the moral life (how God wants us to live) became increasingly distant from each other until they were finally divorced completely.

The hero in Schneewind's account is Kant. In the finale of Schneewind's narrative, Kant brings the search for secure moral foundations to its end, not in an explanation but in an invention--the invention of autonomy:

> Kantian autonomy presupposes that we are rational agents whose transcendental freedom takes us out of the domain of natural causation. It belongs to every individual, in the state of nature as well as in society. Through it each person has a compass that enables "common human reason" to tell what is consistent with duty and what inconsistent.

Why was autonomy an invention? According to Kant, the fact of human freedom is demonstrated by the unique experience of the "moral ought." Because we know we ought to do certain things, it is clear that we have the moral freedom to act. But Schneewind thinks "that our experience of the moral ought shows us no such thing." Autonomy is "an invention rather than an explanation." With Kant's "invention," we not only reach the end of the book but, according to Schneewind, also the end of a century-long struggle to construe a purely rational moral theory.

For Schneewind, Kant is the hero of the story precisely because he brings the process of revising the relationship between religion and morality to its completion by interpreting the core of religion as moral:

> By revealing, for the first time, that religion is basically morality, Christ started us on that "continual approach to pure religious faith," which will one day enable us to "dispense with the historical vehicle" that initially carried its message. . . . The religion of reason, Kant says, "is a continually occuring divine (though not empirical) revelation for all men.

Schneewind continues: "Kant has contributed to the progress of morality by showing that it rests on a purely rational principle, which itself dictates the essential of religious faith."

While God still mattered for most of Schneewind's protagonists, including Kant, Schneewind himself draws the explicitly secularizing conclusions we associate with the Enlightenment project:

> Those of us who hope to see the development of a fully secular understanding of morality need not have any interest in some of the problems that Kant tried to solve. Ignoring them, we of course pay no heed to the conditions they impose on what can count as a satisfactory moral philosophy. If, for instance, we do not think that a prime task for moral

> philosophy is to show that God and we belong to a single moral community, then we will not have Kant's reason for insisting that our theory show how there can be moral principles necessarily binding on all rational beings. There may be other reasons for holding that there must be such principles, but we will not think the requirement self-evident. Principles for humans may be enough.

This is a sobering conclusion to a long journey in which the relationship between God and "moral truth" is at stake. All the attempts prior to Kant to identify and secure "moral truth" by showing that God and humans share a moral community turn out to have been futile. Even Kant's own breakthrough, his invention of autonomy and thus the identification of religion as moral in its very core, is something Schneewind would subscribe to only in a strongly reduced version, without the implicit theological assumptions Kant was ready to entertain.

This is a disquieting move on Schneewind's part. Does not Schneewind's refusal to entertain Kant's central *theological assumption*--that the moral law is the law of God's will--actually put him in the naturalist camp of a philosopher like Hume? Which leads to the further question of whether Hume's account of ethics might not offer everything Schneewind is going to need in order to pursue moral philosophy with an exclusively secular focus. Might not Hume be the secret hero of Schneewind's narrative, particularly given his reductive account of Kant? After all, it is Hume who, according to Schneewind, uses the term "invention" in his analysis of the moral concept "natural law":

> Although we speak of them as laws of nature, Hume reminds us that these are laws that we invent. . . . We think and talk as if acts or people really have moral attributes, but Hume argues that this is simply because our moral feelings project themselves onto an otherwise neutral world.

In the end, it seems Schneewind gives us a Humean account of Kant's concept of "autonomy." A further problem is that Schneewind does not sustain an argument about what actually constituted the success of Kant's solution to the problems with which his predecessors were wrestling. A criterion of a successful solution would be its broad acceptance by Kant's successors. Yet Kant's account was put under intense scrutiny one generation later by Schelling, Hegel and Schleiermacher, to name just a few. And what about Nietzsche's devastating critique of a Kantianized Christianity,

Troeltsch's critique of the ahistorical nature of Kant's ethics, and Scheler's attempt to overcome Kant's formalism?

In order to understand what happened to "moral truth" in the modern world, we need to turn to the parable with which Alasdair MacIntyre opens his history of moral theory, *After Virtue*:

> Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. . . . Finally a Know Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all they possess are fragments. . . . The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. . . . We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have--very largely, if not entirely--lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.

Schneewind's history tacitly but strongly suggests that MacIntyre's "catastrophe" can be located in the inner meltdown of Christendom in the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. The loss of an overarching teleology, the loss of an obvious orderedness and meaning, the loss of confidence that our conscience can give us reliable moral direction or that the Christian faith can offer the framework for a just and peaceful public order, the loss of confidence in the inner coherence between God's saving activity (that to which all humans are called as their final telos) and God's sustaining activity (God's will for human life on earth)--these losses constitute the moral predicament of modernity. Read in light of MacIntyre's vision, Schneewind's book demonstrates why all the attempts of the early modern moralists were condemned to remain unstable, and why even Kant, despite Schneewind's claim, was unable to offer a lasting solution.

Situating Schneewind's history this way also helps to show the dangers of marginalizing God in attempting to articulate an abstract account of "moral truth."

Having decided to isolate the question of salvation from the question of how the moral life should be lived, the (Christian) teleological framework that was still shared by most parties the conversation in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries was abandoned in the domain of moral theory. As Schneewind points out, for many early modern moralists the model for moral theory was mathematics, which was seen as the paradigm for every exact science. In consequence, God became an increasingly abstract function authorizing natural-law concepts that in the long run proved unconvincing because they seemed to be arbitrarily imposed.

The God of the moral philosophers still "functioned" conceptually, but offered increasingly less to disbelieve in, until finally it became hypothetically and then factually possible to posit a moral theory, even a discipline called "moral philosophy," without reference to God. Schneewind himself assumes the integrity of a discipline called "moral philosophy," the history of which can be written without writing the history of theology. MacIntyre, on the other hand, implies that moral philosophy makes sense only as a subdiscipline of an overarching teleological and finally theological account of "moral truth."

Let us return to the present. A nation in which civil society is presumed to provide the moral resources for a democratic project does not seem possible given the very problematic which MacIntyre presses in *After Virtue*. It is the same problematic with which Schneewind's protagonists had to wrestle. In other words, in a civil society that is attempting to battle moral meltdown and reassert "moral truths" that transcend particular religious convictions, a close study of Schneewind's main protagonists, especially the natural lawyers, will prove highly instructive. Yet only if we read them as a lengthy excursus in MacIntyre's narrative will we avoid the pitfalls of either reviving them uncritically, without realizing the inherent instability of their answers, or of leaving them behind as a piece of an irrelevant past.

Rightly read, Schneewind's account of "early modernity" offers a dangerous memory of the instability of our own moral construals. This dangerous memory should urge us to give a full and honest account of the elephant sitting in the middle of the living room of moral philosophy--God. Most of the early modern moral thinkers, including Kant, were too wise to assume that they might be able to rearrange the furniture and the wall paper in the living room of moral philosophy such that this central protagonist would melt into the decoration. They understood that seeking to locate "moral truths" on purely agnostic or atheist grounds was a vain enterprise.

This is not the case for late moderns, including Schneewind himself. The dangerous memory of the early modern moral philosophers--and implicitly of theologians--raises unavoidably the suppressed question about whether "moral truths" might finally depend on particular religious traditions (which have their own understanding of the content, goal, and motivation of morality) and about whether particular theological assumptions are the very condition for reaching "moral truths" that transcend particularity.

The American Civil War, World War I and World War II, the Vietnam war and the recent civil war in the former Yugoslavia have clearly demonstrated that modern secular societies are capable of a destructiveness at least as great as that of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. This historical lesson should call into question the assumption that is at the root of modern liberalism: that in order to secure a peaceful public order the secular realm needs to be protected from religion, and that it can be so protected by making religion a purely private matter. Recent history has taught us that the "secular" world will unavoidably be conquered by pseudo-religions and ideologies--be they the recent ones of fascism and communism or currently flourishing ones like free-market consumerism, moral indifferentism or ethnic tribalism--that are far more destructive than those religions which are kept in the prison of a "private matter."

In other words, the modern flight from religion is futile. Neither the semisecular attempts of the early moderns nor the fully secular attempts of the late moderns at grounding "moral truth" in human rationality or sentiment alone is able to secure a *tranquillitas ordinis*, a peaceful public order of a lasting kind.

If, therefore, the drafters of *A Call to Civil Society* are ready to take up the task of spelling out the "moral truths" that might constitute a public moral philosophy, they will be participating in the same project--and same set of problems--described so well by Schneewind. And beware! They will have to become theologians of sorts, whether they like it or not, since our contemporary situation simply does not warrant the assumption that religion will need to be kept a private matter in order to create a peaceful public order. Just the contrary.