

Pythagoras, Socrates, and Kant: Understanding the history of moral philosophy

"In moral philosophy we have come no further than the ancients." So Kant told his students (9.32 and 28.540). He was not modest about his own achievements in the theory of knowledge. Why did he not claim that the critical understanding of morality was as revolutionary as its epistemological counterpart? He certainly thought about the issue. Unlike Aristotle, who summarized the opinions of his predecessors in metaphysics but not in ethics, Kant regularly taught his students something about the history of moral philosophy, and particularly about the ancients. He seems to have lectured less often on the history of other philosophical subjects, but he drafted an important prize essay assessing the progress recently made in metaphysics.¹ Is it only because no academy had a competition on the subject that Kant wrote no comparable essay about progress in ethics?

To ask these questions is to ask about Kant's understanding of his own historicity as a moral philosopher. The question leads us to ask as well how Kant understood the point of philosophical ethics. In Chapter 22.ii I pointed to some indications that at a formative period Kant felt uneasy about the vocation of a philosopher. I also noted his rejection of the Wolffian belief in the social need for authoritative pronouncements about morality from scholars who spend their lives studying it. Why, then, on Kant's view, did moral philosophy matter – if it did?

To answer these questions we need to find out what versions of the history of moral philosophy were available to Kant. Here the situation is a little more complicated than we might assume.

¹ Although Baumgarten's textbooks in ethics contain nothing on history, the surviving student notes show that Kant gave lectures on ancient ethics and commented more or less fully on some modern theories each time he taught the course. The lectures on metaphysics suggest that Kant was less regular in including history in them. The early *Reflexionen* on ethics contain a great many historical sketches; once Kant settled on the scheme, in the mid or late seventies, there are fewer.

i. The Socrates story

The treatment of moral philosophy as a separate discipline with its own history, and not simply as a part of philosophy to be covered in general histories, began in seventeenth-century histories of theories about the law of nature and of nations. Of these the most notable is one I have referred to several times, the substantial *Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality* that Jean Barbeyrac published in 1706 as a preface to his French translation of Pufendorf's *De Jure Nature et Gentium*. Adam Smith included a partial review of the work of his predecessors in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but the first comprehensive history was Stäudlin's work of 1822. There have been other histories of ethics since then, and the field of history of ethics seems now to have achieved some recognition as a subspecialty within the general history of philosophy. But there has been little discussion of the special problems of historiography that it raises.² This is perhaps partly due to the fact that there seems to be no controversy about the outlines of the history of ethics.

The version of the history of moral philosophy that is most commonly accepted today goes back at least as far as Xenophon. He tells us that Socrates broke with his predecessors by attending to a new set of issues. He did not dispute, as they did, about the cosmos and the nature of things in general. He asked instead about human affairs (*Memorabilia* I.11–12). Cicero elaborates on the point. Socrates, he says, "was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men . . . and compel her to ask questions about life and morals and things good and evil" (*Tusculan Disputations* V.10–11). In the opening paragraph of *Utilitarianism* (1861), John Stuart Mill calls upon this tradition. "From the dawn of philosophy," he says,

the question concerning the *summum bonum* or . . . the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem of speculative thought.

. . . And, after more than two thousand years, the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject than when the youth Socrates listened to the old

² Histories of the history of philosophy such as those of Braun 1973, Gueroult 1984–8, and Santinello 1993 concentrate on general histories and do not take note of the rise of histories of disciplines within philosophy. In studies of historiographical issues in philosophy (e.g., Gracia 1992) there has been no discussion of the historiography of ethics comparable with that which has taken place concerning political theory, stimulated in important part by the work of Quentin Skinner and John Pocock. There are of course some exceptions (e.g., Irwin 1993).

Protagoras, and asserted . . . the theory of utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called Sophist.

Long before Mill, Hobbes gave notable expression to a variant of the Socrates story without making any mention of its hero. He allows, as I pointed out (Chapter 5, iv), that there were reasonably adequate "moral sentences" among the natives of North America. Just as corn and grapes grew wild before their uses and the way to cultivate them were known, "so also there have been divers true, general, and profitable speculations from the beginning, as being the natural plants of human reason." To improve them requires philosophy, which in turn requires leisure. But the Greeks, who had ample time, made no great progress in moral philosophy, nor did the Jews, despite having a "school of the law of Moses." He mentions Christ but says no more of him than that the Jews failed to understand him (*Leviathan* XLVI.6–12). And he leaves us to gather what we know he elsewhere asserted, that he himself was the first to replace natural moral belief with a science of morality that transforms such beliefs into moral knowledge (cf. XXX.5).

Mill offers a theory to account for the fact that the question of the first principle of morality remains open after so many centuries of inquiry. In all the sciences, he says, much information and many low-level theorems come to light long before the most basic principles are discovered. Mankind learns many more or less general truths from experience, only later does careful analysis enable us to extricate the fundamental concepts and principles of a science from the mass of details. Moral beliefs are like others. Hence, it is not surprising that common sense should possess some sound *beliefs* about moral rules. But we will not have secure *knowledge* about morality until we discover its true foundations (*Utilitarianism* I.1–2).

It is still standard to say that moral philosophy began with Socrates and has been carried on continuously ever since. Thus Bernard Williams begins a major study of moral philosophy as follows:

It is not a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live. Or so Plato reports him, in one of the first books written about this subject. . . . The aims of moral philosophy . . . are bound up with the fate of Socrates's question.³

According to what I shall call the Socrates story of the history of moral philosophy, the situation we are in is as follows. Although we have not reached agreement about the basis of morality, we know the tasks that we moral philosophers should undertake. We are trying to answer the question Socrates raised: how to live. People have always

³ Williams, 1985, p. 1.

had opinions on the matter, but it is very hard to get an indubitable answer based on an undeniable foundation. It is so hard that skeptics ask us to doubt that there is an answer, or even a real question. Perhaps, as Mill says, the difficulty exists in all disciplines. Or perhaps, as others think, there are special problems about morality that make the task of developing its theory harder than the tasks facing physics. These problems may account for the fact that we seem not even to have made any generally accepted progress toward the answer, much less found it. Still, the issues are there, and we should continue working on them. If we study earlier moral philosophy, it is because we may gain some insights from our predecessors, or at least avoid their errors.

ii. The Pythagoras story

Because the Socrates story is simply taken for granted today it is important to be aware that for many centuries an alternative view of the history of moral philosophy was widely held. Like the Socrates story, it carries with it a distinctive view of the tasks of the discipline. The underlying thesis of the alternate history is that the basic truths of morality are not the last to be discovered. They have been known as long as humans have been living with one another. Whatever moral philosophy is, therefore, it is not a search for hitherto unknown scientific knowledge.⁴

The alternative narrative takes several forms. The oldest version gives importance to a question most of us would not naturally ask. We will be inside the story once we see why we might ask it. The question is, Was Pythagoras a Jew?

The background for the question is the assumption that the biblical narrative provides the unquestionable framework within which all human history must be located. Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History* (1681) is perhaps the greatest modern monument built on this assumption, but not the only one. As Santinello's study of Renaissance histories of philosophies shows, it was long common to assume that all wisdom comes from God. One major task for historians, therefore, was to ex-

4 I am grateful to Dr. Jennifer Herdt for her very helpful criticisms of an early version of what follows. For one way of giving a general account of the differences between the two stories about moral philosophy, referring however to epistemology generally rather than to ethics, see Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 158–9. See also James Griffin, *Value Judgement* (Oxford, 1996), p. 131, for sketches of two views of the task of moral philosophy that are rather close to the two I discuss.

plain its presence in cultures not directly descended from the Jews.⁵ Those who undertook these enterprises believed that philosophy is an important human activity, which must have a providentially assigned role. They had a special problem about morality and its relation to moral philosophy. The truth about morality was revealed very early in human history, and it has not changed. William Law, arguing against Mandeville, gives us a clear eighteenth-century statement of this point:

When Noah's Family came out of the Ark, we presume, they were as well educated in the Principles of Virtue and moral Wisdom, as any People were ever since; There was therefore a Time, when all the People in the World were well versed in moral Virtue. . . .

He therefore that gives a *later* account of the Origin of moral Virtue, gives a *false* account of it.⁶

Belief that the Noachite revelation was the origin of moral knowledge itself would make it natural to ask why we have moral philosophy anyway. It would also lead us to wonder about how the Greeks could have been the ones to start it.

The answer to the first question lies in human sinfulness. Our nature was damaged by the Fall. It not only dimmed our faculties, lessening our ability to understand God's commands and accept them. It also unleashed the passions. Evildoers, driven by their lusts, seek to avoid the pangs of conscience, so they blind themselves to its clear dictates. They also strive to veil and confuse the moral thoughts of those whom they wish to entangle in their wicked schemes. Bad reasoning is one of their basic tools. Now reason is one of God's gifts to humanity. Among other things it enables us to hold on to at least some of the moral knowledge we need, once revelation has ceased. If reason makes moral philosophy possible, pride leads men to try to outdo one another in inventing schemes and systems of morality, and morality itself gets lost in their struggles. Since the causes of the misuse of reason and of bad philosophy are now ingrained in our nature, there will be no final triumph of good philosophy until after the last judgment. But the battle must be kept up. Moral philosophy is to be understood as one more arena for the struggle between sin and virtue.

As to the Greeks, it may be mysterious *why* God chose them to be the first to philosophize. We can, however, find out *how*, lacking the Noachite and the Mosaic revelations and being as corrupt as the rest of man-

5 See Santinello 1993, pp. 21, 26, 28, and especially the discussion of Thomas Burnet, pp. 330ff. See also Harrison 1990, ch. 5, for discussion of the "single-source" theory of religion. Walker 1972 is another important study of this kind of view.

6 William Law, *Remarks upon . . . the Fable of the Bees*, p. 7.

kind, they could have done as well as they did with morality (how well they did being, again, a subject of debate). Here we come to Pythagoras.

In *Magna Moralia* I.1 Aristotle says that Pythagoras was the first who attempted to treat of virtue. The remark was frequently cited.⁷ And given Aristotle's standing as the first historian of ancient thought, it seems that one could hardly ask for more impressive testimony. We can discover the importance of Pythagoras's priority from a parenthetical remark that Scipion Dupleix adds to his assertion of it. In his *L'éthique ou philosophie morale* of 1603 he says that, although Socrates is praised for his discussion of the rules delivered by moral philosophy, he was not the first in the field: "it is certain that Pythagoras himself, whom the Greeks took for a philosopher of their nation (although St. Irenaeus assures us that he was Hebrew and had read the books of Moses) had worthily treated of morality" before Socrates did.⁸ Here as elsewhere Dupleix was unoriginal. Ficino, for example, thought he recalled that St. Ambrose "showed that Pythagoras was born of a Jewish father"; and there were others.⁹ Thus the problem of transmission is solved. If Pythagoras was the one who initiated moral philosophy among the Greeks, and he was a Jew, it is clear how the Greeks managed to get the subject going.

Not everyone thought Pythagoras was actually Jewish; but there were second-best stories. It was a commonplace that the Greeks got much from the Jews.¹⁰ John Selden, who traced our grasp of natural law

7 Thomas Stanley, the first English historian of philosophy to write in the vernacular, repeats the claim, citing this source. Stanley, *History*, p. 395. The passage from *Magna Moralia*, 1182a12–14, is cited in full in section iii.

8 Dupleix 1632, p. 4. I am told that to the best of our knowledge St. Irenaeus said no such thing.

9 I owe these last references to Heninger 1974, pp. 201–2, a study of Pythagoreanism which I found very helpful. Heninger (p. 229 n. 5) lists half a dozen studies from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that contain bibliographies on Pythagoras's debt to Moses.

10 Herodotus and other ancients attested to Greek debts to Eastern thought generally, and Isocrates held that Pythagoras in particular had brought into Greek the philosophy he learned from the Egyptians. See Guthrie 1962, pp. 160, 163. Guthrie devotes nearly two hundred pages to reviewing the difficulties of studying Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism and summarizing the results of modern scholarship.

Heninger's fifth chapter (1974, pp. 256–84), gives a full and fascinating account of various views of what specifically the moral philosophy of Pythagoras, or of the Pythagoreans, was supposed to be, and the many ways in which Pythagorean views were given Christian legitimacy and propagated widely. But although he has earlier noted Pythagoras's alleged debts to the Jews for his moral thought, he does not

back to the Noachite commandments, devoted long pages of his *De Jure Naturali et Gentium* of 1640 to analyzing the testimony of Jewish and Christian writers about the Jewish influence on Pythagoras. He preferred the Greek authorities to the Jewish, as having, he thought, less of a vested doctrinal interest in proving such a debt to the Jews. His conclusion is that the weight of the evidence makes it clear that Pythagoras,

the primary teacher of Greek theology and the first to be called a philosopher, to whom some also attribute the first doctrine in Greece concerning the immortality of the soul . . . and others wish to credit the first disputations about the virtues, that is, the principles of moral philosophy . . . consulted and heard the Hebrews.¹¹

Selden thinks it quite possible that Pythagoras was taught by no less a figure than the prophet Ezekiel.

Henry More is also explicit about the importance of Greek philosophy's debt to the Jews:

Now that Pythagoras drew his knowledge from the Hebrew fountains, is what all writers, sacred and profane, do testify and aver. That Plato took from him the principal part of that knowledge, touching God, the soul's immortality and the conduct of life and good manners, has been doubted by no man. And that it went from him, into the schools of Aristotle, and so derived and diffused almost into the whole world, is in like manner attested by all.¹²

explore the bearing of claims about the debts on the historiography of moral philosophy.

11 John Selden, *De Jure Naturali et Gentium iuxta disciplinam Ebraeorum*, in *Opera* I.89. The examination of testimonies occurs in cols. 82–5 and elsewhere. I am indebted to Michael Seidler for having put Selden's passages concerning Pythagoras into quotable English. Selden offers an explanation of why "we do not find many vestiges of Hebrew doctrine in the writings of the Greek philosophers – indeed, that nothing at all occurs there which sufficiently retains the pure and unadulterated nature of its Hebrew origin." The various Greek sects themselves commingled so much, and splintered the old teachings so greatly, that the result is everywhere a hodgepodge. But, he adds, no one doubts that in Platonic as well as Pythagorean doctrine there are teachings derived from the Hebrews (col. 91).

12 More, *Encheiridion*, p. 267. For More and the "ancient theology" see Harrison 1990, pp. 133–5. Harrison does not discuss the Pythagoras story about moral philosophy; the ancient theology was concerned less with moral matters than with such doctrinal concerns as trinitarianism.

We have here the germ of a history of moral philosophy. I do not know how old it is.¹³ But I think that some version or other of the Pythagoras story, as I shall call it, must have been assumed, however indistinctly, by a great many philosophers.

iii. Revelation and reason

There is a large amount of room for maneuver within this kind of historical schema. Most importantly, it leaves a role for reason while not making revelation superfluous.¹⁴ This in turn gives rise to a somewhat less thoroughly religious story about the history of moral philosophy. Locke and Clarke in England, and Crusius in Germany, all concerned to defend the view that morality *at present* is not dependent on revelation, are still determined to keep revelation historically essential. They replace Pythagoras's Noachite revelation with Christ's, as that through which alone we became able to know the full truth about morality. It seems, Locke says, that

'tis too hard a task for unassisted reason to establish morality in all its parts upon its true foundation. . . . We see how unsuccessful in this the attempts of philosophers were before our Saviour's time. . . . And if, since that, the Christian philosophers have much outdone them, yet we may observe that the first knowledge of the truths they have added [is] owing to revelation. (*Reasonableness of Christianity*, p. 61)

Now that Christ has revealed the truth, we can see for ourselves the reasonableness of his teaching, and can even turn our knowledge into a demonstrative science.

It is significant for us that Crusius also accepted a rationalized version of the Pythagoras story that omitted the Jews. A truth is reasonable and philosophical, he says in the preface to his treatise on ethics, when it can be proved by valid arguments from rational starting points. It does not matter where we first learned it. "The duties that the Christian religion imposes on us are grounded in reason. Because our knowledge

¹³ Josephus, in *Against Apion*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, 1926, 1966), claims that the Greeks learned much of their science and law from the East, and specifically from the Jews; he mentions Pythagoras in this connection but does not explicitly claim that he was the originator of moral philosophy. See I.13–14, I.165, II.168, where the translator suggests that the dependence of Greek on Jewish thought was first suggested by Aristobulus. Eusebius in the *Preparation for the Gospel* gives a famous description of Plato as Moses Atticizing; but he does not tie Pythagoras to the origins of moral philosophy.

¹⁴ More himself says that the eternal son as the Logos, or human reason, as well as revelation, can enlighten us about morals.

of them was dimmed by our corruption [*Verderben*] they had to be repeated. . . . we learn the extent of human corruption from the fact that without divine revelation we would not have grasped the most important and most fully-grounded rational truths" (*Anweisung*, or *Guide*, pref., folios b4–b5).

Neither Locke nor Clarke nor Crusius says anything at all about Noah or the idea that Pythagoras had a Jewish connection. Yet in holding that the Greek philosophers were never able to get very far in figuring out what morality requires, they share with the Pythagoras story the belief that reason without revelation could not discover morality.¹⁵ Locke and Clarke would have known what use Hobbes made of a Socrates version of the history of moral philosophy. They would thus have had strong motivation to adopt the alternative view. And the Pythagoras story's explanation of the role of moral philosophy is indeed implicit in their work as well. With this in mind, we can see, for instance, that Clarke's standard description of Hobbes as "the wicked Mr. Hobbes" is not just an incidental expression of personal revulsion. But none of them gives any account of the history that leads up to their own moral theories.

No one seems to have written a detailed history of moral philosophy resting on the strongest religious assumptions of the Pythagoras story. Barbeyrac's history, the most comprehensive of its time, gives an important role to the rational grasp of moral truth. He assumes, as I have noted, that the basic truths of morality are readily accessible to human reason. They must have been available in the earliest ages, and therefore mankind did not need revelation for its first instruction on how to behave. But Barbeyrac also believes, with the religious Pythagoras story, that human sinfulness leads men to try to evade the demands of morality and to use reason in the effort.¹⁶ He seems to think that Pythagoras had something to do with the origins of moral philosophy, although he hesitates to claim him explicitly as its originator. But he plainly thinks original sin is one of the causes of the moral philosophy

¹⁵ Locke, *Christianity* 241, pp. 60–1. Clarke, *Lectures II*, in *Works II*.666ff. Gassendi, *Discourses* 3, says, without mentioning any Jewish connection, that Pythagoras was the first to study moral philosophy. He gives no source but was probably drawing on Aristotle.

¹⁶ "There has ever been an uninterrupted succession of men, who, seduc'd by a secret desire to shake off the troublesome yoke of duty; and to indulge themselves in the gratification, if not of their sensual and gross Desires, yet at least of their more delicate and refined Inclinations, have employed all the Faculties of their Souls, in extinguishing the Evidence of those Truths, which were most clear . . . in order to involve in their Ruin all certainty of the Rules of Virtue" (Barbeyrac, *Historical Account III*, p. 5).

that opposes the truth about morality, and he cannot refrain from thinking of the philosophers he opposes as wicked men.

Although Barbeyrac and others cite Aristotle as an authority for Pythagoras's priority as a student of virtue, what he said – if it was in fact Aristotle who wrote the *Magna Moralia* – does not present a very strong claim about it. He makes just one remark on the matter: "Pythagoras first attempted to speak about virtue, but not successfully; for by reducing the virtues to numbers he submitted the virtues to a treatment which was not proper to them" (1182a12–14). The rest of the evidence for the literal versions of the Pythagoras story is equally flimsy. It was controverted in the seventeenth century by Culverwell, who complained of the absurdity of supposing that Pythagoras could not know anything unless a Jewish soul had transmigrated into his body and sneered at the Jewish arrogance of supposing no one but they could know the law without "some Jewish manuscript, which they translated into Greek" (Culverwell, p. 62; cf. pp. 67, 75–6). But the Pythagoras story was not finally dismissed until Stäudlin's work.¹⁷

Stäudlin opens with a brief remark suggesting that morality arises from the interaction between the native powers and dispositions of the human mind and our situation in the world. Its origins lie so far back in antiquity that there is no use speculating about them. There was morality everywhere before there was philosophizing about it, and there were unsystematic and poetic articulations before anything rational appeared. We are as naturally moved to reflect on our own powers as on the world in which we act, and that reflection, carried far enough, is philosophy. Moral philosophy begins with the Greeks: preeminently

17 Friedrich Glafey, a German historian of natural law writing some thirty years after Barbeyrac, refuses, unlike Brucker, to report on the thought of the Eastern nations because they left no adequate written accounts. But he takes Pythagoras as the first of the Greek thinkers to give serious attention to morality, and after discussing his philosophy remarks that "we can see in general from this short summary of Pythagorean morality that, just as this man borrowed much from the Jews and the Egyptians, so also the succeeding Greek philosophers themselves made use of his doctrine." Glafey 1965, pp. 26–8; on Selden, pp. 23–5.

In 1786 the German scholar Christoph Meiners published a history of the sciences in which he devoted much space to a critical examination of the alleged Pythagorean writings, dismissing almost all of them as unreliable. I have not been able to consult Meiners's work; I rely on Braun 1973, pp. 173–7.

At the end of the eighteenth century another German scholar produced a brief history of ethics in which Pythagoras is mentioned along with Aristotle's claim about him, omitting, as most of those who cite it do, the phrase "but not successfully." But he says nothing about any link between a first revelation of moral truth to the Jews and its elaboration by the Greeks. See Hoffbauer 1798, pp. 295–6.

with Socrates.¹⁸ Stäudlin allows that Pythagoras had some interesting thoughts about morals, but he himself is not willing to concede that there is any live issue about a Jewish connection. Yet he notes several recent writers who do, and the amount of effort he devotes to getting rid of the Pythagoras story suggests that it is still a live option.¹⁹

Stäudlin's work is modern in a way that Barbeyrac's is not. What makes it so is not the dismissal of the religious Pythagoras story and its kin. That, after all, is a scholarly conclusion that new evidence might alter.²⁰ It is rather Stäudlin's attitude toward error. He treats error in moral philosophy as like error in any science. It is no more caused by wicked desires or self-aggrandizing tendencies than are blunders in mathematics. Error comes not from original sin, but from the great difficulty of the subject. The function of moral philosophy is not to defend God's revelation from sinful and perverse reasoners. It is, rather, to raise our spontaneous moral insight to the level of fully reflective knowledge.

iv. Kant and the Pythagoras story

Stäudlin was a Kantian, but I do not think that Kant himself saw the history of moral philosophy primarily in terms of the Socrates story. He did not think that philosophy is needed to transform the unsystematic moral convictions of ordinary people from mere belief into warranted moral knowledge, and he made a significant place for revelation in the development of moral thought. With Locke, Clarke, and Cruisius, he tried to combine revelation with reason, and he substituted Christ for Noah or Moses as the one who brought moral truth to mankind. If his view of the history of ethics is thus basically Pythagorean, his interpretation of it transformed that story rather drastically. It enabled him to link his revision of it with an understanding of his own place in the history that seems more appropriate to a Socrates story. But his position here is also not quite like the standard view.

18 Stäudlin 1822, p. 22.

19 Stäudlin 1822, pp. 1–3, 19n, 32–59.

20 There is a more recent version of the Pythagoras story – surely not intended as such – according to which Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was himself the son of a Jew. Giovanni Reale says that both Zeno and Chrysippus were Jewish and hypothesizes that the Stoic notion of *kathekonta* reflects Zeno's effort to bring Jewish moral categories into Greek philosophy. See Reale's *The Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, trans. John Catan (Albany, 1985), pp. 209, 216, 280–1. He refers to Max Pohlenz as his authority for Zeno's Jewishness. See Pohlenz, *Die Stoa* (Göttingen, 1948–9), I.22, 24–5, 28, and the evidence provided, rather scantily and with what may be an anti-Semitic tone, in II.14n. For doubts about the thesis, see Brent Shaw, "The Divine Economy: Stoicism As Ideology," *Latomus* 44 (1985), pp. 16–54, n. 8 on p. 20.

Kant always schematizes the history of ancient ethics by saying that the ancients took moral philosophy to be the rational search for knowledge of the highest good. The Cynics thought the good could be found in the simple life with no artificial wants; and Rousseau, "that subtle Diogenes," is their modern counterpart. Epicurus took the good to be happiness construed as pleasure, like the modern egoists. Zeno and the other Stoics bravely asserted that the highest good is constituted by virtue alone, which gives a self-satisfaction that suffices for happiness (see, e.g., 27.248–50; *LE*, pp. 44–7). Kant, like Descartes, thought that Epicureanism had to be added to Stoicism to obtain a true view of the highest good. Happiness is not just moral self-satisfaction; it requires the satisfaction of our nonmoral desires. Virtue is the worthiness to be happy, and the highest good therefore is to be happy in proportion to one's moral merit.²¹

Kant does not say that he himself is the first or only philosopher to hold this view. He does say that it is what Christ taught. In a fairly early note he claims that Christian thought is more philosophical than that of Hutcheson and Wolff, and in a note from the late 1770s he links Epicurus, Zeno, and Christ: "Epicurus taught [us] to seek happiness without special worthiness to be so. Zeno the worthiness, without having happiness in mind . . . Christ happiness through worthiness to be so" (19.120–1, no. 6634). Still later he claims that the Christian ideal of holiness is superior to the Stoic ideal of wisdom. It is plainly Christ rather than the philosophers who got matters right: "Epicurus wanted to give a motive for virtue and took from it its inner worth. Zeno wanted to give virtue an inner worth and took from it its motive. Only Christ gives it inner worth and also a motive" (19.309, no. 7312; 176, no. 6838; cf. 197–8, no. 6894, comparing Christ and Plato).

In his lectures Kant was quite free with such statements. In one, he says that "only since the time of the evangelists has the complete purity and holiness of the moral law been perceived, though it lies in our own reason" (27.294; *LE*, p. 86). In another he remarks that "The moral law must have purity. The Gospel has such purity in its moral law, as did none of the ancient philosophers, who even at the time of the evangelic teacher were merely brilliant pharisees" (27.301; *LE*, p. 92). A later historical comment makes the basic point explicit: "All the concepts of the ancients concerning humility and all the moral virtues, were impure and inconsistent with the moral law. The gospel was the first to present us with a pure morality, and as history shows, nothing else came near it" (27.350; *LE*, p. 130). Christ is here presented as a philosopher contemporary with some of "the ancients," correcting them by teaching a truth they failed to see.

21 Malebranche has a similar view; see *Morale* I.III.xiii.

We cannot dismiss these remarks as meant merely for Kant's young students. All three *Critiques* assign important functions to the Christian religion. In the first Kant says that we did not have right ideas of God "until the moral concepts were purified" and that it was the "greater preoccupation with moral ideas, which was rendered necessary by the extraordinarily pure moral law of our religion," that led us to a better idea of the divinity (*Pure Reason* A817 = B845). In the second *Critique* he remarks that it was "the moral teaching of the Gospel that first brought all good conduct of man under the discipline of a duty clearly set before him" (5.86; *Practical Reason*, p. 89). Christianity alone, "even when not regarded as a religious doctrine," gives us the only sufficient grasp of the highest good. The ancients failed to find it themselves.²² Yet we need it for all of philosophy. In a note in the third *Critique* Kant attributes to Christianity the origin of the thought that we must believe possible what theoretical reason cannot prove: that proper adherence to morality will bring us happiness. The idea is carried by the word "fides"; Kant adds that "this is not the only case in which this wonderful religion has . . . enriched philosophy with far more definite and purer conceptions of morality than morality itself could have previously supplied. But once these conceptions are found, they are freely approved by reason" (6.471–2 n; *Judgment* II.146n).²³

The first *Critique* opens with the famous claim that "in one species of its knowledge" the human mind cannot help asking questions it cannot answer. In theoretical matters it thus suffers from a "perplexity" which, Kant says, "is not due to any fault of its own" (*Pure Reason* Avii). The promulgation of Christianity was, by contrast, "a revelation of the faith which had hitherto remained hidden from men through their own fault" (6.141; *Religion*, p. 132). The fault that hid the truth from us is our propensity to evil. Because of it the morality carried by Christianity, which we had to have before we could do metaphysics rightly, had to be historically revealed before it could be universally recognized, even though it is always implicit in everyone's heart.²⁴ In these remarks as

22 5.127 and n; *Practical Reason*, pp. 132–3 and n. Kant underlines the general point in his late lectures on metaphysics of morals, after once again reviewing the ancient ideals: "None of the assumed principles is sufficient by itself; they have to be united, and this by a supreme being, as sovereign ruler of the world. . . . Thus the highest philosophical ideal would be a theological one" (27.484–5; *LE*, p. 255).

23 My thanks to Mark Larrimore for this reference. The position is the same as Locke's; see Chapter 8.v.

24 See 6.110–11, 115, 121, 123n; *Religion*, pp. 100, 106, 112, 113n. See also 7.24, *Conflict of Faculties*, p. 37, for the claim that only philosophers can read the Bible in a way that extracts its rational message; and 7.37, 44, 64; pp. 63, 77, 117, for remarks about the need for revelation as a vehicle to bring to consciousness a timeless truth of

well as the explicit statements about Christ as the best of the ancient moral thinkers Kant is making use of a version of the Pythagoras story about the history of moral philosophy.²⁵

If this is his perspective, it is clear why he said that in ethics we are no further than the ancients. Christ revealed the truth in antiquity; Kant has restated it but he has not gone beyond it. Who indeed could wish to do so? Kant explicitly says that he has not invented a new moral principle, but only a new formula for one that has always informed morality (5.4n; *Practical Reason*, p. 8n). We can get further light on Kant's understanding of the point or importance of moral philosophy from a look at his view of the corruption that sometimes obscures the principle from us. This in turn illuminates some aspects of his treatment of the history of ethics.²⁶

In the Pythagoras story the point of sound moral philosophy is to combat the sinful efforts made by some wicked philosophers to cloud our grasp of morality. Kant departs from the tradition by refusing to denigrate those with whose views he disagrees; he defends Epicurus's way of living, and when discussing the attacks by Hume and Priestley on the rational foundations for religion and morality he goes out of his way to praise their moral character (*Pure Reason* A745–6 = B773–4). And he offers a new interpretation of corruption. Corruption is not shown only by our egoism. There is a general human tendency to one-sidedness, of which excessive attention to one's own happiness is only one symptom. In the *Foundations* Kant does indeed blame our desire for happiness for causing a natural dialectic in which we try to corrupt [*verderben*] the grounds of the laws of duty. From this he derives a need for philosophy, to replace our innocent morality with a more reflective one (4.405–6; pp. 21–2). But this is only one example of the morally dangerous exaggerations to which we are prone.

The early Notes inspired by Kant's study of Rousseau show how varied these are. "If there is any knowledge [*Wissenschaft*] which man needs," Kant remarks,

it is that which teaches him fittingly to fill the place which is assigned to him in the creation and from which he can learn what one must be to be a man. Suppose he had come to know deceptive enticements above or

which we were unaware, though it is always within us.

25 Against this it must be noted that in the lecture notes on "History of Natural Theology" in his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* Kant says that by the time of Anaxagoras and Socrates "morality had itself already been founded on secure principles" (28.1125; p. 169).

26 Yovel 1989, chs. 6 and 7, and Gueroult 1977, ch. IV, discuss Kant's views about the history of theoretical philosophy but give no special consideration to his treatment of the history of ethics.

below him which [,] unnoticed [,] had brought him out of his proper place then this instruction will lead him back to the condition of the human and no matter how small or needy he finds himself still he will be just right for his assigned post because he is precisely that which he ought to be. (20.45.17; *Bemerkungen* 36.1)

In another Note Kant adds that a man who pursues "moral qualities" above his capacities withdraws from his post, and the holes he makes in so doing "spread his own corruption" to his neighbors (41.19; 33.1).

The theme is taken up again in the second *Critique*, where Kant stresses that when doing our duty "our position among rational beings" is not that of volunteers, acting at our own pleasure. Rather, "the stage of morality on which man . . . stands is respect for the moral law." To this reminder about our proper place Kant joins some warnings about the "shallow, high-flown fantastic way of thinking" to which those are liable who take themselves to be able to be moral without acting from respect (5.82–5; *Practical Reason*, pp. 85–8).

Again and again in discussing the Stoics, and in his infrequent remarks about Plato, Kant accuses them of forgetting the proper place of human beings in the universe. Plato is a mystic, an enthusiast, a fanatic (see, e.g., 27.305, *LE*, p. 94; 19.95 no. 6584; 108, no. 6611; 196, no. 6894). And for all his admiration of Stoicism, Kant thinks it makes overstrained demands on human nature. "Man fancifully exaggerates his moral capacity," Herder reports Kant as telling his class in the early 1760s,

and sets before himself the most perfect goodness; the outcome is nonsense; but what is required of us? The Stoic's answer: I shall raise myself above myself, . . . rise superior to my own afflictions and needs, and with all my might be good, be the image of godhood. But how so, for godhood has no obligations, yet you certainly do. . . . Now the god departs and we are left with man, a poor creature, loaded with obligations. *Seneca* was an impostor, *Epictetus* strange and fanciful. (27.67; *LE*, p. 32)

If the Epicureans succumb to "deceptive enticements" below the human, the Stoics – and Plato to a far greater degree – yield to those above it. Even that subtle Diogenes Rousseau has taken matters too far. Kant is as averse to these distortions of humanity as Montaigne was (Chapter 3.v). He teaches the history of ethics to warn his students about the way in which one-sided visions of mankind subvert morality. In claiming to unite Epicurus and Zeno through his idea of the highest good, he is thus trying to defend the message of the Gospels against the many-sided effects of the corruption to which we are all prone. In this respect, Kant understands the aim of moral philosophy in what I have called Pythagorean terms.

There is, however, an additional, more Socratic, side to Kant's view of the function of moral philosophy. It is to help make the transition from a historical faith to a universal religion whose core is pure rational morality. Historical faith was available only to those who had access to its records; moral religion is universally available. 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 the message (6.115; *Religion*, pp. 105–6). The religion of reason, Kant says, "is a continually occurring divine (though not empirical) revelation for all men" (6.122; p. 113). Kant has contributed to the progress of morality by showing that it rests on a purely rational principle, which itself dictates the essentials of religious faith. Moral philosophy thus does more than combat corruption. If it does not transform mere belief into knowledge by giving it foundations, it shows that the moral knowledge we have explicitly possessed since Christ revealed it is a matter of pure practical reason, and explains how such a morality is possible.

v. *Has moral philosophy a single aim?*

Both the Socrates story and the Pythagoras story (in its more rationalistic as well as its more religious versions) illustrate the interconnections among our conceptions of the aim or task of moral philosophy, the proper understanding of its history, and the nature of morality. The two grand narratives are similar in holding that moral philosophy has essentially a single task, though each assigns it a different one. But the assumption that there is one single aim that is essential to moral philosophy gives rise to difficulties for both views.

One difficulty lies in formulating the aim. Perhaps it is plausible to hold that we and Socrates are asking the same question if the central issue is described as Williams describes it. Yet we might wonder whether identifying the question of moral philosophy as "How should one live?" is useful for those interested in the history of the subject. The Socratic question, so stated, is extremely general. To take it as locating "the aims of moral philosophy," we must surround it with a number of unspoken assumptions. For instance, we must not take it to be a question about how one should live with respect to health, or income, or eternal well-being. Are we then to take it as a general question about how we should live in order to be happy? We have only to think of Kant's ethics to see that this will not identify an inquiry central to all moral philosophy.

The single-aim view seems to rest on a theory about the essences of philosophical disciplines, which is itself contestable. If we look historically at what moral philosophers have said they were trying to do, we

do not come up with a single aim uniting them all. Compare, for instance, Aristotle's claim that moral philosophy should improve the lives of those who study it with Sidgwick's belief that "a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science."²⁷ Recall the Stoic aim of finding the way to personal tranquillity; Hobbes's aim of stabilizing a society put in danger by religious fanaticism; Bentham's aim of locating a principle to show everyone the need for major political, social, and moral reform; Parfit's aim of developing a new, wholly secular, science of morality.²⁸ Unless we leave the statement of the aim quite vague, it will be difficult to find one on which these thinkers agree. If we are more definite, then it seems that we will be required to say that anyone not sharing the favored aim is not really doing moral philosophy. Whatever the single aim assigned to the enterprise, we would be forced to deny the status of moral philosopher to many thinkers usually included in the category.

Those holding a Pythagoras story version of moral philosophy's single task face some additional difficulties. They must assume that the moral knowledge which is always to be defended can be identified in some way that does not presuppose the truth of any specific theory, and that it is always and everywhere essentially the same. Yet it is implausible to claim that Greek morality, the morality of the Decalog, and the liberal morality of modern Western democracies are in essence identical. The claim can be made out, if at all, only by proposing as "the essence" of these moralities some interpretation of them, probably in philosophical terms, which was not available to some or all of those whose moralities are at issue.

These objections to single-aim views about moral philosophy are themselves both historical. The historian will have a further problem with the outlook. It implies that since we and past moral philosophers share aims and goals, the best way to understand our predecessors is to look at them in the light of our own view of the truth about morality. Even allowing, as some philosophers do, that our own views may not be the last word, it is still tempting, on a single-aim approach, to suppose that we know the best word yet, and that therefore no other standpoint is needed for examining what has gone before.

The historian will complain that insistence on describing the views of past thinkers in our own terminology forces us into anachronism. If we are interested in what our predecessors were doing and thinking, we must try to understand them in terms they themselves had available. It is obvious that Hume could not even have conceived the aim of "anticipating Bentham." But it is just as misleading to describe him as "trying

27 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179a35–b4; Sidgwick 1907, p. vi.

28 *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), p. 453.

to develop a rule-utilitarian theory of justice." Although he discovered some of the important differences between the morality of actions within social practices and the morality of independent actions, the idea of utilitarianism as well as the distinction between "act" and "rule" versions of it are much later inventions. We may have good reason for thinking of his theory in terms like these, but we are not, in so doing, giving a historical account of it. Worse, we may be overlooking its historical distinctiveness by forcing it into our own molds.

vi. *Continuity and change in moral philosophy*

We cannot, it seems, write a history of moral philosophy without having some idea of the aims of the discipline; and we cannot have a well-grounded idea of its aims without having some awareness of its origins and history. The difficulties for the historian arising from this conclusion are not wholly avoidable. But they are less acute if we give up thinking of moral philosophy as having some single essential aim and suppose instead that philosophers at different times were trying to solve different problems.

As historians, we can work with a very general concept of morality, taking it vaguely and imprecisely as the norms or values or virtues or principles of behavior that seem to be present in every known society. We will study those who try to reflect philosophically on the matters thus described. No doubt our idea of what counts as "philosophical reflection" will be marked by our present conception. But we will not try to impose much more uniformity on past efforts than is carried by these two reference points. We will not need to decide whether commonsense morality, ancient or modern, is mere opinion or genuine knowledge. We will not, in particular, suppose that everyone who thought about morality in a way we consider philosophical was trying to solve the same problem or answer the same questions. We will think instead that the aims of moral philosophy – the problems that moral philosophers thought required reflection – are at least as likely to have changed as to have remained constant through history.

Why might there be such alterations in the questions or problems that set the differing aims of philosophical reflection about morality? One answer is that there have been times of upheaval when the norms involved in our common life have been called into question by social, religious, and political changes. The need to blend Christian belief with an inherited culture coming from Greece and Rome is one such case. The problems arising from the disintegration of even the appearance of a unified Christendom was another. Perhaps Parfit's concern to work out a wholly secular morality, or the apparent fact that there is no hope for agreement on conceptions of the good, indicate yet further points of

change. The history of moral philosophy, we may think, itself provides important clues to the eras at which the stresses on widely accepted norms and values became overwhelming and change was necessary. If philosophers do little to bring about the strains, they sometimes provide means to diagnose or even to cope with them.

If we take this approach we will be led naturally to ask some kinds of question about the history of moral philosophy that we may overlook if we think the discipline centers on only one question. On the single-aim assumption we will suppose that we always know what moral philosophers were trying to do. They were trying to solve the essential problem. Without this assumption, we will need to ask what past philosophers were doing in putting forward the arguments and conclusions and conceptual schemes they favored. We will ask about the point or purpose of using these arguments. The answers will have to be historical. Because we think that the answers to such questions may vary from time to time, we will ask just how the thinkers we study differ from earlier thinkers and from those of their contemporaries whose work they knew. What our subjects refused to ask or assert will matter as much to us as their positive claims. Knowing the former will enable us, as knowing the latter alone will not, to understand what their aims for moral philosophy were. To know what they refused to include we must know what they might have included, and did not. Here only historical information, and not rational reconstruction of arguments in the best modern terms, will tell us what we need to know.²⁹

One benefit of this approach is that it gives us a way of checking on our interpretations or readings of past moral philosophy. There is historical evidence about the vocabularies available to our predecessors, and about the issues that mattered to them and to their publics. We may lack documentary evidence about a philosopher's own specific intentions in publishing a given book. But we can assume that he meant to be understood by a living audience, and not just by posterity; and what writers as well as readers could have understood is set to a large extent, although not wholly, by the language they already possessed. Even innovative terms and concepts require some sort of introduction via existing notions. To learn what resources were available to a philosopher, we must look outside his or her writings. We may need to examine theological works, sermons, political pamphlets, old editions of classical authors, contemporary dictionaries, and literary writings, as well as the other philosophers our subject read. If we do not check our accounts of what past philosophers said in this manner, we are in serious danger

29 I am much indebted to work by Quentin Skinner and by John Pocock on these issues; for a helpful review see Tully 1988, and the methodological essays in Pocock 1985.

of mistaking our own fantasies about what they "must have meant" for what they really did mean.

Single-aim theorists may reply that on this view there is no continuing subject of moral philosophy whose history we can try to write. But to say this is to oversimplify. Continuities are quite compatible with the discontinuities that arise from changing problems and aims. It seems highly probable that all societies complex enough to generate philosophical reflection must handle certain problems of social and personal relations. Views about the fair or proper distribution of the necessities of life, or about the relative praise- or blame-worthiness of individuals, seem always to arise in such societies. Study of different ways of structuring such views is a constant theme that gives moral philosophy some of its identity amid its differences.

Some arguments and insights about what makes for coherent views of morality are portable. Since they may be carried over from one situation to another, they provide further elements of continuity in the work of moral philosophers. When, for example, Cudworth said that "good" could not be defined as "whatever God wills," he turned against Descartes and Hobbes the same kind of argument that Plato's Socrates sketched against Euthyphro. G. E. Moore later presented other arguments against the definability of "good." Cudworth was trying to preserve the possibility of a loving relation between God and man that could not have concerned either Socrates or Plato; Moore had quite different aims in view. One could write a useful history concentrating simply on the question of definability.³⁰ But to do so would be to ignore historically crucial differences in the uses to which claims of indefinability were put. I do not wish to minimize the importance of portable arguments. They provide a major set of linkages between past and present moral philosophies. But they do nothing to support the claims of the single-aim historian. Praxiteles and Brancusi both used chisels, no doubt, but we do not learn much about their art from noticing the fact.

Single-aim philosophers will undoubtedly feel that more significance must be assigned to these portable arguments. They will say that such arguments represent what moral philosophy is all about – the discovery of the truth about morality. Plato and Cudworth and Moore all saw the same thing, even if they described somewhat differently what they saw and put their discovery to different uses. They did not discover a mere tool for carrying out some external aim. They themselves say that they are in search of the truth about morality itself, and it is quite possible that they found an important part of it. Progress in moral philosophy, as in science, involves replacing false and one-sided

30 See Prior 1949, a useful short study.

theories with true and comprehensive ones about the designated subject matter of the discipline. History is useful only when philosophical assessment of the arguments of past philosophers helps us with our present projects.

Histories of moral philosophy can of course be written on such assumptions; and assessment of arguments given in the past is important to the historian. The historian needs to know what led to the alteration or abandonment of various views. Failure to achieve coherence or to produce valid supporting arguments may explain the change in some cases. But the single-aim view leaves unexplained a great deal that the historian will naturally wish to consider. Why do some theories emerge and flourish and then disappear, why do some recur, why is there so little convergence, what does moral philosophy as a practice or discipline do in and for the societies in which it is supported? It is more useful for the historian to turn away from the single-aim view and adopt a variable-aim approach instead.

vii. *Progress in moral philosophy*

If we take the variable-aim view of the subject, we will not be strongly inclined to make much of the question of progress or regress. We will look at the enterprise of rationally examining norms and virtues as one of the tools that various societies have used to cope with different problems they faced in shaping or preserving or extending a common understanding of the terms on which their members could live with one another. We will not think of moral philosophy as standing apart from and above the moral discourse of society. We will take it as being simply one participant in the discussion of moral issues. In moral philosophy we will hear the voice that asks us to stand back from current issues and describe them in the most general terms we can discover – or invent. Its hope is that by so doing we can reformulate the problems in more manageable ways. The very stance seems to make it natural to use an atemporal mode of discourse, but the rhetoric of moral philosophy need not conceal the fact that those who use it are located in their own times as well as in a timeless web of abstractions.

It is not hard to understand how questions that were of great importance at one time may lose their hold at another. The conditions giving the questions urgency may have altered. Or new and more pressing problems may have emerged. The abandonment of one question and the move to consider a new one may itself be a major kind of progress in moral philosophy. I am myself strongly inclined to think that change of this kind is essential from time to time to enable moral philosophy to avoid sterility. If so, it is all the more important for the historian to work on assumptions that bring it to the fore instead of hiding it.

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.

Although we may hold that our time presents its own problems to moral philosophy, we may also think that the answers Kant worked out for his problems are useful in coping with ours. And if we share his passionate conviction concerning the equal moral capacity of all normal human beings and their equal dignity, we may well think that something like his basic moral principle is more likely to yield an adequate solution to our problems than any other principle yet invented.

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