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978-0-521-47399-6 - The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy

J. B. Schneewind

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This remarkable book is the most comprehensive study ever written of the history of moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its aim is to set Kant's still influential ethics in its historical context by showing in detail what the central questions in moral philosophy were for him and how he arrived at his own distinctive ethical views.

The book is organized into four main sections. In the first J. B. Schneewind discusses the dominant seventeenth-century view of morality, the natural law view. After sketching its earlier versions and some questions about them raised by Montaigne and Machiavelli, he presents the theories of Suarez, Grotius, Hobbes, Cumberland, Pufendorf, Locke, and Thomasius. The second section examines perfectionist ethics in the work of Lord Herbert of Cherbury and his Stoic predecessors, Descartes, the Cambridge Platonists, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz. In the third section, Schneewind discusses thinkers who explored the extent to which morality might keep its force without reliance on God. The philosophers considered include Gassendi, Bayle, the British moralists through Reid and Bentham, and de Sade. The fourth section considers Kant's more immediate predecessors, particularly the major German figures, Wolff and Crusius, and Rousseau. Schneewind then follows the development of Kant's own views up to the point at which he was first able to formulate the central position of his mature ethics: the claim that we are autonomous agents who impose morality on ourselves by legislating a formal practical principle. In an epilogue the author discusses Kant's view of his own historicity and of the aims of moral philosophy.

In its range, its analyses of many philosophers not usually considered in histories of ethics, and its discussions of the interweaving of religious and political concerns with moral philosophy, this is an unprecedented account of the developments that led up to Kant's ethics. Extensive quotations allow the reader to understand the philosophy through the vocabularies that the philosophers themselves used.

J. B. Schneewind has written a history of modern ethics that will be essential reading not only for students of moral philosophy and religious thought but also for all those interested in the history of philosophy, the history of political theory, and European intellectual history.

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The invention of autonomy

A history of modern moral philosophy

J. B. SCHNEEWIND

Johns Hopkins University



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For
Sarah Rachel Hannah

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Preface

I started on the work that led to this book because there were many aspects of Kant's moral philosophy that I could not understand. I thought that I would have a better chance of understanding them if I knew what questions Kant believed he had to answer when he began considering the subject. In earlier work on Sidgwick, I had found some help in history. I came to think that the history of moral philosophy is not a seamless carpet stretching uninterruptedly from Socrates to us. I thought I could locate a point in that history of which it made sense to say: here is a largely new set of issues from which there developed the specific problems that Sidgwick addressed. Sidgwick seemed more comprehensible to me when I knew what he was trying to do in his philosophizing. I thought there must be counterparts for Kant. This book comes from my attempt to find them.

In 1976 I read Josef Schmucker's *Die Ursprünge der Ethik Kants*. Although published in 1961 it had not then – it has not yet – been reviewed in English. Schmucker supersedes almost all previous work on the origins of Kant's ethics. I found his studies of the ethics of Wolff and Crusius a revelation, and I remain greatly indebted to his book. But even he did not answer all my questions. He deliberately said little or nothing about what led up to the work of the moral philosophers whose influence Kant acknowledged. He also left me unclear about the rationales for the basic differences among these philosophers. Much as I learned from him, I wanted more than he provided.

When in 1981 I was able to begin work on this project, I had no idea of how far back I would have to go or how widely I would have to range in order to think that I had found accounts of Kant's questions that illuminated his answers. It was clear from the start that I would have to study a large number of philosophers about whom many commentators had already written. I might not have undertaken the project if I had immediately realized how many philosophers I would need to discuss. But by the time I had developed an outline for the book, and had recognized the rashness of the plan, it seemed too late to stop. I

have tried to learn enough from the work of experts to keep serious errors out of my own remarks on their subjects; but I am sure that there are many points at which they will see that I have failed.

Hobbes says that it is often with fraudulent design that men “stick their corrupt Doctrine with the Cloves of other men’s wit.” There are a great many quotations in what follows, but not, I hope, for the reason Hobbes gives. They are meant to provide evidence for my accounts of the philosophers I discuss and also to give the reader some sense of the language in which they expressed themselves. We need to avoid describing past thought exclusively in our own terms. We should try not only to situate it in the intellectual, social, political, and religious contexts of which its creators were aware, but also to understand it through the vocabularies that they themselves used or could have used. Both efforts are needed if we are to see past thought as its creators and readers would have seen it. I would like to have done more than I have to locate the moral philosophies of Kant and his predecessors in the practical problems that gave them their urgency. To have said more, however, would have lengthened an already long volume and exposed even more of my ignorance.

The reasons for trying to see the past in its distinctive specificity are philosophical as well as historiographical. Great moral philosophy does not come primarily from concerns arising within philosophy itself. It comes from engagement with serious problems about personal, social, political, and religious life. Since these problems change, we need to see the contexts of the moral philosophy of the past as well as its arguments in order to understand fully why it developed as it did. Once we see how such changes have affected our predecessors, we may hope to become clear about similar considerations affecting ourselves. Awareness of the historicity of what we take to be our own central issues gives us a critical hold on them that we cannot get in any other way.

I planned from the beginning to make Kant the focal point of this study because I thought, as I still do, that his conception of morality as autonomy provides a better place to start working out a contemporary philosophical understanding of morality than anything we can get from other past philosophers. Kant has some particular moral convictions that I find repugnant, but I think that they do not pose difficulties of principle for using his insights as a starting point. Some of his theoretical views about morality are much more problematic. These, it now seems to me, are often part of his response to inherited issues that need not concern us. Historical study thus helps us to disentangle from his overall position what we can use to move forward.

Leibniz somewhere says that we might compare a perfect being to “a learned author who includes the greatest number of truths in the smallest possible volume.” Readers of this volume will rightly think me far

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from being such an exemplary author. I have tried to be accurate and concise; but I am painfully aware of how far short I come of anything like the Leibnizian ideal. Writing the book has given me, I think, a better understanding of Kant's theory and of what we might make of it today. I hope that readers, too, will find the history illuminating. Perhaps some of them will even be tempted into joining the now happily growing number of those who have tried to increase our knowledge of the past of moral philosophy. The most any one author can do is to make some small improvements in our grasp of the thought of single thinkers and of the broader scenes in which they worked. The task is large, and more help would be welcome.

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One of the pleasures of studying the history of thought is the sense one has of taking part in a long cooperative endeavor. To the textual editors, commentators, and previous historians without whose work I could not even have begun, I can offer only the thanks of footnote and bibliography. To the institutions, friends, and colleagues who have helped me over the years I can, happily, make more personal acknowledgment.

The first seventeen chapters were drafted in 1992–3, at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford. The Center, its expert staff, and the other fellows, provided an ideal environment for such work. My stay there was made possible by financial assistance from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and by a sabbatical leave from Johns Hopkins University. I am most grateful for their generosity. I should also like to thank the Stanford University Library for its courtesy to a visitor, and the staff of its Rare Book Room for its skillful assistance.

The remaining chapters were drafted in 1994 during time made available by Johns Hopkins. Deans Matthew Crenson and Stephen Knapp were generous with their support, as Deans Lloyd Armstrong and George Fisher had been earlier. I am grateful to them for continuing the Hopkins tradition of encouraging research. The Hopkins Library has been a great help throughout my work.

I began trying out some ideas about Kant's development in 1983 at a Summer Institute sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since then I have lectured on the history of ethics at many colleges, universities, and conferences. Of particular importance for me were series of talks I was asked to give at Notre Dame University, the University of Virginia, the University of Pittsburgh, San Diego University, and Princeton University. Daniel Garber's NEH Summer Institute in 1988 and Wade Robison's in 1990 made me think in more synoptic ways than I had previously done about the history I was studying. The 1987 Kant Conference in Sigriswill, organized by Ottfried Höffe, and the Pufendorf Conference in Göttingen in 1989, directed by Istvan Hont

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and Hans-Erich Bödecker, enabled me to discuss common interests with scholars I would otherwise never have met. From them and from audiences and friends on all of these occasions I learned a great deal; their help in shaping both my ideas and the presentation of them was invaluable. Many of my recent publications resulted from the lectures given for these meetings; and I have shamelessly plundered these writings for the present work, using, without specific acknowledgment, ideas, phrasing, and whole pages from various essays, which I list in the bibliography.

As always I have learned much from students. Undergraduates and graduates at Johns Hopkins have listened to and discussed endless versions of much of what I present here. Whether they knew it or not, they were forcing me to be clearer and more precise than I would have been without them. To three Hopkins students I owe particular thanks. Chris Grau commented insightfully on a number of the chapters and helped with bibliographical matters. Carolyn McConnell worked on the bibliography of primary sources. I am especially grateful to Natalie Brender, whose discussions of many of my chapters have been un-failingly helpful, and whose expert work over the past few years on bibliography and other research matters has been of immeasurable assistance.

Students elsewhere have also been most helpful. My thanks go to Jeffrey Stout for enabling me to teach a seminar on the history of ethics in the Department of Religions at Princeton in 1985, and to John Cooper for inviting me to give another seminar on the subject for the Princeton Philosophy Department in 1992. Members of both seminars provided useful criticism. The participants in a 1992 Summer Seminar funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities worked with me in assessing what became the basic plan of the book, and their criticisms and suggestions helped to shape its content.

So many colleagues and friends have discussed issues in the history of ethics with me, over so long a period, that I cannot hope to list them all. David Sachs died before he could see most of this work, but his comments on some of my earlier papers were always acute and – even when devastating – constructive and encouraging. John Cooper listened patiently, during our year together at the Center, to my worries about what I was writing; he spent much time then and has spent more since then giving me the benefit of his unparalleled knowledge of ancient thought and his great philosophical acumen. Discussions with Richard Rorty of his forceful challenges to Kantianism and to systematic moral philosophy generally have long helped me in rethinking my approach to their history. John Rawls's work, and his encouragement, have been an inspiration to me for many years. Robert Adams, Karl Ameriks, Rüdiger Bittner, Charlotte Brown, Edwin Curley, Stephen

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I can find no words adequate to thank Elizabeth Schneewind for her support while I worked on the book, and for all else.

J. B. Schneewind

A note on references and abbreviations

The first bibliography, Sources, lists material published prior to 1800. It includes a number of early histories of moral philosophy as well as the works of the authors who are my main concern. When I cite any of these works, I use the author's name if there is only one work listed, a short title of the work, or one of the abbreviations listed here. Quotations from anthologies, which are also gathered under Sources, following the primary authors, are similarly identified by indicating the editor's name and the page number.

Citations from later commentators and historians are identified in all cases by author and date. The works I refer to are listed in the second bibliography, Commentary. Occasionally I refer to a modern work just once and incidentally; in these cases bibliographical details are given only in the citation.

- DJBP Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace (De Jure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres)*. Trans. Francis W. Kelsey. Oxford, 1925.
- DJN Samuel Pufendorf, *On the Law of Nature and Nations (1672)*. Trans. C. H. Oldfather and W. A. Oldfather. Oxford, 1934.
- DJP Hugo Grotius, *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty (De Jure Praedae Commentarius) (1604)*. Trans. Gwladys L. Williams and Walter H. Zeydel. Oxford, 1950.
- ECHU John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding (1689)*. Ed. Peter Nidditch. Oxford, 1979.
- LCCorr Samuel Clarke and G. W. F. Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*. Ed. H. G. Alexander. Manchester, 1944.
- LE Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*. Ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind. Trans. Peter Heath. Cambridge, 1997.
- MM Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge, 1991.

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- ST* St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York, 1947.
- TP* Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*. Trans. and ed. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote. Cambridge, 1992.