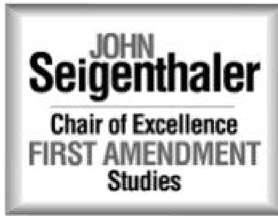

Have Americans Lost Their Virtue? Theme and Variation on Michael Schudson's The Good Citizen

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I.

In The Good Citizen, as in much of his previous writing, Michael Schudson approaches the highly contentious question of what kind of people we Americans have become in something of a contrarian spirit. Instinctively skeptical of doom-sayers and nostalgia buffs, Schudson reverses the usual priorities by which social criticism is informed. Instead of assuming that things must invariably be worse than they have ever been before, and on that basis selectively retelling the history of how we came to the present moment, he writes as if the political world has always been full of folly – and saturated with success. Decline is a word effectively abolished from his vocabulary. When it comes to anything we value publicly – information, intelligence, participation, rights – there have always been moments when they were abundant and times when they have been scarce. We are thus freed to understand our history as it may have happened, not as a set of instructions on where, morally speaking, we may have gone wrong.

Considering how many things contemporary critics find wrong with us -- we lack, among other things, civility, integrity, loyalty, honesty, and sincerity, and all that is from one author, Stephen Carter, alone – Schudson's approach, to say the least, is refreshing. In The Good Citizen, he finds that much of our present sense of democracy's discontent is exaggerated. As befits a book dealing with political questions, The Good Citizen focuses on the public side of our lives: how often we vote, how much we know about politics, how we participate, how we express ourselves, and whether we focus too much on our rights and too little on our obligations. But Americans, or at least so I found in my book One Nation, After All, tend to make sharp distinctions between the public

realm and the private realm, tolerating, or condemning, behavior in one arena that they would not tolerate, or condemn, in the other.

How, one wonders, would the Schudson approach work if the subject under discussion involved questions that reach to the most private and intimate matters with which people are concerned? In my remarks today, I want to take a first stab at this question by outlining a possible response to critics of America's moral condition based on the kind of approach Schudson brings to public matters. My concern will be with classic questions of virtue and vice. It has become something of a cliché that Americans, no longer as deeply committed to faith are they once were, no longer believe in the old-fashioned virtues such as loyalty, courage, honor, and fidelity. Are such charges correct? Do they ask the right questions? Even if there is some truth to them, are there compensating advantages to what is held to be in decline? I do not know how Schudson would answer these questions, although I can guess. So let me instead offer answers in which I can have a bit more confidence: my own.

II.

In 1741, Jonathan Edwards delivered the most famous sermon in American history. With all the certainty of a man sure of his position, Edwards told his Northampton, Massachusetts parishioners that God holds them "over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire" and that He "abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire…." Notwithstanding transformations

in the way we live that render Edwards's eighteenth century village foreign to our sensibilities, the grandchildren of Jonathan Edwards still make themselves heard in late twentieth century America. Their language is not as harsh. It is not outward piety but outward profanity that disturbs them. Some of them turn away from his theology in favor of an analysis rendered in secular terms, even, at times, in the language of social science. (This is not as odd as it may at first seem; Edwards himself believed that the scientific revolution of Newton and Locke supported his theology). Others find the problem to lie, not in the moral depravity of individuals, but in structures within which individual choices are made. Yet for all these differences, there is nonetheless a widespread feeling in the land, akin to the Great Awakenings of America's past, that something has gone profoundly wrong with the country's moral character – and that someone has to be called upon to bring the matter up for urgent public attention.

Perhaps the one contemporary voice that resonates most with the tone of moral opprobrium so characteristic of Jonathan Edwards is that of Robert Bork, former professor of law at Yale University, just down the highway from where Edwards preached. Turning to the Old Testament for the title of his book, Slouching toward Gomorrah, Bork writes that morality cannot be based on reason but instead presupposes the unquestioned authority of religious texts and practices. While religion was at one time "rigorous," and in that way served the function of instilling respect for authority, its demands will win no hearing in a society devoted to egalitarianism and individualism. "As life became easier and diversions more plentiful," Bork continues, "men are less willing to accept the authority of their clergy and less willing to worship a demanding God, a God who dictates how one should live and puts a great many bodily and

psychological pleasures off limits." In theory, it might be possible for individuals to reflect on their experience and from that deduce moral rules to govern their lives. This, however, would work only for a few people, Bork believes: "To suppose that an entire society may be made moral in this fashion is merely laughable. We are not a community of over 250 million reflective men and women able to work out the conditions of contentedness and willing to sacrifice near-term pleasure for long-term benefits."

Similar ideas have been expounded by other thinkers, none with as large an audience as former Secretary of Education William Bennett. From a wide variety of sources – The Bible, great literature, children's stories, history – Western societies, he believes, came to a broad agreement on the importance of the virtues. But if such virtues as friendship, loyalty, work and faith are not taught well, especially to the young, they turn into vices. Bennett leaves no doubt that such vices are omnipresent in contemporary America. Surveying the moral landscape, he is disturbed by rising rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and other potential indicators of decline. Indeed once one starts looking for them, signs of moral degeneration seem to be everywhere: basketball players strangling their coaches; cadets at austere military institutions participating in cheating rings; the entertainment industry purveying sex and violence to ever younger watchers and listeners; gays demanding acceptance of their sexuality, and, most disturbing of all, a President engaging in sordid and illicit sex and then lying about it on television and in the courts. Moral health is like physical health: to find out whether the body is sick, you take its temperature. And no matter how you measure it, Bennett believes, America's moral illness gets worse day by day. A society in which vice triumphs over virtue is morally flabby: we do what is in our best interest, shirk our responsibilities when they prove

burdensome, lie to get ahead, and, as afraid of administering punishment as having it administered, persuade ourselves that everyone deserves a second – or third or fourth – chance.

The analysis of Bork and Bennett is not just an academic exercise. Their views overlap significantly with those of Christians activists influential in the Republican Party. Of all those worried about the moral situation of the United States, only conservative Christians had the confidence to call themselves a "moral majority," a term coined by the political activist Paul Weyrich. Overcoming a history of suspicion toward political activity, Christian conservatives organized their followers around an analysis of what went wrong in America that can be summarized in the form of a few basic propositions. The primary source of morality, as Robert Bork emphasized, was religion. It therefore followed that for a society to have a common morality, it also must share a common religion. Once upon a time, this story continues, America did have that common religion: not only were most Americans Christian, but most Americans saw nothing amiss with prayer in school, Christ in Christmas, or God in the national motto. Those days are long past, not because America now has so many Jews – conservative Christians see themselves as friends of Israel – but because the dominant religion of America is secular humanism. Under the sway of that view of the world, the indicators of moral decline identified by William Bennett cannot be a surprise. Only by returning the country to an appreciation of its religious heritage can the moral decline of the United States be reversed. And that will be done, as the term "moral majority" implies, through a kind of grass-roots populism, allowing traditionally silent Christians in their local communities to make their voices heard.

My final example of those who believe that has gone seriously wrong with morality in contemporary America comes from a wide variety of journalists and social critics who believe that we no longer live with the moral integrity of those who came before us. Among the most eloquent and honest of those voices is that of the journalist Alan Ehrenhalt, who brings to life the world of 1950s Chicago. Whether discussing the lives of those trapped in black ghettos, those tied both to their local Catholic parishes and to the political machine of Mayor Daley, or those attracted to mass-produced housing in the near suburbs, Ehrenhalt emphasizes the degree to which limited lives could, in their own way, be considered good lives. Chicagoans of that time no more thought of morality as a range of choices from which one chose the appropriate response than they thought of a world in which television might some day offer more than a hundred competing stations. They accepted authority for what it was and shaped their lives to conform to its commands. The preoccupations of their lives – sin, obedience, standards, respectability, and togetherness – seem worlds away from ours. Yet this world, from which so many of baby boomers fled the minute postwar prosperity allowed them to do so, stands in retrospect as a world governed by a decided moral integrity.

I believe the critics I have been discussing, despite the rhetorical power of their analysis, have not had a significant impact in changing America in the direction they favor. To be sure, Bork's and Bennett's books became best sellers. No one can doubt that for a significant period of time conservative Christians had strong influence within one of our two major political parties. Just because historical social criticism is nostalgic does not necessarily mean it is wrong: Ehrenhalt may well be correct to suggest that an earlier generation of Chicagoans respected authority more than the present generation.

Yet I think it fair to say most of these critics miss the mark. Despite initial enthusiasm for their insistence that America has lost its virtue, the tide has begun to turn away from them. Of course one could respond to the fact that Americans do not seem to be listening to their message by arguing that their inattention is precisely what is wrong with America. Critics of our decline are in the odd position of having their message well received – in which case America really cannot be so bad – or in having their ideas about America confirmed – in which case their message is not well received. But I think there is another reason why their analysis of the American condition eventually fails. There is something wrong with the substance of what they are saying. What follows are some thoughts on what it is they may have gotten wrong.

III.

The same question that bedeviled Jonathan Edwards also bedevils his grandchildren: If society is irredeemably bad, can the people who compose it ever be good? Putting the same question another way, what happens if the problem with America turns out to be Americans? The institutions that together compose the social capital of America – families, religious congregations, neighborhoods, clubs – are not, as we know from deTocqueville, imposed from above. They are voluntary organizations made strong by the individual decisions of millions of individuals pursuing what deTocqueville called self-interest rightly understood. By that very same logic, they are also made weak when individuals avoid their obligations to pursue self-interest wrongly

understood. It would therefore seem to be impossible to argue that such institutions are in decline without in some way leaving the implication that, morally speaking, it is Americans themselves who are really in decline.

The source of this moral decline, from the point of view of many who speak in the contemporary tones of Jonathan Edwards, is the fact that increasingly Americans are applying the same freedom they have in economics and politics to the moral questions with which they have to deal. Morality defines our duties to self and others. It includes, but is not limited to, timeless questions like these: What is the difference between right and wrong? What does it mean to lead a good life? What is virtue and what is vice? In what – or whom – should a person believe? What is forbidden and what is allowed? How binding is the marriage vow? What do parents owe their children? Can a person be compelled against his will to obey a law with which he disagrees? What obligations do citizens have to their countries? Are they more or less important than their obligations to humanity in general? What is justice? Is there a duty to help the needy? If so, should it be undertaken voluntarily or compelled through law? Are all human beings deserving of equal respect? When is it justifiable to take from some in order to give to others? What rights do people have? How fundamental are they?

As if questions like these were not difficult enough to answer, people who live in the modern world find themselves facing an entirely new set of moral issues posed by changes in human social practices, politics, and technology. Is an abortion ever justified? Should sexual relations between people of the same sex be extended the same moral stature as sexual relations between people of opposite sexes? Should research into cloning be permitted? Is it right to kill animals to serve human needs for food and

fashion? Is a sexually promiscuous person immoral? Should people with disabilities be treated in the same way as those without disabilities? Is the nuclear family the best form for the family to take? When should children be considered responsible adults? Are drug addicts responsible for their actions? Is there an obligation to discourage someone from smoking? Does respect for religious diversity include respect for non-believers? Should we try to regulate the content displayed on the Internet? Ought we to permit euthanasia? Under what conditions and whose supervision? If we discover that behavior traditionally considered immoral, such as violence, has biological or neurological origins, should we change our conceptions of morality? Should we, if we could, make people who violate received ideas about morality feel a sense of shame?

Moral freedom is the principle that individuals should determine for themselves their duties to self and others. They, and they alone, should provide the answers to all both those perennial questions and the more contemporary questions moral inquiry has addressed. To be sure they can consult moral authority in the form of God's commands, tradition and customs, the advice of the wise, the laws of the state, or the practices of institutions, but when an answer has to be given, they must look as deeply as possible into themselves – at their own interests, desires, needs, sensibilities, identities, and inclinations – before decide what they ought to do. Moral freedom is a more radical concept than political or economic freedom because its scope is so much greater. Although political freedoms – the right to speak one's thoughts or vote for candidates of one's own choice – are enormously important, they are restricted to one sphere of human activity: obtaining and exercising political power. The same is true of economic freedom, which, by definition, is limited to such essential, but also essentially mundane,

matters such as the buying and selling of commodities. Moral freedom involves freedom over the things that matter most. The ultimate implication of the idea of moral freedom is that there are no questions the answers to which must be found outside the purview of freely choosing people.

Because the idea of moral freedom is so radical, it has not been an idea that has ever possessed much currency among the West's great moral theorists. Even those who made passionate arguments in defense of freedom in general did not extend their argument to moral freedom. Indeed the common position among most Western thinkers has been to argue the necessity for moral constraint as a precondition for freedom in all other aspects of life. Typical of them is Immanual Kant. Kant was one of the great theorists of freedom in the Western tradition. In no other thinker can one find such eloquent efforts to secure a grounding for the proposition that the greatest value to human beings lies in their capacity for autonomy. But we can only be autonomous, according to Kant, to the degree that we act in accord with timeless moral precepts not chosen by us. Moral action, in Kant's view, was the exact opposite of a do-as-you-please affair. Instead we must imagine what would happen if all other people act as we are tempted to do, a thought experiment which makes immediately clear why acting selfishly or short-sightedly would be wrong. Should I nonetheless decide to act in ways contrary to the categorical imperative – should I, for example, conclude that under the circumstances in which I find myself at the moment I would be best off lying, or taking my own life, or taking advantage of another – I would not have been morally free but the opposite. For if everyone else had made the same decision as I did, the result would be a form of anarchy in which nothing, including autonomy, would be possible.

Religious freedom is yet another realm of liberty that is not the same as moral freedom, indeed which, to come into existence, generally requires the definite absence of moral freedom. The freedom to hold and act upon one's religious beliefs is not the same thing as the freedom to decide for oneself what and how to believe. John Locke's Letter Concerning Toleration, a classic text in the history of religious freedom, does not extend tolerance to all, for, in grounding the concept of toleration in Christian teachings, it leaves Jews to the mercy of their own conceptions of justice and excludes entirely those "who deny the Being of a God." By the time the idea of religious toleration came to the United States, its basis was broader than Locke's. But for America's eighteenth century theorists, religious freedom was still freedom for religions and only incidentally freedom for believers – or, even more improbably, non-believers. The free exercise clause of the United States Constitution countered the idea of an established church. It imagined a world in which Baptists and Catholics would have the same right to practice their religion as Congregationalists. It did not contemplate a world like our own in which people consider a wide range of options from orthodoxy to non-belief and then decide which one suits them best.

And how could it? The idea of people having the freedom to choose their own way of believing – a little more this week than last, a little bit of Protestantism this month and Catholicism the next – assumes that the individual is in charge of his own destiny. Such an idea was foreign to eighteenth century conceptions of religious freedom, which assumed that God was in charge of a person's destiny. Indeed the reason to keep the state out of religion was because there was a power higher than the state to which a person owed his obedience. In his "Memorial and Remonstrance" of 1785, James Madison

defended the idea that "It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage, and such only, as he believes acceptable to him," but he also wrote that "what is here a right towards men, is a duty toward the Creator." The idea of religious freedom stakes out a position independent of the state's authority only to clear the way for God's authority. Freedom of conscience presumes that we have a conscience, that we are already predisposed to say no to our instincts and desire for immediate gratification.

It was not just with respect to religious belief that America's eighteenth century theorists of freedom assumed the existence of a prior moral world in which freedom would be valued and protected. Students of the classical world, influenced by European writers from Machiavelli to Montesquieu, they were, to one degree or another, adherents to a conception of republican virtue which emphasized that freedom was possible only when individuals restrained their self-interest for the sake of the public good. Sober, stern, serious – such virtuous people could hardly be described as morally free. For they did not act by considering all the possible actions they might take before deciding which one to take. Instead they were more likely to consider all the things which could not be done before limiting themselves to those few things which might be permissible.

It would not be surprising to learn that the enemies of freedom over the past two centuries were also opponents of moral freedom: Conservatives since at least Edmund Burke have believed that because "duty and will are … contradictory terms," our moral obligations "are such as were never the results of our option." We realize just how radical the idea of moral freedom is when we recognize how little support the idea has received from freedom's greatest friends. To be sure, not all friends of liberty were enemies of moral freedom; John Stuart Mill's <u>On Liberty</u> not only defends the idea that

people should be free to determine for themselves the plan of their lives, he also extended the realm of liberty to new terrain when he wrote that "over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign." Still, if the name we give to the party of freedom is liberalism, Peter Berkowitz is right to claim that the great liberal thinkers – Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and even Mill in some of his writings– were not opposed to "theories of politics that dealt with virtue, the common good, and the ends of political life." The one freedom forbidden to us was the freedom to choose all the arenas in which to be free. Some things were simply too important to be left to the whims of caprice and self-interest. And nothing was more important than assuring that the moral rules which shaped all of society's other rules were secured by something transcendental, impervious to the passions of the moment, and filled with symbolic grandeur.

Despite such long-standing and considerable objections to the principle that people ought to have the freedom to construct their moral rules, it is hard to imagine a situation in which individuals who are free in all other areas of life will stop at the door of morality. For one thing, they may not know where that door is. We often consider abortion or gay rights "moral" issues, but they also involve commercial services provided through the market, a fact which has repeatedly led feminists and gay rights activists to defend Lochner v. New York and its laissez-faire principles when bath houses or abortion clinics are the business firms involved. For another, the crucial importance of morality – its location in what Durkheim would call the sacred realm of meaning than the profane world of commerce and elections – makes unfreedom in that arena particularly poignant to individuals who insist on their liberty. What is striking about moral freedom is not that Americans are insisting that they ought to have it, but that they waited so long.

Reviewing the entire history of religion in America since the first Spanish and French settlements, Sidney Ahlstrom concluded that "only in the 1960s would it become apparent that the Great Puritan Epoch in American history had come to an end." Putting aside the hysterical politics and the theatrical demonstrations, something clearly important happened during the 1960s that transformed life in America. The decade began at a time when institutions of moral authority craved obedience: religious leaders were quick to offer unambiguous prescriptions for proper Christian conduct; women were encouraged to stay home and raise their children; government's word was to be trusted; teachers could discipline as well as instruct; and the police enforced laws against what was considered immoral conduct. The 1960s ended at a time when liberation, once a political slogan with little appeal in the American heartland, had become a way of life for all those Americans determined to rely more on themselves, and less on what once would have been called their betters, in the realm of manners and morals. For better or worse, the pollster Daniel Yankelovich is correct to suggest that we have been governed by "new rules" for the last twenty or thirty years. And most prominent among those rules is the idea that people themselves will have a say in determining what the conditions are for good and virtuous lives for themselves and their fellow citizens.

IV.

If I am right, then those who set themselves up to counter what they perceive to be the moral decay of the United States are setting themselves up in opposition to moral freedom – a pretty tough-minded, but also probably hopeless, thing to do. To their credit,

a number of those who speak in the language of Jonathan Edwards recognize that this is what is required of them. One example is provided by "A Call to Civil Society," a document issued by the Council on Civil Society, a joint product of the New York-based Institute for American Values and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Signed by a number of prominent writers, including John DiIulio, Jean Bethke Elhstain, Glenn C. Loury, Cornel West, and James Q. Wilson, the "Call" filled in many of the moral gaps left behind in the wake of Robert Putnam's by-now famous article, "Bowling Alone."

One of the questions raised by Robert Putnam's research was why should we care about declining civic participation in the first place. Writing as a political scientist, Putnam, to the degree that he addressed the question at all, answered it by asserting that low civic participation was bad for democracy. But such an answer was no answer, according to the signers of the "Call." Participation is a good only to the degree that it serves some higher purpose. We would not admire active civic organizations if their objective were to promote white supremacy. To call for more democracy without raising the question of democracy for what is to leave morality out of the picture entirely.

This, the Council on Civic Society was unprepared to do. Different writers saw different value in civil society. For the Council, that value could be found in the capacity of these organizations "to foster competence and character in individuals, build social trust, and help children become good people and good citizens." Active participation in civic life was necessary, not just for the sake of participation itself, but because through socially connected activity "we answer together the most important questions: what is our purpose, what is the right way to act, and what is the common good."

In a post-modern age, the Council's language was unusual language indeed. For the Council was claiming, not only that active participation in the institutions of civil society forces us to ask the right questions, but also that it provides the right answers. As contrary to the times as this way of thinking may be, the authors of the "Call" argued, it was very much along the lines of what the Founders believed. In writing a Constitution and establishing the framework for a new society, they understood that there were important civic truths to which all Americans ought to be committed, such as the idea that all people were created equal. By themselves, such civic truths "do not tell us how to pursue happiness or how to live a good life." But our founders – as well as those great Americans like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King who followed them – were steeped in biblical and religious sources. What the founders spoke of "laws of nature and of nature's God," or when King made reference to a "higher law," they were expressing the sense that "democracy depends upon moral truths."

Moral truths take on their importance because, timeless and transcendental as they are, they have their origin in forces – such as nature on the one hand or the realm of the supernatural on the other – that are outside the control of human beings. "Our moral truths underwrite our social well being primarily because they teach us to govern our appetites and to transcend selfishness," the Council claimed. Those who refused to have their appetites held in check – the children, so to speak, of Herbert Marcuse – thus live under a moral lie. They fail to realize that freedom does not mean "immunity from restraint." Instead freedom must be understood as "an ethical condition," as "the morally defined mean between license and slavery." Human beings, the "Call concluded, are "not autonomous creatures who are the source of their own meaning and perfection." We are

rather "intrinsically social beings" who require "connectedness" in order to "approach authentic self-realization."

One finds the same concern with moral freedom expressed by another high-level effort to combine empirical data about the decline of civil society with moral exhortation was initiated by the National Commission on Civil Renewal, chaired by former Senator Sam Nunn (D. GA) and William Bennett. "Compared with previous generations," the Commission – or should I say its staff director William Galston – wrote, "Americans today place less value on what we owe others as a matter of moral obligation and common citizenship; less value on personal sacrifice as a moral good; less value on the social importance of respectability and observing the rules; less value on restraint in matters of pleasure and sexuality; and correspondingly greater value on self-expression, self-realization, and personal choice." The Commission further argued that the ultimate cause of America's social decline lies in the emergence of new, and disturbing, conceptions of freedom. "We must ask ourselves some hard questions about this new understanding of individual liberty. Dare we continue to place adult self-gratification above the well being of our children? Can we relentlessly pursue individual choice at the expense of mutual obligation without corroding vital social bonds? Will we remain secure in the enjoyment of our individual rights if we fail to accept and discharge our responsibilities? Is there a civic invisible hand that will preserver our democratic institutions in the absence of informed and engaged citizens?" The clear answer to all these questions, in the opinion of the National Commission on Civic Renewal, was no.

To illustrate why attacking moral freedom in a free society is such a difficult proposition, we ought to look at the one social institution in the Untied States closest to

ordinary people: the family. If one were looking for empirical evidence for the decline of traditional morality in America, trends in family life would certainly seem to offer them. According to The National Marriage Project, led by sociologist David Popenoe and social critic Barbara DaFoe Whitehead, Americans are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce than they were a generation ago. Unmarried cohabitation increased by nearly 1000% between 1960 and 1998. The number of children under eighteen living with a single parent has increased over the same time-period among both blacks and whites but at especially sharp rates for the former. More and more teen-agers endorse the idea of living together before marriage. The effect of these trends, the authors argue, is to undervalue the importance of marriage, its commitments, and its status as the most proper way to raise children. As is often the case with America's moral debate, critics of the National Marriage Project's conclusions tend to focus on problems in its methodology. But no one disputes the fact that if the definition of a strong family is one that is formed when people are young and persists until they are very old, that version of the family has clearly weakened in America.

The question is why. And the answer has to involve the dawning recognition on the part of women in contemporary America that the family, at least in the version idealized during the 1950s as the best model for family life, did not yield to them the autonomy to lead their lives as free individuals. Whether or not the 1950s family ever lived up to the moral standard to which it was held – that question calls forth a passionate debate which need not be entered here – these days marriages are undertaken, roles are determined, children are raised, family size is determined, and divorces are influenced by the overwhelming fact that women have achieved a significant degree of moral freedom

in contemporary America. The fact that women work – and that through both birth control and the availability of abortion they have significant say over how many children they will have – become symbolic as well as actual realities. For some, they represent a newly won freedom in an arena once governed by traditional morality, a freedom that allows people to lead the best possible lives for themselves. For others they represent a world in which moral freedom comes at the cost of putting the needs of the self above obligations to others and even above responsibility to the sanctity of life itself.

From the perspective of the latter, the stakes involved are great. "Self-governance begins with governing the self," wrote the authors of the Council on Civil Society's "Call." "In this sense, the family is the cradle of citizenship, since it is in the family that a child learns, or fails to learn, the essential qualities necessary for governing the self: honesty, trust, loyalty, cooperation, self-restraint, civility, compassion, personal responsibility, and respect for others." In a similar way, the National Commission on Civic Renewal stated that "Our civic condition cannot be strong if our families remain weak." In both accounts, the family was not pictured as an essentially private institution responsible for the happiness of those who joined together to form it. Each endorses instead an inverted version of the feminist slogan that the personal is the political: we make good families in order to make good citizens. Whether or not the point is true – some of our best citizens, need one again mention Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., lived in less than ideal families – this way of thinking raises the stakes over moral freedom. For if the cause of the family's decline is in any way attributable to the claims women are making for greater autonomy, then moral freedom for women not only threatens the family, it threatens the state as well.

The question of the family illustrates exactly why moral freedom for anyone can be such a difficult topic to address. Clearly, as thinkers concerned with placing limits on unrestricted moral freedom have long recognized, society would be impossible if each person simply decided to follow their own inclinations in everything they did, including such socially important matters as raising the next generation of adults. It is a basic truth established by modern sociology, one in no way disproved by the popularity of rational choice theory in the social sciences, that institutions must have moral authority if some form of social order is to work well. Yet people struggle to gain – and fight to keep – freedom for a reason. Americans want institutions to justify the authority they presume to exercise. Their skepticism applies most strongly to the institution that Durkheim believed to be a moral institution par excellence: the state. But they have been just as skeptical of preachers, principals, and physicians when they found them too intrusive, too zealous in lecturing other people how to live. No institution, including the family, can consider itself immune from this skepticism.

V.

It is because moral freedom seems to have so pervasive in American life that Jonathan Edwards' grandchildren have so much to say. At the same time, the world really has changed since the days of Jonathan Edwards. For Edwards, God's power was a truth from which no one could hide. But today it is impossible to establish either the empirical or the moral truths capable of rallying Americans around institutions of moral authority. Despite the entry of so many well-trained social scientists into hotly contested

areas of moral debate, reliance on empirical data, as helpful as it can be, rarely settles much of anything. We can generally learn enough about how we behave to rule certain claims out of bounds – no one these days can make a credible case that divorce rates are at historic lows. But the numbers can never command general agreement the issues so many care most about, such as whether our conduct makes us sinners in the eyes of God.

Against the force of moral freedom, appeals to moral truth seem even weaker than appeals to empirical truth. It is comforting to believe that the American founders shared conceptions of moral truth shaped by ideas of natural right and by their common Christian faith, but this ignores the fact that some of them were also committed liberals pretty far along on the road to modernity. And if for them moral truths could not be automatically translated into principles that instruct us on what laws to pass or on how to behave, one can hardly blame contemporary Americans for modifying their conceptions of moral truth to account for the realities of how they lead their lives. When they do so – when, for example, they shape the institution of the family to take account of the autonomy of its members – they are essentially saying that their institutions are made, not by God and certainly not by nature, but by them. This does not mean that all ways of life are moral equivalents; for all the talk of moral decay, Americans continue to believe, with respect to the family, that two-parent families are the best way to raise children. But it does suggest that those who presume to offer moral advice in the form of unalterable truth will have to listen with as much dedication as they have learned to instruct.
against it.

For all the fear that it is experiencing moral decline, it would be difficult to imagine a society more obsessed with morality than America at century's end. This

became clear in the aftermath of the tragic shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The locale of this grizzly affair, from a symbolic point of view, could not have been better chosen. Denver, where the Rocky Mountains begin, can, depending on one's point of view, represent either the free air or the West or the costs of uncontrolled planning and ecological arrogance. Littleton, a suburban composed of generally expensive tract homes built around cul de sacs, stands for either private property and the benefits of a home of one's own or urban flight and white racism. (In the latter version, the fact that people fleeing what they assumed to be the violence of the cities only to encounter greater violence in the suburbs seemed especially ironic). The guns assembled by the two teen-agers reflect either Constitutional guarantees of freedom, including the right to bear arms, or the freedom of an irresponsible capitalism gone amok, willing to sell any commodity, even one that kills, for the right price. The high school at which the shooting took place suffered from secular America's unwillingness to allow prayer and meaningful moral reflection or from the failure of Americans to support public education generously with their tax dollars. The gothic images and Nazi regalia that attracted the killers demonstrate for some why censorship is necessary and for others the impossibility of ever controlling people's fantasies. And, most dramatic of all, the killings symbolized either unrestrained evil on the one hand or the kind of alienation caused by snobbery and exclusion on the other. No matter what moral point one was trying to make, the events in Littleton seemed to fit the tale. If talk about morality could only be taken as a measure of morality, America would be experiencing, not moral decline, but moral renewal.

The talk, of course, exists because of a deep sense among some of America's most respected thinkers that we are not the moral society we once were. What, finally, is one to make of their case? Those who worry that Americans have lost the sense of moral authority embedded in truth, tradition, and time have distinguished pedigrees, for a concern with excess moral freedom has been a consistent theme of Western social and political commentary. Whether or not social trends concerning divorce, single-parent families, crime, civic participation, and trust constitute what Francis Fukuyama has called a "great disruption," they do justify asking serious questions about the consequences of moral individualism. We ought to be pondering the way we live at any time, especially during those times when social changes seem especially unsettling.

Still, if the period since the 1960s seems disruptive, can we be sure that it will be more disruptive than earlier periods in American history? Conservative moralists, much in the spirit of Jonathan Edwards, write as if America must be worst off the more moral freedom it has. It is in response to this near automatic assumption that a reading of Michael Schudson's The Good Citizen comes in handy. Responding to critics of our public discontents, Schudson suggests that we would be wrong to view history in purely linear fashion, as if there was only so much of a good thing like participation which could be measured the way our body temperature is measured. Instead, he suggests, the meaning of citizenship has changed in different eras depending upon the social, political, and technological understandings of that era. The problem is not that citizens are "worse" now than they ever were before. The problem instead is that our current conception of the informed citizen is an unrealistic one for which our history offers no guidance.

Can the same way of thinking be applied to the questions of virtue and vice that are presumed to guide private behavior? Schudson himself offers one way to think about the problem. Writing about political change, he points out that "the locus of authority has moved from shared, generally religious, values located in the community to the formal polity and elections, to individual rights guaranteed by administrative fairness and the courts." One can also see in the realm of private concerns a movement from shared values, often religious in inspiration and reinforced by institutions possessing moral authority such as churches, to individual values chosen by people with the advice and consent, but no longer the compulsion, of institutions of moral authority. How significant is this transformation?

It would, I think, be incorrect to read Michael Schudson as suggesting that, just because things have not gotten worse, they have automatically gotten better. We need instead to approach any question as important as the ones being discussed here with an open mind. And in that sense, I believe that those who worry about moral decline in America do have one strong point propping up their case. Because moral freedom emerged so late in American life, earlier cycles of moral freedom were generally confined to small numbers of intellectuals and bohemians clustered in unrepresentative quarters of American life. The moral freedom that emerged in the 1960s, by contrast, captured the attention of the entire society. Rarely, if ever, has a society had to deal with so many claims, in so many areas of life, and over such intimate and personal matters, as America has faced since the 1960s. It would be surprising indeed if changes of that magnitude did not give rise to serious, thoughtful, and to some degree persuasive explorations of the negative consequences of those trends.

Yet there is also something to be learned from the kind of historical approach Schudson has taken with respect to our public life. Just as America adjusted to the emergence of economic freedom, religious freedom, and freedom of speech – each of which was greeted with warnings from conservatives about great potential damage should it go too far – it may also survive the emergence of moral freedom. There is even the possibility that the society might flourish once Americans, as they become more used to the moral freedom they have gained, also become more responsible for managing the moral conditions of their lives. If there are competing conceptions of the good citizen, there are also competing conceptions of the good person. Clearly the views that Americans have about what constitutes a good person have changed since the days of Jonathan Edwards. Chances are that newer conceptions of a good person that are emerging will lack the moral seriousness and theological depth of those conceptions held up in the eighteenth century. But they will also have greater respect for the notion that people ought to be in charge of their own moral destiny than such earlier conceptions could have had. Whatever we might have sacrificed in the loss of one capacity, we will more than have gained in the achievement of the other.