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Moral Belief in Barbara Honigmann's *Soharas Reise*

In his book *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* Mark Roche suggests that one possible role of literature is to function as a thought experiment. That is to say, literature often allows us to construct hypothetical scenarios that are useful in order to examine the consequences of our beliefs. This experimental function often takes ethical beliefs as its object. Elaborating on this, Roche writes, "Frequently our experience of the ethical dimensions of an artwork does not so much expand our knowledge of ethics as deepen our understanding of the implications of our ethical positions".¹ In other words, Roche thinks that literature does not necessarily propose new ethical theories, but it does often examine the consequences of current ethical theories. Following this line of reasoning, this essay considers Barbara Honigmann's novel *Soharas Reise* as a kind of thought experiment.² Specifically, it examines how moral beliefs are established in *Soharas Reise* and traces the varying consequences of each means for establishing moral belief. Stated alternatively, the goal of this essay is to describe how some of Honigmann's main characters both develop personal moral beliefs and seek to establish their moral credibility, as well as to ask how effectively they do each of these. The conclusion of the essay is that the novel should be viewed as an examination of the consequences of one particular way of grounding moral belief, namely belief through deference to a moral authority. *Soharas Reise* considers the implications of relying on moral experts who are seen as having exclusive or privileged access to moral guidance. The novel highlights many negative aspects of deference to a moral authority, but also problematizes individual moral reasoning. Ultimately, the positive examples of Sohara and Frau Kahn suggest that constructive moral reasoning depends on a balance between religious rituals and the scrutability of a reasoned adherence to moral obligations.

It is helpful to begin with a look at some aspects of Sohara's characterization relevant to her moral outlook. Sohara undergoes a moral transformation initiated by her disappointment in one of her former

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¹ Mark Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 22.

² Barbara Honigmann, *Soharas Reise* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2010). Citations of this work will henceforth be given parenthetically.

moral authorities, her husband Simon. This develops gradually, first through disagreements between Sohara and Simon, and later peaking in Simon's eventual departure and bid to kidnap the children he had with Sohara. Prior to these events, Sohara respects Simon for his commitment to their shared religion. The hierarchy of ethical authority is described when Sohara details her first meeting with Simon. Speaking of men who study religious texts all day, she states, "Sie sind die Elite unseres Volkes, und wir, die wir arbeiten, müssen sie miternähren [. . .], jeder einen Zehnten, für den Geist. Damals bewunderte ich diese Männer und bewunderte Simon, daß er so ein Leben auf sich nahm, wochenlang unterwegs zu sein, zu fremden Leuten zu gehen, zu bitten, zu erklären" (32). The origin of moral authority is God, the elite study the will of God through the texts and the workers learn of this will from the elite. Sohara thus envisions herself as a worker and sees Simon as somewhere between a worker and an elite. She says of him, "Früher hatte ich ihm alles geglaubt, ich hatte ihn bewundert und als einen heiligen Mann angesehen, ich war verzaubert von seinem weißen Bart und seinen Segenssprüchen zu jeder Gelegenheit und ganz benebelt von seinen Geschichten" (63). Later, however, it becomes clear to Sohara that her moral judgment is not only superior to Simon's but also sufficient to determine ethical behavior without deference to him or any other religious elite. One example of this is when, after Simon kidnaps their children, Sohara becomes more relaxed about Shabbat. She states, "Ich hätte am Schabbat telefoniert, auch wenn es verboten ist, und Gott hätte es mir verzeihen müssen, denn er wird doch wohl in dieser Sache auf meiner Seite stehen" (67). In other words, Sohara has by now come to see herself as accessing God's will without the mediation of Simon or the elite.

Sohara's ethical transformation offers an opportunity to apply Roche's concepts to the text. Namely, the implications and consequences of Sohara's beliefs on moral authority before and after her transformation can be contrasted. Beginning with her belief in the authority of the elite, it is sometimes suggested in the novel that had Sohara gained confidence in her moral judgment earlier, she may have prevented her children's kidnapping. Discussing her previous familial life with Rabbi Hagenau's wife, Sohara acknowledges that she "hätte [wahrscheinlich] selber mit den Kindern schon längst auf und davon gehen sollen," adding immediately thereafter, "Bloß wohin?" (97). This statement could be read in at least two ways. On the one hand, Sohara could be simply stating that she did not leave with the children because she could not determine a better place to go with them. On the other hand, she could be lamenting that she did not have confidence in her moral judgment earlier. This second reading is supported by her newfound empowerment revealed at the beginning of the next chapter. She says, "Meine Angst und die Scham hatte ich abgelegt

und das Kopftuch auch. [. . .] Ich lief einfach so herum, ohne Grund und ohne Ziel, [. . .] und fühlte, wenn ich so ziellos hinschleuderte und mir Zeit für lauter unnütze Sachen ließ, so etwas wie Mut in mir aufsteigen, eine Erleichterung wenigstens, und ich fürchtete mich nicht” (97). This description of Sohara’s new sense of courage and trust in herself supports the notion that she indeed laments not coming to her confidence and security in moral judgment earlier. Had she recognized her agency and power of judgment earlier, perhaps she could have prevented the kidnapping.

Here it is necessary to consider an important piece of the story’s logic. Having recognized her access to God’s will and taken responsibility for her moral judgment, what distinguishes Sohara’s belief from Simon’s? It seems that Simon has all along seen himself as having access to the will of God without deference to the elite. Something must separate his form of belief from Sohara’s, otherwise she could potentially justify immoral behavior in the same way the he has. Indeed, the story differentiates sharply between Sohara’s and Simon’s forms of belief.

One of the major differences in the belief structures of Simon and Sohara is the moral importance that they give to human suffering. The incident in which Simon destroys the table that he uses for prayer after Sohara has used it for tending to the children helps to highlight this difference. Sohara states, “Als er mich das Kind auf dem Tisch wickeln sah, brüllte er, ob ich denn vollkommen wahnsinnig geworden sei, dies sei doch schließlich der Tisch, an dem er die heiligen Bücher lese, ob ich diesen Platz mit Kinderhintern und Kinderwindeln entheiligen wolle” (62). This indicates Simon’s disregard for the worldly realm of human suffering. The needs of the children and his wife are not of primary importance to him. It is adherence to divine commands that occupies his main attention.

Additionally, Sohara wants transparent beliefs that are scrutable. Simon is unable or unwilling to provide this for her. Shortly after describing the chair incident, Sohara states, “Manchmal habe ich ihm Fragen gestellt, warum ist dieses verboten, jenes erlaubt, aber er hat mir auf keine Frage jemals eine Antwort gegeben” (63). Sohara’s dissatisfaction with such opaque responses represents one reason she ceases to see him as a moral authority and as a good father. She had hoped he would pass his reasons and explanations on to the children. Furthermore, although both believe in many of the same moral obligations, Simon ascribes the same weight to each moral obligation, whereas Sohara sees the importance of some obligations, like those relating to the family, as superseding others, such as those that relate to appearance. Their disagreement on the importance of covering Sohara’s hair illustrates this well. Sohara states, “Simon hat peinlich darauf

geachtet, daß ich auch morgens nach dem Aufstehen und am Vormittag nicht etwa mit offenen Haaren herumliefe, und er erzählte immer wieder die Geschichte von der Frau, deren Söhne alle große und Heilige unseres Volkes geworden waren; daß sei der Lohn dafür gewesen, daß nicht einmal die Wände ihres Hauses jemals ihr Haar gesehen hätten" (100). Simon ascribes the same importance to the covering of the hair as he does to all moral obligations, whereas Sohara believes there is a difference in degree of importance between this type of obligation and others.

To summarize, both Simon and Sohara believe that knowledge of ethics comes from God, but Simon's system of belief differs from Sohara's in that he ignores the relevance of human suffering in moral considerations. Additionally, he ascribes nearly equal moral importance to all moral obligations. Simon also tolerates the inscrutability of moral obligations that come from God and does not subject them to his own notions of practicality, rationality or anthropocentrism. Sohara, by contrast, ascribes moral importance in more varying degrees and considers explicability in rational and humanistic terms to be a precondition for moral obligation. The tragic consequences of Simon's behavior imply the danger of his views and suggest that Sohara's view is superior.

Another question that I would like to consider is how we can explain Frau Kahn's role as a trustworthy moral figure in the logic of the novel. She is an admitted atheist who claims no knowledge of God's will, which for Simon and Sohara is the source of their moral insight. How are Kahn and Sohara able to come to consensus on issues of morality? One of the first things that help to establish Frau Kahn's moral credibility is her experience during the Holocaust. This is mentioned in connection with her budding atheism. In discussing the emergence of the Nazi movement, Frau Kahn states, "Es war wirklich nicht mehr viel von Gott und seinem Gesetz übrig. Aber dann haben sich die modernen Deutschen als Kannibalen entpuppt und haben meine Eltern und ihre Freunde abgeholt, am hellichten Tage, im Zentrum der Stadt, auch diese Stelle könnte ich Ihnen zeigen, und haben sie in diese Lager gebracht" (73). Although her experience during the Holocaust technically does not alter the nontheistic source of her ethical convictions, it somehow resonates with Sohara, who nonetheless sees a religious-ethical quality in Frau Kahn's experience of the war and the rituals that have developed since. Frau Kahn has a community and the community has rituals that center around hardship, sacrifice and remembrance. Perhaps this explains the connection and trust between the two. In describing her community, Frau Kahn states, "wir sind atheistisch und keine Gemeinde, aber wir sind unter uns. Wir treffen uns ab und zu, wir diskutieren, wir erinnern uns, wir forschen und hören uns Vorträge an. Pilgerfahrten in die ehemaligen

KZs gehören natürlich auch zum Programm, wir bringen Blumen dorthin, pflanzen Bäume, klagen und treffen uns manchmal mit Christen, die auch Blumen bringen und Bäume pflanzen und klagen” (74). Although these rituals stem from worldly experience, not knowledge of divine scripture or the will of God, they depict a lifestyle that is guided by community, introspection and remembrance in ways that resemble theistic traditions. Nonetheless, some distance does remain between Frau Kahn and Sohara. Sohara does not feel completely understood by Frau Kahn, who sees religious rituals as mere formalities. Sohara states, “Frau Kahn versteht meine Angst nicht, sie versteht nicht, daß bei uns in Oran die Angst vor Gott größer war, als es wohl in Mannheim der Fall gewesen ist” (75). This difference between Frau Kahn and Sohara is not enough to make one think that the other is not a good person and it does not seem to damage their friendship. Frau Kahn also has some seeds of religious belief left in her, which may help her and Sohara to think about morality in similar ways. At the end of their visit to the synagogue Frau Kahn says, “Wissen Sie, ich kann nicht mehr an Gott und sein Gesetz glauben, aber, sagen wir, ich will ihn auch nicht ganz vergessen” (75). This sort of longing for God, or a desire not to completely abandon the idea of God, may explain some of the overlap that is possible between Sohara’s and Frau Kahn’s ethical considerations. Frau Kahn’s positive characterization and Sohara’s trust in her implies nonetheless that being a good person is possible without explicit belief in a deity.

In conclusion, *Soharas Reise* can be viewed as a consideration of various ways of establishing moral belief. Through the characters of Sohara, Simon and Frau Kahn readers are offered three explanations of moral belief. Sohara undergoes a transformation from a person who follows the guidance of moral authorities to a person who sees morality as scrutable and trusts in her own moral judgment. By the end of her experience with Simon, Sohara’s moral belief is grounded in balance between responsibility to the divine commands and the responsibility to apply such commands in a reasoned manner that takes into consideration human suffering. She has access to moral beliefs by communicating with God but is therefore able to subject moral obligations to requirements of rationality and anthropocentrism. Once this transformation has taken place things seem to go better for her. Simon emphasizes the importance of the divine commands to the neglect of the human needs. Additionally, he places roughly equal emphasis on all moral obligations represented in the religious texts, whereas Sohara categorizes obligations in terms of importance. Simon’s system of ethical belief is associated with the largest moral failures in the novel. Lastly, Frau Kahn’s atheism complicates the narrative and adds an interesting question to Honigmann’s considerations. How can an atheist be moral if ethical beliefs come from God? The

source of Frau Kahn's ethical insights is not explicitly religious, but much of her credibility seems grounded in her experience in the Holocaust and the rituals and community that she maintains. I argue that this history of hardship and its incorporation into her life give Frau Kahn moral credibility in the logic of the novel. In all, the novel seems to problematize the issue of moral authority and highlight the necessity of individual moral reasoning.