

# Public moral debate vital for democracy

## ETHICS AFTER BABEL: THE LANGUAGES OF MORALS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

By Jeffrey Stout  
Beacon Press, \$27.50, 338 pages

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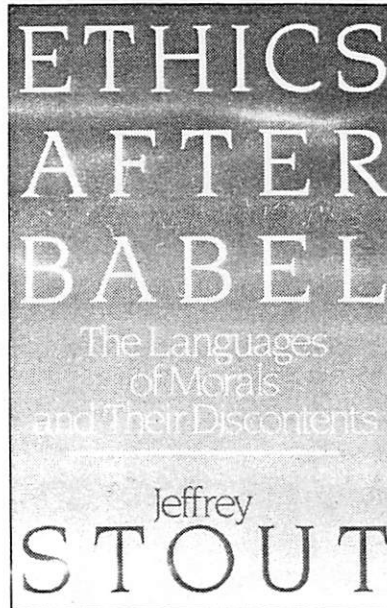
After Tawana Brawley, Ivan Boesky, Wedtech, the congressional hearings on the Iran Contra affair and the 1988 presidential campaign, the idea that the debate over ethics and American public life is improving will doubtless come as something of a shock. But there it is.

The improvements rarely show up at the pop-cultural or pop-political levels of our society. The arguments leading to a wiser debate are largely confined to a small band of scholars and publicists. But the vigor of the new academic debate on the nature of ethics may just have a salutary effect on the quality of our public life, and perhaps sooner rather than later.

Perhaps the key moment in this happy development was the 1981 publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue," which galvanized the discussion of ethics in "post-modern" America rather like Allan Bloom's "The Closing of the American Mind" did the discussion of higher education. Mr. MacIntyre's was a devastating portrait of a society sunk in moral "emotivism," incapable of conducting, much less resolving, fundamental ethics and public-policy debates (like those over abortion, or the issue of war and peace) because it had lost commonly accepted moral reference points and language.

Mr. MacIntyre's villains were the Enlightenment quest for the "autonomous person" freed from "traditional" authorities and constraints, and the hegemony of the allegedly "value-free" social sciences on American campuses: "autonomy" plus "value neutrality" equals modernity and its discontents.

And the Alasdair MacIntyre of "After Virtue" seemed to argue that the modernity jig was up: The breakdown of moral consensus was so profound that the best one could do was retreat into small communities where the virtuous life might be preserved and nurtured. We were



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waiting, in Mr. MacIntyre's famous image, not for Godot, but for a new and rather different kind of St. Benedict.

The debate on public virtue after "After Virtue" has tended to be divided between "liberals" who think the Enlightenment project is salvageable, and "communitarians" who argue that we learn to think and act morally within longstanding traditions (or "stories") of virtue, such as might be found in religious communities or, conceivably, a reformed academy.

Both liberals and communitarians agree that something is deeply wrong with public moral discourse today; they split on the question of where one looks for a path to take us out of our current confusions. To make matters even more interesting and complicated, there are political liberals among the communitarians, among them Robert Bellah and his fellow authors of the widely discussed "Habits of the Heart."

Enter, then, Princeton's Jeffrey Stout, author of "Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents." Mr. Stout proposes an "Augustinian liberalism" that brokers the argument between communitarians and liberals through what Mr. Stout terms "moral bricolage": taking "bits and pieces" of the moral "languages" now in play, arranging some of them into a coherent whole while abandoning others, and ending up with a moral framework that gets the public debate beyond today's wheel-spinning.

Mr. Stout argues that this kind of bricolage is not just splitting the difference, but has historical antecedents in, say, Thomas Aquinas, whose "real accomplishment was to bring together into a single whole a wide assortment of fragments — Platonic, Stoic, Pauline, Jewish, Islamic, Augustinian, and Aristotelian."

Mr. Stout's reading of our current cultural situation is less pessimistic than "After Virtue" or "Habits of the Heart." Where Mr. Bellah and his colleagues see tongue-tied Americans unable to verbalize any moral norm beyond radical individualism, Mr. Stout sees men and women who, by and large, lead decent and honorable lives marked by a discernible care for the welfare of others, even if they cannot satisfy the relentlessly Socratic probings of Mr. Bellah and his friends.

No doubt America needs to strengthen its heritage of republican virtue through a revitalized language of public moral debate. But, to Jeffrey Stout, it is romantic nonsense to think that human beings have ever lived far from Babel. The point, then, is not to search for a new St. Benedict, but to create a form of moral argument that allows us to make slow but real progress amid plurality.

All very interesting. But why should others care about this occasionally arcane debate among the academicians?

The answer is simple. If Laurence Tribe and those of his ilk are wrong: if democracy is more than an ensemble of legal procedures; if democracy rests on substantive agreements about the nature of the human person, human society and human destiny — then the ability to conduct purposeful, public moral argument about the ordering of our lives, loves and loyalties is essential to the democratic future. "Ethics After Babel" is an important contribution to securing that future.

George Weigel's new book, "Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy," will be available from Paulist Press in early 1989.