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978-0-521-00767-2 - Friedrich Schleiermacher: Lectures on Philosophical Ethics

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HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



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FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

*Lectures on
Philosophical Ethics*

EDITED BY

ROBERT B. LOUDON

University of Southern Maine

TRANSLATED BY

LOUISE ADEY HUISH



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521007672

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First published 2002

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN 978-0-521-80982-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-00767-2 Paperback

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Introduction

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834) – father of modern liberal theology, founder of modern hermeneutics, translator of Plato into German, co-founder (with Wilhelm von Humboldt) of the University of Berlin, and early advocate of civil rights for both women and Jews – was clearly a man of many talents and interests. But over the years a number of German scholars have argued that it is in fact Schleiermacher’s philosophical work in ethics that constitutes his most outstanding achievement. For instance, August Twستن, Schleiermacher’s student and later successor at the University of Berlin, claimed in 1869 that Schleiermacher’s ethics was “in truth the key to understanding all of his scientific works.” And Otto Braun, in the Foreword to his 1910 German edition of Schleiermacher’s works, summarized his criterion of selection by stating that “ethics is the crux of Schleiermacher’s philosophy; all of the writings belonging to ethics therefore form the foundation of the edition.” Hans-Joachim Birkner, founding editor of the more recent (and still incomplete) *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (critical edition) of Schleiermacher and German editor of the ethics lectures translated below, begins his discussion of Schleiermacher’s ethics by proclaiming that “without a doubt, Schleiermacher’s philosophical ethics represents his most important achievement, and in the history of ethics constitutes a completely original project.” Finally, Gunter Scholtz, in a more recent study, argues that Schleiermacher’s ethics, in comparison with all other areas of his work, “has a far greater

I would like to thank the Board of Trustees of the University of Maine System for awarding me a 2001–2 Trustee Professorship, which greatly facilitated my research on Schleiermacher’s ethics. Thanks also to Karl Ameriks, Peter W. Foley, Patrick Frierson, and Daryl Morazzini for their comments on an earlier version of this Introduction.

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significance: it tackles the more important problems, has a much wider perspective, and can lay claim to greater originality.”¹

However, in the Anglo-American world Schleiermacher’s philosophical ethics has long remained a well-kept secret. How did his ethics develop and take shape? What does his mature ethical theory look like? And can the above claims be justified?

Steps along the way: Schleiermacher’s ethics before 1812

Schleiermacher’s writings before 1812 (the year in which parts of the following lectures were first delivered at the University of Berlin) cover a wide range of topics and genres, and include some of his most famous publications – e.g. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799) and the *Monologues* (1800). Many of them were never published or even completed during his own lifetime. But, overall, ethical themes and concerns dominate these early writings as well. As one recent critic notes, “if we view them with hindsight and in light of where Schleiermacher’s numerous interests eventually led him, it is fair to say that moral philosophy, broadly understood, occupied the young Schleiermacher far more than religion or theology.”²

The pre-1812 writings of Schleiermacher’s that are most relevant to the development of his mature ethical theory are the following:

“*Notes on Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics 8–9*” (1788)

This is, as far as we know, Schleiermacher’s first philosophical work – written when he was twenty years old and still a student at the University of Halle, studying under the Wolffian philosopher Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809). Originally intended as a contribution to a complete translation of and commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,

¹ August Twستن, “Zur Erinnerung an Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher” (lecture, Berlin, 1869), p. 10. As cited by Hans-Joachim Birkner, *Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre im Zusammenhang seines philosophisch-theologischen Systems* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1964), p. 36 n. 28. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *Werke. Auswahl in vier Bänden*, edited by Otto Braun and Johannes Bauer (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1910–13; reprint ed. Aalen: Scientia, 1967), I, xxxiii. Birkner, *Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre*, p. 37. Gunter Scholtz, *Ethik und Hermeneutik: Schleiermachers Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 7.

² Brent W. Sockness, “Was Schleiermacher a Virtue Ethicist? *Tugend* and *Bildung* in the Early Ethical Writings,” *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 8 (2001): 10. (I am indebted to Sockness’s analysis on a number of points in the following survey of Schleiermacher’s early ethics.)

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the project was abandoned in 1791 when another scholar published a new German translation of the same text. Perhaps the essay's most telling feature occurs in the opening sentence, when the author asks "How then are we to reconcile" duty (*Pflicht*) and feeling (*Empfindung*)?³ – a question that gains prominence in many later writings, as Schleiermacher begins to interweave the Kantian philosophy he was raised on with the new Romanticism which he himself helped to create. On a more general note, this early comment on Aristotle (particularly when combined with his later and more ambitious Plato translation project) serves as an important reminder that a very important source of Schleiermacher's ethical theory is ancient Greek philosophy. One of Schleiermacher's main goals as an ethical theorist is to integrate what he regards as the one-sided approaches of ancient and modern ethics – to bring together the teleological doctrines of good and virtue on the one hand with a deontological doctrine of duty on the other. As he notes in his Introduction to the *Brouillon zur Ethik* (1805/06): "With the ancients, the highest good and virtue; with the moderns, virtue and duty. These [latter] two are in opposition: if virtue is given, duty stops; as long as one must inculcate duty, virtue is not yet there" (*WA* II, 84; see also 256, 555). However, unlike certain late twentieth-century virtue ethicists whose passion for Aristotle (and/or dislike of modernity) was so strong that it led them to try to "do ethics without . . . the notion 'morally ought,'"⁴ Schleiermacher proposes a more pluralistic program: one that incorporates the strengths of both the ancient and modern traditions of ethical thought.

The most significant representative of modern ethical thought (particularly for a young German intellectual writing at the end of the eighteenth century) is of course Immanuel Kant – by far the deepest and most pervasive influence on Schleiermacher's earliest writings. While

³ Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Hans-Joachim Birkner with Gerhard Ebeling, Hermann Fischer, Heinz Kimmerle, and Kurt-Victor Selge (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984–), I.1, 3. Future references to Schleiermacher's writings are cited in the body of the text by division, volume, and page number in this edition (hereafter abbreviated as *KGA*). Most recent English translations of Schleiermacher's ethics writings contain the *KGA* pagination. References to Schleiermacher's *Grundlinien einer Kritik der bisherigen Sittenlehre* (1803), *Brouillon zur Ethik* (1805/06), and *Ethik* (1812/13) (not yet reprinted in *KGA*) are cited in the body of the text according to volume and page number in Braun and Bauer, eds., *Werke. Auswahl in vier Bänden* (hereafter abbreviated as *WA*).

⁴ Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19; reprinted in *Virtue Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 34, 33. For a critique, see my "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 227–336; also reprinted in *Virtue Ethics*.

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many of Schleiermacher's pronouncements concerning Kant's ethics are extremely critical, the impact of the sage of Königsberg on his ethical theory was both lasting and profound. As he notes in an often-quoted letter to his friend Karl von Brinkmann in 1790: "All this must strike you as rather anti-Kantian; nevertheless I can sincerely assure you that with each day my faith in this philosophy increases" (2 February 1790, *KGA* V.1, 191).

On the Highest Good

This second text was written in early 1789, also during Schleiermacher's student days at the University of Halle. It is primarily a response to certain issues raised in the Dialectic of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (namely, the doctrine of the highest good, and the related postulates of God and immortality), which had been published the preceding year. At bottom, Schleiermacher seems here to be trying to out-Kant Kant, pleading for a more rarified concept of the highest good that is completely detached from all-too-human empirical concerns for happiness. To include happiness along with virtue within one's concept of the highest good, as Kant does (while warning readers that they "are two specifically quite *different elements* of the highest good"⁵ that cannot be reduced to one notion – *contra* eudaimonisms both ancient and modern), is, Schleiermacher claims, "to present to us a prostitute . . . who only knows how to flaunt charms of a sordid and . . . revolting variety" (*KGA* I.1, 96). Also of note in this essay is Schleiermacher's scornful dismissal of Kant's moral arguments for God and immortality as "postulates" or necessary presuppositions for the connection between virtue and happiness, a critique which foreshadows Schleiermacher's later battle in *On Religion* to put a stop to reductionist Enlightenment efforts to make religion merely "a saving support of morality" (*KGA* I.2, 202).

The mere fact that Schleiermacher chooses to criticize Kant's concepts of the highest good and the postulates rather than other concepts that are more central to his ethics (such as duty or the categorical imperative) may be taken as yet another sign of the strong influence of ancient Greek ethics on the development of Schleiermacher's own ethical theory. At this

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the German Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–), 5: 112. Future references to Kant's writings are cited in the body of the text according to volume and page number in this edition. (References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited in the body of the text according to the traditional A/B pagination.)

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point, however, it is clearly Plato rather than Aristotle who emerges as Schleiermacher's hero in the history of moral philosophy. Plato "saw the moral law as independent of the idea of happiness, as lying in reason"; and he also (unlike Kant) understood that the highest good "is possible and definable only through reason" (*KGA* I.1, 109). Aristotle, on the other hand, is criticized for viewing ethics as "nothing but the doctrine of happiness," and thus for constructing a "vacuous" and "hideous" system. Aristotle "simply did not know that reason could be practical of itself" (*KGA* I.1, 109–10).

However, despite Schleiermacher's professed Platonist (not to mention Kantian) endorsement of the fundamental tenet that moral action needs to be based on reason rather than feeling, he also shows signs of wavering here. "Ours is not a will that can be determined by the moral law directly, this can only happen indirectly by means of subjective motivating grounds" (*KGA* I.1, 100). For Kant, on the other hand, "what is essential to any moral worth of actions is *that the moral law determine the will immediately*" (5: 71).

The above quarrels with Kant notwithstanding, Schleiermacher remains committed throughout his ethical writings to the fundamental Kantian claim that we have a duty to promote the highest good; to make the material world around us agree "as far as possible" with our idea of a truly "moral world" – i.e. a world in conformity with moral principles chosen by free and rational beings (A 808/B 836; see also 5: 113). In *On the Highest Good*, this duty is summarized as the promotion of "the totality of what is possible through rational laws" (*KGA* I.1, 92); in Schleiermacher's mature ethics it translates into the goal of a "steady dissemination [of reason] across the whole earth, the total field of the cultural task" (*WA* II, 284; see also 92).

On Freedom

Schleiermacher's next substantial early work in ethics is *On Freedom*, described by Günter Meckenstock as "the most comprehensive, ambitious, and no doubt also the most difficult work in the corpus of his early writings."⁶ The essay was written between 1790 and 1792, while

⁶ Günter Meckenstock, *Deterministische Ethik und kritische Theologie: Die Auseinandersetzung des frühen Schleiermacher mit Kant und Spinoza 1789–1794* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), p. 52. (Meckenstock is also editor of vols. I.1–3, 12 of *KGA*.)

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Schleiermacher was working as a tutor at the estate of Count Dohna in Schlobitten, East Prussia. The original plan was for Schleiermacher to accompany the eldest son Wilhelm zu Dohna to Königsberg, where he was beginning his university studies in political science (and where Kant was entering his twilight years as professor of philosophy). Instead, he remained at the Count's estate, working as tutor for the three younger sons. Unpublished and unfinished (the essay breaks off in the third section; four sections were planned), *On Freedom* appears to build on three other short pieces, remaining fragments of which are also included in the first volume of *KGA* (I.1, 129–34, 135–64, 213–16).

This essay represents yet a further parting of the ways with Kant. In his Preface to *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant declares that “the concept of freedom . . . constitutes the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason . . . Freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law” (5: 3–4). Schleiermacher, however, denies the reality of freedom in Kant's absolute libertarian sense, opting for a variant of “the deterministic solution of the Leibniz–Wolff school” (*KGA* I.1, 129) – a solution no doubt suggested to him by Eberhard, his professor at Halle.

In his writings on ethics, Kant is primarily concerned with *practical* freedom – “the independence of the power of choice from *necessitation* by impulses of sensibility” (A 534/B 562). This independence has both a negative sense (freedom *from* determination by external causes) as well as a positive sense (freedom *to* legislate for oneself how to act). However, Kant also held that the possibility of practical freedom presupposes *transcendental* freedom,

the faculty of beginning a state *from itself* [*von selbst*], the causality of which does not in turn stand under another cause determining it in time in accordance with the law of nature. Freedom in this signification is a pure transcendental idea, which, first, contains nothing borrowed from experience, and second, the object of which also cannot be given determinately in any experience (A 533/B 561).

Schleiermacher, like many others before and since, rejects Kant's metaphysically extravagant notion of transcendental freedom. At the very beginning of the surviving portion of his *Notes on Kant: Critique of Practical Reason* (probably written in 1789), he writes: “transcendental freedom. Therefore apparently a faculty of causality without necessary connection

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with that which has gone before. I have therefore certainly not misunderstood him" (*KGA* I.1, 129). In its place, Schleiermacher posits a naturalized self that is wholly a creature of desire, or rather of multiple desires embedded in their own complex causal networks. Choice is determined by desire, and each choice made by the faculty of desire "must in every case be grounded in the totality of present representations and in the state and interrelations of all the soul's faculties that have been produced in the progression of representations in our soul" (*KGA* I.1, 237–8). And this naturalized self is also a unitary self. Schleiermacher (again, like many other critics of Kant) rejects Kant's dichotomous phenomenal/noumenal self: "it is pointless to divide the human being, all is connected in him, all is one" (*KGA* I.1, 241). However, this is not at all to say that it is easy or even possible for finite rational beings to track the actions of the naturalized self. Determinism does not necessarily imply predictability: "the activities of the faculty of desire change as richly and rapidly as the flux of external things can ever do. In every moment it is filled not simply with life but with superabundant life, multifariously active" (*KGA* I.1, 238).

In rejecting the Kantian concept of transcendental freedom, Schleiermacher essentially opts for a position on moral deliberation and choice that is much closer to that of Aristotle ("thought by itself moves nothing") or Hume ("reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them").⁷ For Kant, however, any and all such efforts to explain human choice as simply part of the mechanism of nature are at bottom "nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself" (5: 97).

A stronger philosophical influence on Schleiermacher's thinking about free will and determinism (not to mention other topics) is Spinoza. Included in the first volume of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* are also three short pieces dealing with Spinoza's philosophy (*KGA* I.1, 511–58, 559–82, 583–97), which in Meckenstock's judgment were all written between 1793 and 1794. However, Albert Blackwell argues convincingly that Schleiermacher knew "Jacobi's secondhand presentation of Spinoza's

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin. 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), VI.2 1139a35–36. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Niddich. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 415.

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philosophy as early as 1787”⁸ – i.e. well before he wrote *On Freedom*. In his *Ethics* (1677), one of the most radical works of the early Enlightenment, “the holy rejected Spinoza” (*KGA* I.2, 213) defends a straightforward version of determinism: “Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way.”⁹ The determinism in Schleiermacher’s *On Freedom* is partially fueled by indirect contact with Spinozism, an influence that intensifies in the years immediately following.

On the Value of Life

Schleiermacher’s next major effort in the development of his ethical theory is a longish essay (pp. 391–472 in *KGA* I.1) entitled *On the Value of Life* (late 1792–early 1793). In its pursuit of a broad-based “reflection about all of life” (*KGA* I.1, 393), the essay can be seen as marking yet another departure from a Kantian morality of duty with its narrower focus on the question What ought I to do? and another move closer to ancient virtue ethics, in which “the fundamental question is, How ought I to live? or, What should my life be like?”¹⁰ At the same time, in his triple emphases on “the destiny of the human being” (*die Bestimmung des Menschen*) (*KGA* I.1, 406); “serious virtue” (*ernste Tugend*), which strives “to appropriate everything within me to rationality, the crown of my existence” (*KGA* I.1, 413); and culture or formation (*Bildung*), the key process by means of

⁸ Albert Blackwell, *Schleiermacher’s Early Philosophy of Life: Determinism, Freedom, and Phantasy* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 125. See also Meckenstock, *Deterministische Ethik und kritische Theologie*, pp. 185–8. Many late eighteenth-century German intellectuals were attracted to Spinozism more as a result of Jacobi’s work, *Briefe über die Lehre von Spinoza*, than by close study of Spinoza’s own texts. For discussion, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 44–91.

⁹ Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pt. I, prop. 29. For discussion of Spinoza’s influence on the Enlightenment, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. pt. II.

¹⁰ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 27. As Annas notes (p. 27 n. 1), the question is “classically posed by Socrates in the first book of the *Republic*: ‘It is not a trivial question . . . what we are talking about is how one should live,’” (352 d). At the same time, Kant’s own debt to the virtue ethics tradition should not be underestimated. For discussion, see my “Kant’s Virtue Ethics,” *Philosophy* 61 (1986): 473–89; reprinted in Daniel Statman, ed., *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1997).

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which humans are to achieve their destiny and “bring forth true human happiness . . . among all peoples” (*KGA* I.1, 449), Schleiermacher once again reveals his deep debt to Kant.

Two additional themes deserve mention which are touched on here and pursued in greater depth in later writings:

- 1) The positive role of desire and feeling in human life. In our discussion of *On Freedom*, we noted that Schleiermacher rejects the Kantian idea of transcendental freedom as a rational capacity to produce a state spontaneously, replacing it with a causally determined faculty of desire. But now, without giving up the root claim that human thought and action, as part of nature, are always subject to laws of cause and effect, he also strives to overcome the duality between thought and desire: “Knowing and desiring should not be two in me, but one. Complete, constant harmony of the two . . . that is humanity” (*KGA* I.1, 410). Pleasure (*Lust*) is declared to be “the driving wheel of all cognitive powers”; “the touchstone that shows me in which objects my two powers [of knowing and desiring] can unite” (*KGA* I.1, 410). In a manner strikingly similar to John Stuart Mill’s later distinction between higher and lower pleasures,¹¹ Schleiermacher then distinguishes between “pleasure in truth” (which he also equates with “pleasure in rules” and “pleasure in laws”) with mere “pleasure in objects.” The former is declared to be “humanity in the highest degree,” the *Bestimmung* of our existence (*KGA* I.1, 412).
- 2) The value of fantasy (*Fantasie*). Later in his essay Schleiermacher asserts: “we act wrongly if we fail to recognize the value of fantasy” (*KGA* I.1, 450). Those Enlightenment intellectuals who overvalue understanding (*Verstand*) and its “contribution of abstract concepts” are declared to be mere *Buchstabenmenschen* (people who go by the letter, bureaucrats) with an “addiction to theory and abstract being” that leaves them in “the land of the lame” (*KGA* I.1, 450). Several years later, these dual themes of feeling and fantasy will resound deeply in early German Romanticism, a movement in which, as we shall see next, Schleiermacher played a key role.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 2. Mill introduces his distinction between higher and lower pleasures in order to rebut the objection that utilitarianism is “a doctrine worthy only of swine” (p. 55).

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Schleiermacher's ethics and early Romanticism

The years 1797–1802 marked a new and distinct phase in Schleiermacher's intellectual development, a phase fueled by his association with the early Romantic movement in Berlin. In 1796, he obtained his first post as pastor at the Charité Hospital in Berlin. Meanwhile, Count Alexander Dohna, whom Schleiermacher had tutored back in Schlobitten, also moved to Berlin. Through Dohna, Schleiermacher was introduced to Marcus Herz and his wife Henriette. Marcus Herz was a noted Jewish physician (Dohna was one of his patients) who had also been one of Kant's best students earlier in Königsberg. (In 1770, Kant "chose Herz to be respondent at the defense of his inaugural Dissertation – an honor all the more singular in view of Herz's Jewish origins."¹²) Schleiermacher was particularly close to Henriette (false rumors of an extramarital affair circulated for many years), herself the daughter of a Sephardic physician who had been head of the Hospital of the Jewish Community. She was a beautiful woman seventeen years younger than her husband, and by 1796 had already mastered eight languages, to which she later added Sanskrit and Turkish.

During the 1790s the Herz home was the center of a salon that attracted many of the leading philosophical and literary figures of Berlin, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and Henriette herself was the guiding spirit behind it. Much has been written about both the role of the salon and women's place within it in Enlightenment culture. Here, arguably for the first time in human history, we find

the world of a critically debating reading public that at the same time was just evolving within the broader bourgeois strata . . . the world of the men of letters but also that of the *salons* in which "mixed companies" engaged in critical discussions; here, in the bourgeois homes, the public sphere was established.¹³

It was through Henriette's salon that Schleiermacher became friends with Friedrich Schlegel in 1797 (though they actually first met each other at another famous but more secretive and exclusive literary society,

¹² Martin L. Davies, *Identity or History? Marcus Herz and the End of Enlightenment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 20.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 106. See also Davies, *Identity or History?* pp. 163–94.

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the Berliner Mittwochsgesellschaft).¹⁴ Schlegel, founder with his brother August Wilhelm of the short-lived (1798–1800) but highly influential journal *Athenaeum*, was the leading figure of the new Romantic movement in Berlin, a movement which, at least in its earliest and most intense phase, was already dying out in 1802.

In his *Monologues* (1800), Schleiermacher assigns a crucial role both to Henriette and her salon in the formation of his own thinking during his early Berlin years:

you, who even now surround me in sweet love . . . at every moment I could exchange thoughts and life with you; where such community exists, there is my paradise . . . [I remain indebted to] this beautiful period of my life, where I came into contact with so much that was new, when many things appeared to me in bright light that previously I only darkly felt and had no preparation for (*KGA* I.3, 51, 23).

The praise is surely warranted, when we consider his extremely productive literary output during this brief time period. To begin with, his contributions to the *Athenaeum* include several significant reviews (see *KGA* I.3, 63–72, 225–34, 235–48), including one of Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* – in which the text is labeled “a collection of trivialities” and criticized for, among other shortcomings, its “treatment of the female sex as an abnormality, and throughout as a means” (*KGA* I.2, 365, 369); as well as a modest number of the famous *Fragmente*, the bulk of which were written by Friedrich Schlegel (*KGA* I.2, xxxi–xxxii, 141–56). Schleiermacher’s most famous *Fragment* is Nr. 364, a feminist mini-essay entitled *Idee zu einem Katechismus der Vernunft für edle Frauen* (*Idea for a Catechism of Reason for Noble Ladies*), in which he argues for liberation from the social conventions of gender, women’s right to education, and the equality of the sexes (*KGA* I.2, xxxviii, 153–4).

Other important works written during this period but not published in *Athenaeum* include *Versuch einer Theorie des geselligen Betragens* (*Attempt at a Theory of Sociable Conduct*), published in 1799 in the *Berlinisches Archiv der Zeit und ihres Geschmacks*. In the opening sentence, Schleiermacher proclaims: “Free sociability, bound and determined by no external end,

¹⁴ See Günter Birtsch, “The Berlin Wednesday Society,” in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 235–52.

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is demanded aloud by all educated human beings as one of their first and noblest needs" (*KGA* I.2, 165). In his later ethics this concept of free sociability (*freie Geselligkeit*) is assigned a key role as a distinct form of moral community; "completely separate . . . from the state" (as well as from the church and other fundamental institutions such as universities); a community of friendship and inquiry that "goes directly from individual to individual" but which "dies away as soon as it attempts to organize itself according to external characteristics" (*WA* II, 367, 366, 367). The personal roots of Schleiermacher's theory of free sociability, often viewed as one of his most original contributions to ethics (indeed, he has even been called "the theorist of salon culture"),¹⁵ clearly lie in Henriette Herz's salon.

Another important piece, also published in 1799, is *Briefe bei Gelegenheit der politisch theologischen Aufgabe und des Sendschreibers jüdischer Hausvater. Von einem Prediger außerhalb Berlin* (*Letters on the Occasion of the Political-Theological Responsibility and Petition of the Jewish Housefathers. From a Preacher outside Berlin*) (*KGA* I.2, 327–61). In these *Letters* Schleiermacher argues for full civil rights for Jews and recommends the establishment of a reform sect within Judaism. And in 1800 he publishes anonymously *Vertraute Briefe über Friedrich Schlegels Lucinde* (*Confidential Letters Concerning Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde*), in which he defends both the autonomy of art ("I know of no immorality at all in a work of art other than when it fails to do its duty to be outstandingly beautiful, or when it goes beyond its boundaries, in short when it's no good" [*wenn es nichts taugt*]) (*KGA* I.3, 190) and a Romantic interpretation of erotic love.

Schleiermacher's most famous work during his early Berlin years is of course *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799) – a defense of religion against secular Enlightenment critics who sought to reduce religion to a handmaiden of ethics or natural philosophy: "Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling . . . religion is sense and taste for the infinite" (*KGA* I.2, 211, 212). However, from the standpoint of Schleiermacher's ethics, it is the *Monologues* of 1800 that constitutes "the chief work of the young Schleiermacher, for in it he has condensed a thirteen-year process of ethical reflection."¹⁶

¹⁵ Davies, *Identity or History?* p. 166. See also Gunter Scholtz, *Die Philosophie Schleiermachers* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), p. 124; *Ethik und Hermeneutik*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Kurt Nowak, *Schleiermacher und die Frühromantik: Eine literaturgeschichtliche Studie zum romantischen Religionsverständnis und Menschenbild am Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), p. 230.

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Several key motifs now emerge that link this work both with his earlier as well as later ethics. First, a strong stress on individuality constitutes yet another break with Kantian ethics. Schleiermacher's "highest intuition" in the *Monologues* is the insight "that each human being is meant to present humanity in his own way, in his own mixture of its elements, so that humanity reveals itself in every manner, and so that everything can issue from its womb and become real in the fullness of infinity" (*KGA* I.3, 18). Those (like Kant and Fichte, and even the Schleiermacher of ten years earlier) who are allegedly "content to have found only reason" and who "throw themselves before duty" overvalue universality and undervalue particularity – they have not yet "risen to the higher standpoint of the formation [*Bildung*] of particularity and ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]" (*KGA* I.3, 17, 18). And in doing so they fail to grasp what is most vital in human life. At the same time, Schleiermacher (unlike certain late twentieth-century postmodernists) is not casting universality completely aside on the ground that it is merely "an arduous campaign to smother the differences and above all to eliminate all 'wild' – autonomous, obstreperous and uncontrolled – sources of moral judgment."¹⁷ "What I am searching for," Schleiermacher emphasizes, "is individuality and its relation to humanity" (*KGA* I.3, 26). Universality and particularity are both core values in Schleiermacher's ethics, and in his later work he tries to carve a clear space for each.

But what does the Romantic Schleiermacher offer in place of the stern ethics of duty? Here his ethics of individuality begins to sound like a (19)60s love-in: "Love, you power of attraction in the world! No individual life and no formation is possible without you, without you everything must melt into a crude homogeneous mass! . . . For us you are the alpha and omega" (*KGA* I.3, 22). And because Kantians fail to appreciate individuality, they are also unable to grasp the significance of the primal force of love, on which all else depends: "for them law and duty, uniform action and justice are sufficient" (*KGA* I.3, 22).

An additional theme touched on in the *Monologues* that takes on a central role in Schleiermacher's later ethics is what he calls "the twofold vocation of human beings on earth" (*KGA* I.3, 19). Beginning in his 1812–13 lectures, Schleiermacher repeatedly characterizes ethics as the historical process by which nature becomes the organ and symbol of reason

¹⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 12.

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(see, e.g., *WA* II, 254, 259, 561–3). In the *Monologues*, he refers to this organizing and symbolizing activity as the two ways by means of which humanity comes into possession of “its great body,” the material world – “nurturing this body in order to sharpen its organs, or mimetically and artistically forming it into the imprint of reason and mind” (*KGA* I.3, 11).¹⁸

Grundlinien einer Kritik der bisherigen Sittenlehre

Schleiermacher’s next major work in ethics is *Outlines of a Critique of Previous Doctrines of Ethics*, which he published in 1803, after the intense flame of the Berlin Romantic group had already begun to fade and he had accepted a position as court preacher in the small town of Stolpe, near the border of Poland. His longest (346 pp.) work thus far, its style is also radically different from the Berlin Romantic writings. Now the same author who only ten years earlier had criticized the *Buchstabenmenschen* for their addiction to theory himself expresses a strong craving for system: “the real to which ethics relates must be presented . . . as a system” (*WA* I, 250). Similarly, the announced critique of previous doctrines of ethics (which in effect serves as a foil to his own system of ethics) must have a “scientific form”: “for each actual science, as ethics after all wants to be and shall be, there is no other critique except that of scientific form [*wissenschaftliche Form*], and the presentation of such a critique will be attempted here” (*WA* I, 10).

The conceptual structures by means of which Schleiermacher here investigates previous ethical theories definitely set the tone for his own future work in ethics. He is now firmly convinced that there are three formal ethical concepts, “namely, the concepts of duties, virtues, and of goods” (*WA* I, 128) and that in a systematic ethical theory all three will be recognized as “equally necessary” (*WA* I, 74; see also 312). Also, his own preference for an ethics that is not *beschränkend* (limiting, restrictive) but rather *hervorbringend* (productive, creative, bringing forth) becomes evident. Ethics is not simply about constraining desires, but is rather a process through which “totally unique and new” creations are brought forth into the world (*WA* I, 54). And, again, ethical theory needs to find a way to do justice to both universality and particularity: “the call of

¹⁸ Cf. Horace Leland Friess, *Schleiermacher’s Soliloquies: An English Translation of the Monologen, with a Critical Introduction and Appendix* (Chicago: Open Court, 1926), p. 146. See also Birkner, *Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre*, p. 39; and John P. Crossley, Jr., “The Ethical Impulse in Schleiermacher’s Early Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17 (1989): 12.

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Schleiermacher's earlier [*Monologues*] to bring the universal and the individual together without dominating or subordinating is extended to the *Critique* as a task for the future."¹⁹ Finally, Plato and Spinoza once again stand out as Schleiermacher's own heroes in the history of ethics (see, e.g. *WA* I, 68–9), and much of the sting of the *Critique* is aimed at Kant and Fichte. Kant's doctrine of ethics, for instance, is declared to be "throughout more juridical than ethical, and has throughout the look and all the marks of a social legislation" (*WA* I, 65). And Fichte's doctrine of ethics also has "actually the same character; with Kant it only emerges more strongly" (*WA* I, 65).

Brouillon zur Ethik

In 1804 Schleiermacher received his first academic appointment, joining the theology faculty at his alma mater, the University of Halle. His next major work in ethics, and the one that immediately precedes the lectures translated below, is *Outline for Ethics*, a set of lectures delivered in the winter semester of 1805–6, during his second year at Halle.²⁰

The *Outline for Ethics* has been described as "the first attempt at an explicit and positive presentation of Schleiermacher's systematic conception of ethics."²¹ However, many aspects of this conception were strongly hinted at in earlier works as well – e.g. Schleiermacher's conviction that an adequate ethical theory requires a pluralistic integration of doctrines of good, virtue, and duty, rather than the one-sided programs favored by both ancient and modern theorists. But one key theme that emerges more clearly at this point in his writing career is the view that ethical theory properly conceived concerns not the philosophical intrusion of formal, ahistorical principles of conduct into human life, but rather the broad-based normative study of human life (individually as well as collectively and institutionally; locally as well as globally) as it actually develops

¹⁹ John Wallhauser, "Schleiermacher's Critique of Ethical Reason: Toward a Systematic Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17 (1989): 29. See also *WA* I, 111–12.

²⁰ *WA* II also contains a shorter text (39 pp.) entitled *Tugendlehre 1804/05* – Schleiermacher's ethics lectures from the winter semester of 1804–5 (see p. xiii). This text presents only a part of the larger system outlined in the *Brouillon*.

²¹ Eilert Herms, "'Beseelung der Natur durch die Vernunft': Eine Untersuchung der Einleitung zu Schleiermachers Ethikvorlesung von 1805/06," *Archivio di filosofia* 52 (1984): 50. See also Herms's earlier book, *Herkunft, Entfaltung und erste Gestalt des Systems der Wissenschaft bei Schleiermacher* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1974), esp. pp. 168–75, where the 1803 *Grundlinien* is described as Schleiermacher's key work before his move to Halle in 1804.

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through history. By 1805, Schleiermacher is definitely an advocate of a strongly anti-formalist program in ethics, one concerned more with the *is* than the *ought* of human life.

In the *Brouillon zur Ethik*, this more material or immanent conception of ethics occurs in the opening lecture, where Schleiermacher bluntly asserts that “ethics is the science of history, that is to say, the science of intelligence as appearance” (*WA* II, 80; see also 88). In the later lectures translated below this theme is developed further in a variety of ways – for instance, in the dual claims that “the study of history provides the illustrations [*Bilderbuch*] to ethics, while the doctrine of morals provides the formulae [*Formelbuch*] for the study of history” (*WA* II, 549); and “the doctrine of morals contains the beginnings of reason, in which, in just the same way, the manifestations of reason are rooted, the whole course of which goes to form history in the widest scope of the term” (*WA* II, 536). The intent is thus not to collapse ethics into history, to re-read history moralistically, or to construe moral norms as mere shifting historical products. Rather, according to Schleiermacher’s mature conception of ethics, the task of ethical theory is to “supply the categories of understanding for human-historical life”;²² while recognizing that there is always an ineliminable gap between theoretical categories and real life.

For many readers, this more material, immanent conception of ethics naturally brings to mind Hegel’s philosophy, particularly its infamous notion of “reason in history” – namely, the claim that “the only thought which philosophy brings with it [to the study of history] is the simple idea of reason – the idea that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process.”²³ Like Hegel, the mature Schleiermacher advocates a concrete ethics of *Sittlichkeit* over an abstract morality of *Moralität*; a philosophical ethics committed to “the comprehension of the present and the actual, not the setting up of a *world beyond* which exists God knows where.”²⁴

Nevertheless, there is at least one basic difference between Schleiermacher’s and Hegel’s ethics. Schleiermacher’s ethics, so to speak, contains

²² Birkner, *Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre*, p. 37.

²³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 27.

²⁴ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 20. See particularly §135 on the *Sittlichkeit/Moralität* distinction.

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more normative space – there still remains an *ought* along with the *is*. For Schleiermacher (but not for Hegel), the job of ethical theory is

to draw the image of a humanity as it should be; an image that when it is first suggested in history is out of focus and imperfect. Ethics is thus at the same time image and corrective of reality. As a theory of the history of that which is still incomplete but also situated on the right path, it stands between the positions of Kant and Hegel.²⁵

One prominent example of the greater normative space in Schleiermacher's ethics is that he would never endorse Hegel's notorious claim that "the state is the actuality of the ethical idea [*die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee*]." ²⁶ On the contrary, Schleiermacher reminds readers in his 1812–13 *Lectures* that one of the chief defects of the ancients was their view that the state "encompassed the whole of the ethical process" (*WA* II, 337; see also 555). On Schleiermacher's view, the proper tracking of "the ensoul-ing [*Beseelung*] of human nature through reason" (*WA* II, 87) requires a plurality of autonomous cultural and institutional spheres.

Schleiermacher's mature ethics

The works considered thus far may be grouped together as Schleiermacher's early works in ethics. (He was only in his mid-thirties when he began delivering the *Brouillon* lectures in 1805.) But the following year marks another key shift in Schleiermacher's life. In fall 1806 Napoleon's troops occupied Halle; in October the university was shut down. In 1807 Schleiermacher moved back to Berlin, where he soon began to take a

²⁵ Scholtz, *Die Philosophie Schleiermachers*, p. 121. See also ch. 2 ("Ethik als Theorie der modernen Kultur. Mit vergleichendem Blick auf Hegel") of Scholtz's *Ethik und Hermeneutik*.

²⁶ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 257. See also §§ 258, 260. Although Schleiermacher was instrumental in bringing Hegel to the University of Berlin, where they were colleagues from 1818 until Hegel's death in 1831, their relationship was often acrimonious. However, their ongoing quarrel can at least be said to have contributed to one of the history of philosophy's more memorable put-downs. Commenting on Schleiermacher's conception of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence, Hegel wrote in 1822: "If religion grounds itself in a person only on the basis of feeling, then . . . a dog would be the best Christian, for it carries this feeling more intensely within itself and lives principally satisfied by a bone. A dog even has feelings of salvation when its hunger is satisfied by a bone" ("Vorrede zu Hinrichs Religionsphilosophie," in *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970], II, 42). For discussion, see Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 445–7, 498–502; Richard Crouter, "Hegel and Schleiermacher at Berlin: A Many-Sided Debate," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980): 18–43; and Jeffrey Hoover, "The Origin of the Conflict between Hegel and Schleiermacher at Berlin," *The Owl of Minerva* 20 (1988): 69–79.

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leading role in discussions for a new Prussian university. In 1808, he published *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense: With an Appendix Regarding a University Soon to be Established*, and as a result quickly became a key voice in the actual planning of the university.²⁷ In 1809 Schleiermacher was appointed professor of theology at the new university, as well as a member of the philosophical and historical sections of the Berlin Academy of Sciences. He retained both of these appointments until his death in 1834.

Dates and style of the lectures

The text below (here translated into English for the first time) consists of lectures delivered by Schleiermacher at the University of Berlin. The first half or so of the text definitely dates from the winter semester of 1812–13; the German editors assign a probable date of 1816–17 to most of the remaining material. Additionally, when Schleiermacher lectured on philosophical ethics again in 1824, 1827, and 1832 he re-used these earlier lecture notes, adding occasional new comments in the margins of his texts. These later comments appear in our text as footnotes.

Although Schleiermacher repeatedly announced his intentions to publish his mature ethical theory, this plan was never realized. None of the following lectures were published during his lifetime; indeed, they were not published in complete form until early in the twentieth century (in volume II of *WA*). The closest that Schleiermacher's contemporaries came to seeing a published form of his mature ethical theory were the six *Akademieabhandlungen* that he read before the Academy of Sciences between 1819 and 1830.²⁸ However, the Academy's *Yearbook* in which these Addresses were eventually published had a small readership, and

²⁷ For discussion, see Terence N. Tice and Edwina Lawler, "Dedicatory Preface," in Schleiermacher, *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*, trans. Terence N. Tice and Edwina Lawler (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), p. ii. The German text is reprinted in *KGA* I.6, 15–100. See also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 31–7.

²⁸ The six Addresses are reprinted in *WA* I, 347–494, and were originally published between 1820 and 1832. The most important one is "On the Difference between Natural Law and Moral Law" (*WA* I, 396–416; read 1825, published 1828), in which Schleiermacher argues that both types of law are fundamentally descriptive rather than prescriptive. In "On the Difference," Schleiermacher also reinterprets Kant's categorical imperative as a hypothetical imperative: "If you want to be rational, then act so" (*WA* I, 405).

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each Address is more an academic treatise dealing with a specific issue than a systematic presentation of a complete theory. In other words, the following *Lectures*, warts and all (they abound in cryptic formulations)²⁹ are extremely important documents: they are the closest we will ever get to a full picture of Schleiermacher's later ethical theory.

Basic concepts and themes in the lectures

Schleiermacher's mature ethics constitutes an ambitious effort to integrate many of his earlier intellectual influences in moral philosophy – e.g. Kant, ancient Greek (particularly Platonic) thought, early Romanticism, and Spinoza – as well as transformative experiences in his personal life such as the salon culture of Berlin. Because many of the key themes in his *Lectures* are in effect more detailed expositions of ideas first presented in earlier writings, much of what follows should sound familiar.

Ethics as a descriptive and historical science

First, ethics according to the mature Schleiermacher is more a descriptive science than a normative one. The task of ethics, he announces early in the Introduction, is “to encompass and document all truly human action” (*WA* II, 246). Granted, the word “truly” does imply *some* normative orientation (actions which are not “truly human” are not part of the proper purview of ethics), and we will try to get a clearer sense of the content of this normative dimension in a moment. But it is the enormous descriptive scope of his conception of ethics that first strikes the reader. Indeed, Schleiermacher regards it as a virtue of his approach that eventually “every empirical element [*alles Empirische*] will find its place” in his presentation of ethics (*WA* II, 274). On the other hand, Kant's “so-called pure doctrine of morals” is dismissed as “an empty thought” (*WA* II, 548). Kantian rationality, Schleiermacher warns in his first Introduction, posits an a priori ought as the characteristic feature of the ethical, “without concerning itself with what exists” (*WA* II, 246).

²⁹ In addition to the fact that these *Lectures* were not prepared for publication by their author, their very nature as lectures may explain part of their difficulty of comprehension. In a letter written when he first began lecturing on ethics at the University of Halle in 1804, Schleiermacher states: “You can imagine that I only note the main propositions and lecture freely for the rest of the time, and I will continue doing so” (letter to von Willich of 30 October 1804, as cited by Birkner, “Einleitung,” *Ethik 1812/13* [Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1981; rev. 2nd ed., 1990], p. xvi).

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Part of the normative content of ethics is hinted at in Schleiermacher's root conviction that ethics is "the action of reason" on nature (*WA* II, 541). "Truly human action," in other words, is to be understood as action that is guided by reason. In stressing the impact of reason on and within nature, Schleiermacher seeks to overcome what he sees as the objectionable gulf between "ought" and "is" in many previous ethical theories: "The propositions of ethics ought not . . . to be commands, whether conditional or unconditional, but inasmuch as they are laws, they must express the true action of reason upon nature" (*WA* II, 545). But reason of course cannot instantly act on all aspects of nature: it is, at best, a long and gradual process as recorded in human history. Ethics for the mature Schleiermacher is thus also defined as "the science of history" (*WA* II, 251). Insofar as rational human action is a subset of human behavior, the subject matter of ethics can be viewed as a subset of the larger subject matter of history.

Nature as organ and symbol of reason

Ethics is the study of the action of reason on nature, in the broadest sense of the term "nature." Reason acts on human nature (shaping our talents and capacities) via the process of what Schleiermacher calls "gymnastics," on organic nature via agriculture, and on inorganic nature by way of "mechanics" (*WA* II, 276). A further specification of this broad historical process is obtained in Schleiermacher's dictum that the natural world, when viewed from the perspective of ethics, is "the organ and symbol of reason" (*WA* II, 254). In its organizing function, reason is involved in forming or shaping nature in accordance with its own principles: "making the world moral." In the broadest sense, we are talking now about the activity of human culture and its transformative impact on the natural environment. This aspect of Schleiermacher's ethical theory is consonant with the basic spirit of much practical philosophy in the German idealist tradition: the primary task of ethics is to create a moral world; to bring the real closer to the ideal. In its symbolizing function, reason is involved in marking or signifying nature so that nature becomes a symbol of reason. Here the arts and sciences play crucial roles. And because the arts and sciences are themselves aspects of human culture, at bottom these organizing and symbolizing activities of reason "are merely two different aspects of the same thing" (*WA* II, 254; see also 564). Nature as organ of

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reason refers more to the formative process of reason as it is acting on nature, while nature as symbol of reason refers to the completed process. They are thus two sides of the same coin: “both functions are essentially bound up together in every complete act” (*WA* II, 293).

Doctrines of goods, virtue, and duties

As we saw earlier, in his normative ethics the mature Schleiermacher is committed to a pluralistic program that integrates doctrines of goods, virtue, and duties. None of these doctrines is reducible to the others, and each has a necessary role to play in any adequate theory of ethics. At the same time, the doctrine of goods is more overarching than the other two and thus has a certain priority over them. Only the idea of the highest good “can stand alone” – “the moral process finds its complete depiction” in this idea, while the doctrines of virtue and duties refer back to the doctrine of goods “and are incomplete in themselves” (*WA* II, 256). As used by Schleiermacher, the term “good” refers primarily to the end or goal of moral activity (the broadest and most ambitious sense of which would be the eventual union of reason and nature – “the making moral of the whole of earthly nature” [*WA* II, 547]); “virtue” to the power or force in human beings from which moral actions flow (“reason in the human individual” [*WA* II, 375], albeit reason which has also become disposition and skill [*WA* II, 378]); and “duty” to those principles of action necessary for the realization of the highest good. For Schleiermacher, the cardinal virtues are wisdom, love, prudence, and steadfastness (*WA* II, 379); while the four major divisions of duties are duties of right, duties of profession or vocation, duties of love, and duties of conscience (*WA* II, 412).

Universality and particularity

In addition to reason’s organizing and symbolizing activities, a second key distinction concerns what is universally like or identical, and what is individually unique or differentiating. With this feature of his theory Schleiermacher seeks to balance Kantian concerns with universality, fairness, and impartiality on the one hand with the Romantics’ stress on individuality, tradition, and local community on the other. Ethical activity concerns both that which has “validity for everyone” (*WA* II, 279) as well

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as the uniqueness of each human personality – “a personal sphere which is absolutely nontransferable” (*WA* II, 289). The attempt to do justice to the real demands of both moral universality *and* particularity constitutes one of the outstanding achievements of Schleiermacher’s later ethics. However, as was also the case with the organizing and symbolizing functions of reason, neither identity nor particularity stands entirely alone: “Particularity is not in another domain to identity; on the contrary they are both in the same one, so that in reality they are always interrelated, to a greater or lesser extent” (*WA* II, 286).

Four spheres of ethical activity

Within the extremely broad scope of reason’s action on nature, Schleiermacher highlights four specific spheres or provinces of ethical activity. Each sphere corresponds to a quadrant created by the crossing of reason’s two major antitheses or axes – the organizing/symbolizing axis and the universality/particularity axis. The four spheres are thus: (1) the organizing/universal quadrant, (2) the organizing/particular quadrant, (3) the symbolizing/universal quadrant, and (4) the symbolizing/particular quadrant. Corresponding to each of the four spheres are specific types of activity that help reason realize its domain-specific aims. For the organizing/universal sphere, he draws attention to economic activities of labor, commerce, and exchange, as regulated by basic principles of justice. Corresponding to the organizing/particular sphere are personal assets such as talents and property (particularly one’s home), as well as activities that further relationships in the private sphere such as friendship and hospitality. Activities pertaining specifically to the third sphere (symbolizing/universal) are language and science (in the traditional broad German *Wissenschaft* sense of the term: natural and social sciences, as well as humanities). And in the fourth sphere, the symbolizing/particular quadrant, he sees the activities of feeling, art, and religion as playing key roles.

Four types of moral institution and community

Finally, associated with each of the above four fields of moral praxis are domain-specific institutions and forms of community designed to promote reason’s different goals. Corresponding to the first sphere

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-00767-2 - Friedrich Schleiermacher: Lectures on Philosophical Ethics

Edited by Robert B. Louden

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(organizing/ universal) is the state;³⁰ to the second (organizing/ particular), free sociability; to the third (symbolizing/ universal), universities and research institutes; and to the fourth (symbolizing/ particular), the church.³¹ Each of these types of institution and community is to be understood as an autonomous and independent site of moral self-realization. Universities and churches, for instance, must remain free from state interference. And the intimate and informal modes of communication fostered in the salons of free sociability will die away as soon as one tries to organize such communities along bureaucratic or institutional lines.

Assessing Schleiermacher's ethics

We began by noting that many German scholars have singled out Schleiermacher's ethical theory as his most outstanding philosophical achievement. And one may hope that the above tour of his ethics provides some support for this conviction. But it should also come as no surprise to readers that his ethics, from the beginning, has generated an ample arsenal of criticisms. Although the extremely broad and descriptive swath cut by his ethics will come as a relief to those who feel that the insular battles of much modern ethical theory have resulted in an unfortunate disciplinary isolationism that has divorced philosophical analyses of ethics from those areas of life as well as scholarship that can bring content to the abstractions of theory, it is this same breadth of scope, when combined with a stubborn resistance to transcendental norms and their justification, that has led many critics to question the cogency of Schleiermacher's program. The result, or so say the critics, may be exemplary as an exercise in the philosophy of culture or philosophical sociology, but it does not pass

³⁰ Schleiermacher's placement of the state on the side of reason's move towards universality should not lead readers to infer that he envisages one world-state eventually replacing the present plurality of independent states. In the *Lectures* he writes: "Particularity in common is the basis of the state"; "if we posit the state as necessarily conditional upon national unity, we are also positing an essential plurality of states" (*WA* II, 336–7). Rather, it is shared, transnational principles of justice that will (hopefully) allow the plurality of states to coexist peacefully and collectively to make moral progress. For discussion, see Birkner, *Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre*, p. 42.

³¹ Here too (see previous note), the fact that Schleiermacher places the church on the particularity side of reason's activity should not lead us to infer that he sees no universalizing tendencies within religion. Birkner writes: "while a universal state and a universal language are unthinkable to Schleiermacher, matters stand differently with the idea of a universal religion and church" (*Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre*, p. 43). While Schleiermacher does not pursue this theme in any detail in the following *Lectures*, he does note at the very end that "the church is within the state but as something that transcends its boundaries" (*WA* II, 484 n.).

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muster as an adequate normative ethical theory. Somewhere within the myriad institutions, communities, and yearnings of *Bildung*, the task of justifying moral norms has been forgotten.³² Others, particularly those who like their philosophy straightforward and clear, will no doubt be put off by the overly programmatic, extremely abstract, and occasionally cryptic tone of these *Lectures*. And certainly Schleiermacher's overoptimism concerning reason's presence and influence in human life, not to mention his questionable assumption that reason's ultimate goal is complete mastery and domination over all of nature (attitudes which of course mark much of the practical philosophy of the modern and late modern periods), should be factored in to any critical assessment of his mature ethics.

But let us end on a positive note. Broadly speaking, Schleiermacher's ethical theory represents an under-explored and singular option within the amazingly rich and creative tradition of German Idealism – a tradition which itself is arguably “the most successful and comprehensive formulation and assessment of the nature and legitimacy of modernity.”³³ The strong and multifaceted pluralism of Schleiermacher's ethics – as evidenced not only in his attempt to integrate ancient Greek concerns with virtue and the good with modern conceptions of duty and justice, but also in his clear recognition of both the universal and individual dimensions of ethics and the related need for autonomous forms of moral institution and community, each of which plays a unique role in humanity's often tragic, sometimes comic efforts to create a moral world – should certainly speak to a contemporary audience that has grown weary of the reductive platitudes of academic ethical theory. On these and other points, Schleiermacher has much to teach us.

³² For examples of such criticism, see the references cited in Birkner, *Schleiermachers Christliche Sittenlehre*, pp. 46–7; and Scholtz, *Die Philosophie Schleiermachers*, pp. 115, 119–21.

³³ Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), p. 9. For general discussion of German Idealism, see Karl Ameriks, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).