

6 No Discipline, No History: The Case of Moral Philosophy

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How are we to understand the history and the historiography of moral philosophy? As a number of recent works in ethics show, philosophers think that more than our knowledge of the past is at issue. In these works, interpretations of the history of ethics play an important part in the construction of an acceptable view about morality. MacIntyre, Williams, Donagan, Taylor, Irwin, and Annas offer various views about whether moral philosophy has made progress or not. They ask whether we are now doing better at the subject than our predecessors did, and they offer answers—quite different answers, to be sure, but that is no surprise in philosophy. Historians are apt to be uncomfortable with this question. To ask it is to suppose not only that there is some common enterprise engaging earlier and later moral philosophers, but also shared standards by which we may judge improvement or decline. Historians tend to think that such assumptions are not their business, and that in any case they make for “Whiggish” or “triumphalist” history. They are thus likely to be uncomfortable with histories of moral philosophy written with such philosophical assumptions; philosophers are likely to think histories written on any others are irrelevant.

In this paper I shall raise some questions about the supposition that there is enough significant continuity in the concerns of moral philosophers to warrant discussions of progress and regress in the discipline. I should like also to indicate why it is not possible to consider the history of moral philosophy seriously without some views that, properly speaking, can be adjudicated, if at all, only within the discipline itself. It seems obvious that if there is no single discipline of moral philosophy there cannot be a history of it; it may seem less obvious that unless you are pretty well versed in, and have views

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about, moral philosophy—unless you have acquired the discipline—you cannot properly study whatever history it may have. The history and the discipline, I shall argue, are inseparable.

I

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.¹

¹ Xenophon, *Socratic 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.”²

² Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, V.iv.10–11.

In the eighteenth century Thomas Reid taught his pupils that Socrates “has always been reckoned the Father of Moral Philosophy.”³

³ Thomas Reid, *Practical Ethics*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 110.

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

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

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surprising that common sense should possess some sound *beliefs* about moral rules even though we will not have secure *knowledge* about morality until we discover its true foundations.⁴

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *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 his important study *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) 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...” (1). Although we have not reached agreement about the basis of morality, the Socrates story draws on a clear picture of the tasks that moral philosophers should undertake. We are trying to answer the question Socrates raised: how to live. People have always 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 learn at least to avoid their errors.

II

Because the Socrates story is simply taken for granted today it is important to be aware that it is not the only possible narrative of the history of the subject. For many centuries an alternative view of that history 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

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philosophy is, therefore, it is not a search for hitherto unknown scientific knowledge.

The alternative narrative takes two forms, one religious and one secular. The religious version is the older. It 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 question arises from two assumptions. One is 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. 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 explain its presence in cultures not directly descended from the Jews.⁵

⁵ See *Models of the History of Philosophy*, ed. Giovanni Santinello, vol. 1: *From Its Origins in the Renaissance to the "Historica Philosophica"* by Francesco Botten et al., trans. C. W. T. Blackwell et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 21, 26, 28, and especially the discussion of Thomas Burnet, 330ff. See also Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 5, for discussion of the "single source" theory of religion. D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (Cornell, 1972), is another important study of this kind of view.

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

⁶ William Law, *Remarks upon...the Fable of the Bees*, in *Works* (London, 1762, 1892), 2:7.

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.

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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 become aware of God's commands and understand 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.⁷

⁷ "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." From Jean Barbeyrac, *An Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality*, trans. Carew (London, 1729) §III, p. 5.

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 mankind, they could have done as well as they did with morality (how well they did being, again, a subject of debate).

The first part of the answer is due to a frequently cited remark attributed to Aristotle. In *Magna Moralia* 1.1 he says that Pythagoras was the first who attempted to treat of virtue. Thomas Stanley, the first English historian of philosophy to write in the vernacular, repeats the claim, citing this source.⁸

⁸ Thomas Stanley, *The History of Philosophy*, (1655–62) (London, 1721), 395. The passage from *Magna Moralia*, 1182a12–14, is cited in full below at the opening of sect. 4.

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 inserts in his assertion of it. In his *L'Ethique ou Philosophie Morale* of 1603 he says that although Socrates is praised for his discussion of

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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.⁹

⁹ Scipione Dupleix, *L'Ethique, ou Philosophie Morale* (Paris, 1603, 1632), 4. Dr. Sebastian Brock informs me that to the best of our knowledge St. Irenaeus said no such thing.

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.¹⁰

¹⁰ I owe these last references to the excellent book by S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1974), 201–2. Heninger lists (229, n. 5) half a dozen studies from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that contain bibliographies on Pythagoras's debt to Moses.

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.¹¹

¹¹ 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 W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 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, 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 explore the bearing of claims about the debts on the historiography of moral philosophy.

John Selden, who traced our grasp of natural law 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.¹²

¹² John Selden, *De Jure Naturali et Gentium iuxta disciplinam Ebraeorum*, *Collected Works* vol. 1, col. 89. The examination of testimonies occurs in cols. 82–5 and elsewhere. I am deeply 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 hodge-podge. But, he adds, no one doubts that in Platonic as well as Pythagorean doctrine there are teachings derived from the Hebrews (col. 91).

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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.¹³

¹³ Henry More, *Enchiridion Ethicum*, English translation of 1690 (London), 267. For More and the “ancient theology” see Peter Harrison, cited in n. 5 above, 133–5. He 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.¹⁴

¹⁴ Josephus, in *Against Apion*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1926, 1966), claims 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.

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. There is a large amount of room for maneuver within this kind of historical schema. Even the religious version leaves a role for reason while not making revelation superfluous.¹⁵

¹⁵ More himself says that the eternal son as the *Logos*, or human reason, as well as revelation, can enlighten us about morals.

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

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'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.¹⁶

¹⁶ Locke, *Reasonableness*, MPMK I.194–5.

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. A truth is reasonable and philosophical, Crusius says in 1744, when it can be proven 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 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.”¹⁷

¹⁷ C.A. Crusius, *Anweisung vernünftig zu Leben* (1744), reprint ed. G. Tonelli (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), “Vorrede,” fol. b4 and following.

III

Neither Locke nor Clarke nor Crusius say 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. The Pythagoras story's explanation of the role of moral philosophy is implicit in their work as well. With it 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.¹⁸

¹⁸ John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), §241, 60–1. Samuel Clarke, *The Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion* (London, 1705), VII.1. For Clarke it is the “wicked Mr. Hobbs” whose evil philosophy makes his own virtuous philosophical activity necessary. Reid does not say that the heathens could not have discovered the principles of morals; but he does say that revelation allowed Christians to surpass the heathen in matters of natural religion. Reid, *Practical Ethics*, 108–9.

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Jean Barbeyrac is of great interest because he gives an only partly secularized version of the history embodying the basic philosophical assumption at work in the religious Pythagoras story.¹⁹

¹⁹ Richard Tuck rightly finds his history important for its part in the propagation of Grotian natural-law theory, but does not discuss the historiography as such. See Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Following Pufendorf, Barbeyrac assumes that the basic truths of morality are always readily accessible to human reason. They must therefore have been known in the earliest ages, so that no revelation of morality was necessary. 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. It is worth looking at some of the details as they are spelled out in his 1706 *Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality*.²⁰

²⁰ The English translation of Barbeyrac's 1706 French work serves as a lengthy introduction to the fourth edition of Kennett's English translation of Barbeyrac's French translation of Samuel Pufendorf's *Of the Law of Nature and of Nations* (London, 1729). Barbeyrac's *Account* is hereafter cited in the text, with the abbreviation “Barb.”

Since the first inhabitants of the world lived in the “Eastern Countries,” he says, it must have been among them that there originated “the most general Notions of Morality, and the other Sciences...The Greeks,” he adds, “for all their Vanity, were forc'd to own themselves Debtors for these notices, to those, they call'd Barbarians.” As for Pythagoras, he travelled in the East, among the Egyptians, Persians, and Chaldeans, and brought back “many of his Notions” as well as his symbolic and enigmatic way of teaching (Barb., 37,45,47). Barbeyrac also cites the important sentence of Aristotle, on which the whole tradition hangs (Barb., 50). If he does not explicitly say that Pythagoras was a Jew or studied the books of Moses, he clearly has something like it in mind.

The problem that gives the structure to his *Account* shows his divergence from the purely revelational account of the origins of moral knowledge given in the older Pythagoras story.²¹

²¹ I am greatly indebted to Dr. Jennifer Herdt for her comments on an earlier version of this paper, in which I failed, in the present section, to notice Barbeyrac's adherence to what I am calling the "secular" variant of the Pythagoras story. Her remarks led me not only to correct this error but to rethink the whole paper, which is, I hope, improved as a result.

In his first two chapters he tells us that the principles of morality are so simple that they are within the reach of everyone. His adherence to Pufendorf's natural-law view of morality requires him to add that in thinking of morality we must also be thinking of God, but he finds no problem with this because he thinks it easy to

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acquire the natural knowledge that God exists and actively governs our lives (Barb., 1–2). Morality is not only plain and simple; it is also, as Locke showed, demonstrable (Barb., 4–5). Why, then, has the science of morality remained so backward? And what use are philosophers?

Here Barbeyrac falls back on the older history. Sin provides the answers. Barbeyrac cites Hierocles—significantly, he cites a comment on Pythagoras—to say that sinful people can have clear ideas about many things while still being blind to morals (Barb., 6). Not only self-interest, but long-standing custom or tradition can also conceal moral truth from us, as can prejudices acquired in early education. We might think that priests would at least teach morality properly, but it has not been so. Pagan priests had such misguided ideas of the divinity that they could not hope to get morality right. The Jewish priests were too busy with ceremonial and civil affairs to teach adequately "the revelation of which they were the depositaries." Their carnal prejudices, moreover, kept them tied to the letter of the law. Although Christ re-established morals in all their purity, there were false teachers even in the time of the Apostles who corrupted his doctrine. Barbeyrac goes on at great length about the decay that followed and about the awful morals of the Christian Fathers. He includes St. Augustine among those condemned: did not Augustine write in defense of persecution? Barbeyrac was a Huguenot, and he could hardly excuse Augustine for this failing (Barb., 24).

IV

Although Barbeyrac cites him as an authority for Pythagoras's priority as student of virtue, Aristotle—if indeed it was Aristotle who wrote the *Magna Moralia*—does not make a very strong claim about it.²²

²² Guthrie presumably thinks that the *Magna Moralia* is spurious, since he does not list its remark about Pythagoras and the study of virtue in his review of sources concerning Pythagoras. Heninger also thinks that the *Magna Moralia* is spurious (277 n. 2)—a thesis John Cooper challenges in "The *Magna Moralia* and Aristotle's Moral Philosophy," *Amer. J. of Philology* 94.4 (Winter 1973), 327–49. For my purposes it does not, of course, matter whether the attribution to Aristotle is correct; it suffices that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was thought to be so.

The whole of what he says on the matter is this: "Pythagoras first attempted to speak about virtue, but not successfully; for by reducing the virtues to numbers he

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submitted the virtues to a treatment which was not proper to them" (1182a12–14). Socrates and Plato are also mentioned as having attempted to understand virtue, but with similar lack of success; and we are left with the distinct impression that Aristotle sees himself as the first to succeed in moral philosophy. When Barbeyrac cites the passage in his text, he omits the words "but not successfully," although he plainly knew they were there. Pythagoras was in any case something of an embarrassment. Little of his writing survives, and that little obscure. He was the subject of fantastic stories. Stanley unquestioningly repeats some of the stories contained in Diogenes Laertius and in the (alleged) Aristotelian fragments—that he showed his golden thigh in public, was in Croton and Metapontum at the very same time, and convinced an ox to stop eating beans forever by whispering in its ear.²³

²³ Stanley, *The History of Philosophy*, 360–1. For Aristotle, see Fragments 190–1, in Barnes, ed., *Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) vol. 2, 2441. Stanley partly follows Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VIII.11, who includes other wonders. The "Golden Verses" once taken as evidence about his moral doctrine is a much later composition wrongly attributed to him. See Heninger, who gives Stanley's translation of them (260–1) as well as a rich note on the controversies about them (278–9 n. 18).

The lack of clarity in Pythagoras's writings and the other mists that shroud him may have made him ideally suited for construal as the link between God's revelation to the Jews and the ability of the Greeks to have and philosophize about a proper morality. But by the end of the seventeenth century he was evidently beginning to seem a broken reed.

The Pythagoras story, however, still kept its hold. Adam Glafey, a German historian of natural law writing some thirty years after Barbeyrac, refuses 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.”²⁴

²⁴ Adam Friedrich Glafey, *Vollständige Geschichte des Rechts der Vernunft* (Leipzig, 1739, reprint, Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1965), 26–8; on Selden, 23–5.

Vico found it necessary to challenge a number of stories about Pythagoras, among them the one about his having learned from the Jews. Quite aside from the difficulty of accepting the tales of Pythagoras's numerous travels, there is the strong probability that like priests everywhere, the

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Jewish priests kept their mysteries secret. Vico holds that it was “by grace of a most sublime human science” that Plato and Pythagoras “exalted themselves to some extent to the knowledge of the divine truths which the Hebrews had been taught by the true God.”²⁵

²⁵ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Bergin and Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), 43. This is the 3rd edn. of 1744, §94–5. Leon Pompa, *Vico: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), gives comparable passages from the 1st edn., 1725; see §§36, 39, 86.

He thus denies the essential presupposition of the Pythagoras story, that knowledge of morality could only have been acquired at first from a divine revelation.

Vico was not widely read; and it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the Pythagoras story was critically examined and dismissed. 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.²⁶

²⁶ I have not been able to consult Meiners's work; I rely on Lucien Braun, *Histoire de l'Histoire de la Philosophie* (Paris: Editions Ophrys, 1973), 173–7. By 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, lacking, again, 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 Johann Christoph Hoffbauer, *Anfangsgründe der Moralphilosophie und insbesondere der Sittenlehre, nebst einer allgemeinen Geschichte derselben* (Halle: Kümmel, 1798), 295–6.

An effective positive replacement for the Pythagoras story was not published until 1822, in what I think should be considered the first comprehensive *modern* history of moral philosophy, Carl Friedrich Stäudlin's *Geschichte der Moralphilosophie*.²⁷

²⁷ Adam Smith surveys part of the history of moral philosophy in Part VII of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Although showing what I here describe as a modern attitude, it makes no effort to be comprehensive.

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.²⁸

²⁸ Vico in *New Science*³ says that human thought begins in particulars, not in theorizing, and that it was a mistake to think that universal laws were the most ancient form of the direction of action: 498–501.

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: pre-eminently with Socrates.²⁹

²⁹ Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, *Geschichte der Moralphilosophie* (Hannover, 1822), 22. Referred to hereinafter as Stäudlin.

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Stäudlin gives Pythagoras a chapter; but in it he expresses great admiration for the work done by Meiners (whom on other

points he attacks) enabling us to dismiss all the old claims about his importance. Allowing that Pythagoras had some interesting thoughts about morals, 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.³⁰

³⁰ Stäudlin, 1–3; on Pythagoras, 32–59.

What makes Stäudlin's work modern is not mainly its dismissal of the Pythagoras story and its kin. That, after all, is a scholarly position that might alter. Thus 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.³¹

³¹ See Reale's *The Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, trans. John Catan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 209, 216, 280–1. He refers to Max Pohlenz as his authority for Zeno's Jewishness. See Pohlenz, *Die Stoa* (Göttingen, 1948–49), 1.22, 24–5, 28, and the evidence, rather scant and with an anti-Semitic tone, 2.14n. For doubts about the thesis, see Brent Shaw, “The Divine Economy: Stoicism as Ideology,” *Latomus* 44 (1985), 20 n. 8.

What makes Stäudlin's work modern is essentially its attitude toward error. He treats error in moral philosophy as like error in any science, no more due to wicked desires or self-aggrandizing tendencies than 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. Like Kant, Stäudlin holds that it expresses the human tendency to reflect on our own powers and dispositions. The Greeks, Stäudlin thinks, exhausted almost all the possibilities and explored almost all the blind allies. Only rarely does a new insight, such as Kant's, enable us to advance. With such insights moral philosophy may increase our grasp of moral principle from time to time, or correct honest mistakes made along the way, and so contribute to the progress of morality as well as of moral philosophy.

Stäudlin was a Kantian; and Kant would have agreed with much of his approach. But he would have added that reflection also has an important moral function. He thinks that we have all always known the basic principle

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of morality. Because of our tendency to selfishness, however, a natural dialectic arises in which we try to convince ourselves that prudential reason is the only practical reason there is.³²

³² *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin), 4:405.

The philosophical reflection that shows the reality of pure practical reason therefore has its own practical importance. Kant has developed his own version of the secularized Pythagoras story.

V

Both the Socrates story and the Pythagoras story (in its secular as well as its 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

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with Sidgwick's belief that "a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science."³³

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179a35–b4; Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (1930), vi.

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.³⁴

³⁴ *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 453.

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 the work of 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 ours is 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

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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 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 an historical account of it. Worse, we may be overlooking its historical distinctiveness by forcing it into our own molds.

VI

We cannot, it seems, write a history of moral philosophy without having some philosophical 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 common-sense 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.

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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 is another. Perhaps the apparent fact that there is no hope for agreement on conceptions of the good presents another such juncture. 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 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. Holding 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—not rational reconstruction of arguments in the best modern terms—will tell us what we need to know.

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

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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—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 writings, and outside of philosophy. If we do not check our accounts of a past philosopher in this manner, we are in serious danger of mistaking our own fantasies about what he “must have meant” for what he 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 amidst its differences.

Some arguments and insights about what makes for coherent views of morality may carry over from one situation to another. They provide further elements of continuity in the work of moral philosophers. One illustration must suffice. When 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. A century later Diderot appealed to the same argument precisely because it “detaches morality from religion.”³⁵

³⁵ Diderot makes this remark in one of his contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1772 and later editions). I cite from Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*, ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211.

Moore had still other aims in view. One could write a useful history concentrating simply on the

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question of definability.³⁶

³⁶ See Arthur Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

But to do so would be to ignore historically crucial differences in the uses to which the point was put. I do not wish to minimize the importance of portable arguments. They do indeed 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 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 at the very least it is true that assessment of arguments given in the past is indispensable. The historian needs to know what led to the alteration or abandonment of various views. Since failure to achieve coherence or to produce valid supporting arguments may explain it in some cases, the historian who is not sensitive to such matters will write defective history. If the single-aim view is asserting only that knowledge of the discipline is prerequisite to writing its history, one cannot object to it. 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.

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VII

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 a society. We will take it as being simply one voice in the discussion of moral issues. In moral philosophy we will hear the voice that asks us to stand back from current issues and look at them in the most general terms we can call upon—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. Perhaps only the assessment of questions can keep moral philosophy from the sterility and irrelevance that we sometimes call “scholasticism.”

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Moral philosophy, for Kant, is most fundamentally addressed to the first-person, deliberative question, "What ought I to do?", and an answer to that question requires much more than delivering or justifying the fundamental principle of morality. We also need some account, based on this principle, of the nature and extent of the specific moral duties that apply to us. Fundamental issues in moral philosophy must also be settled a priori because of the nature of moral requirements themselves, or so Kant thought. This is a third reason he gives for an a priori method, and it appears to have been of great importance to Kant: Moral requirements present themselves as being unconditionally necessary. The conformity of one's action to duty in such cases is only related by accident to morality. The elements of moral philosophy/James Rachels. 7th ed. by Stuart Rachels. p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index. I corrected our account of the history of Catholic thought on abortion. In previous editions, we erroneously said that the alleged spotting of "homunculi" under primitive microscopes had a profound effect on the Church's position. In Chapter 5, "Ethical Egoism," the Principle of Equal Treatment has been reformulated to say: "We should treat people in the same way unless there is a good reason not to." Most cases of anencephaly are detected during pregnancy, and the fetuses are usually aborted. Of those not aborted, half are stillborn. About 350 are born alive each year, and they usually die within days. Philosophy of history is the philosophical study of history and its discipline. The term was coined by French philosopher Voltaire. In contemporary philosophy a distinction has developed between speculative philosophy of history and critical philosophy of history, now referred to as analytic. The former questions the meaning and purpose of the historical process whereas the latter studies the foundations and implications of history and the historical method. The names of these are derived from C. D. The philosophers who created modern moral philosophy were familiar with the thinkers of classical antiquity; some had also studied the medieval scholastics. But neither the ancient nor the medieval philosophers faced the conditions that increasingly confronted the whole of Europe from the Reformation onward. Early in this period political and religious authorities struggled for control over all significant human activity. After the Reformation, religion no longer spoke with the single voice it claimed in the Middle Ages, but ministers of every denomination demanded obedience to the God they pr