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# 1

# Introduction: virtue and morality

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No branch of philosophy has been more influenced by serious consideration of ancient writings in the past quarter of a century than has moral philosophy – or 'ethics', as it is often now called (a change in nomenclature which is itself a sign of that influence). This has made it more difficult to delineate helpful contrasts between ancient and modern moral philosophy. Had one set out to write an overview of ancient ethics some twenty years ago, it would have been relatively easy to contrast the sorts of issue which concerned ancient writers with those to be found in contemporary discussion. Whereas modern moral philosophers were still largely wrestling with the competing merits of utilitarian and 'deontological' accounts of moral action, the key notions in ancient ethics were rather those of virtue and *eudaimonia* – and although '*eudaimonia*' has standardly been translated by 'happiness', it plays a very different role in ancient ethics from that given to happiness by utilitarians. For the ancients, to give an account of *eudaimonia* was to specify what made a life valuable – and, at least generally, the accounts they offered were far removed from the sort of reductive theories offered by utilitarians in terms of pleasure and pain or the satisfaction of people's desires.[1] More generally, whilst modern moral philosophers focused on the question of how to determine the right action in any given circumstance, the ancients were primarily concerned with issues of character and the evaluation of a person's life considered as a whole.[2]

Ethics is by no means the only area of philosophy in which contemporary

[1] Epicurus is exceptional in this respect. Although he seems to accept the status of *eudaimonia* as the final end, he does attempt to provide a hedonistic account of what it is to be happy. In this, he is less radical than the Cyrenaics, who maintain hedonism whilst denying that happiness is the final end. For discussions of the difficulties which are occasioned by the combination of eudaimonism and hedonism, see Mitsis [760], Annas [71], ch. 16, Striker [772] and Irwin [735].

[2] This point is frequently made: see, for instance, Williams [70] and Annas [71].



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philosophers have looked back to the work of the ancients, but if recent interest in ancient epistemology and psychology has been encouraged by a reaction against Cartesian assumptions about knowledge and the mind, interest in ancient ethical theories has been in large part the result of a reaction against broadly Humean assumptions about moral psychology and the nature of evaluative judgements. Thus, if it is thought obvious that one's evaluative beliefs are not capable of truth, then the ancient concern to achieve ethical knowledge will seem to rest on a straightforward misunderstanding of the nature of the moral philosopher's subject-matter. Again, if one takes for granted that one's evaluative beliefs are motivationally inert – that whatever beliefs the agent has, it is an open question how he will be motivated to act – then the moral psychology to be found in ancient writings will seem decidedly peculiar. As these Humean assumptions began to be challenged, however, ancient ethical writings became attractive sources for those who wished to see what form a secular moral theory might take when it did not suppose that one's evaluative beliefs could neither motivate action nor be assessed for truth.

As a result of this, whilst one can discern obvious differences between ancient ethics and moral philosophy as it was generally practised twenty years ago, it has become more difficult to draw usefully broad distinctions between ancient and contemporary moral philosophy. Indeed, one construal of the effect of the influence of ancient ethics on contemporary philosophy might be that it has encouraged a flight from 'moral philosophy' altogether – if by that one means the philosophical investigation of moral reasons. Some philosophers have argued that ancient ethical theories are so different from the main traditions of moral philosophy that it is misleading to look to them for views about morality since, for better or worse, the ancients in fact lacked the very notion of morality, that is, of specifically moral reasons for action. Thus, in her paper 'Modern moral philosophy', published in 1958, Miss Anscombe argued that if one wishes to elucidate the 'modern way of talking about "moral" goodness, obligation etc.', one cannot go back to Aristotle, since, whilst he is happy to talk about blame, he does not distinguish a species of moral blame. Indeed, 'if someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about "moral" such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don't come together in a proper bite'.[3]

[3] Anscombe [933], 2. She does not regard this as a defect in Aristotle, since she recommends abandoning the notion of morality altogether: 'the concepts of obligation and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought", ought to be

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More recently, a more generalised version of this concern has been expressed by Bernard Williams – a philosopher who has himself recommended abandoning the notion of morality.[4] Thus, in a brief survey of ancient philosophy, Williams contrasts Greek ethical thought with 'current concerns' and 'the moral inheritance of the Christian world'. The former

> takes as central and primary questions of character, and of how moral considerations are grounded in human nature: it asks what life it is rational for the individual to live. It makes no use of a blank moral imperative. In fact – though we have used the word 'moral' quite often for the sake of convenience – this system of ideas basically lacks the concept of *morality* altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand . . . Relatedly, there is not a rift between a world of public 'moral rules' and of private personal ideals: the questions of how one's relations to others are to be regulated, both in the context of society at large and more privately, are not detached from questions about the kind of life it is worth living, and of what it is worth having or caring for.[5]

Like Miss Anscombe, Williams regards this absence of a distinctive notion of morality as an advantage: it is a respect in which – as with its having no need of God – 'the ethical thought of the Greeks was not only different from most modern thought, particularly modern thought influenced by Christianity, but was also in much better shape'.[6]

Now, the force and plausibility of the claim that the ancient writers lacked the notion of morality depends, of course, on quite what one takes that notion to be. Certainly, there is no analogue in the ancient philosophical texts for Kant's way of distinguishing moral requirements as universalisable maxims, for instance, and no support for the idea that one might derive moral reasons from divine edict. If one thinks that only some of the reasons for action are moral reasons, and that those reasons must be distinguishable by reference to some criterion whose nature can be understood by someone

jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it' (p. 26). She makes the further claim that 'it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy': 'that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking' (p. 26). There are certainly many contemporary moral philosophers who would maintain that the moral psychology one finds in Aristotle comes considerably closer to adequacy than that which was to be found in the moral philosophy about which Anscombe was complaining.

[4] See his [979], ch. 10. Surprisingly, although Williams there cites Anscombe as targeting 'the moral *ought*' (p. 223, n.18) he makes no reference back to Anscombe's paper in his discussion of the Greeks – but the similarity of concern is clear enough. [5] Williams [70], 251. [6] *Ibid.*, 251.

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who does not already have a grasp on the notion of morality, then it will not be denied that the ancients lacked the idea of a distinctively moral reason for action. Anscombe indeed links the notion of a moral obligation to a 'law conception of ethics', and maintains that in continuing to make use of it once that conception has been renounced, philosophers maintained 'the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one'.[7] If this were right, then it would indeed not be possible to find in ancient texts – except, possibly, those of the Stoics – any elucidation of what it is to be a moral agent, that is, an agent whose actions are (properly) motivated by moral reasons.[8] This characterisation of a moral reason is not one which is immediately compelling, however. What makes it dubious is precisely that even those who do not accept that there are moral rules, whether or not of a divine provenance, find it natural to distinguish between moral and immoral actions, as between moral and immoral agents. At least before engaging in philosophical reflection, it seems perfectly intelligible to deny that the proponent of rules of behaviour provides a satisfactory account of moral reasons – that is, to maintain that he fails to delineate how one ought morally to act – and if that is genuinely intelligible, then the notion of morality is independent of the notion of a moral law.[9]

Williams' characterisation of the notion of a moral reason is more difficult to assess precisely because it is more vague – and so, of course, his thesis that the ancients lacked the concept of morality is correspondingly more difficult to judge. Taking 'moral reason' to have the sense of a reason which is different in kind – even *vitally* so – from reasons of other kinds clearly will not do, since one could have a culture which failed to recognise moral reasons, but which did recognise aesthetic reasons and took these to be vitally different from reasons of other kinds – and one should not be forced to think of such a culture as possessing the notion of a moral reason just because of this. There has to be more content to the notion of a moral reason than just that it is vitally different from reasons of other kinds (whatever, indeed, that quite means).[10] Unless we can provide some substantive characterisation of what

[7] [933], 6.

[8] So, the Stoics did maintain that there are natural laws – for the importance of this innovation in the theory of natural justice see Striker [66] and Annas [71], 302 f.

[9] This is not intended as a knock-down argument against Miss Anscombe's thesis. For she does not deny that such a claim will seem intelligible, merely that it is indeed so. That it *does* seem so provides strong prima facie evidence that it is – but an inability to characterise, even if not to define, what it is for a reason to be a moral reason would count in her favour here.

[10] Annas in her [71] argues that 'in any intuitive understanding of morality', 'the ancient theories are not theories of some alien mode of thought, but theories of morality, in the same sense that Kant's and Mill's theories are' (p. 452). In her discussion of Williams, she takes the point of distinguishing moral from non-moral

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makes a reason a moral reason, Williams' thesis that the ancients lacked the notion of a moral reason will be seen to be too vacuous to be of interest.[11] The problem here is that the more precise the sense one gives to the notion of a moral reason, the more difficulty there will be in finding such reasons recognised in the ancient texts – but, equally, the less plausible it will be to maintain that in failing to recognise reasons so defined, the ancients thereby lacked the concept of a moral reason altogether.

As we have seen, even Williams himself in the passage cited above acknowledges that, despite his denial that the ancients did distinguish moral reasons as a class, he had nevertheless found it convenient to discuss their ethical theories in terms of views about morality. That this was not just a matter of laziness can be seen by considering how naturally the term is employed in that discussion. Thus, earlier in his piece, Williams had contrasted the defence of justice offered by Glaucon and Adeimantus in book II of the *Republic* with that provided by Plato in the rest of the work. According to the former, 'morality is represented as a device for promoting egoistic satisfactions which could in principle occur without it, but which are as a matter of fact unlikely to do so because of everyone's weak position in an amoral state of nature'.[12] On the instrumentalist account, the reason people

reasons to be that the former 'have a special place in our deliberations': 'moral reasons are special just because of this place they have in our deliberations: they override other kinds of reason just because of the kind of reason they are' (p. 121). In this respect, as she points out, reasons of virtue, as understood by ancient writers, are entirely similar to moral reasons – 'all ancient theories think the same way about the fact that the action is cowardly: this is a consideration which is not just weighed up against the profit and time expended, but which sweeps them aside; and to think otherwise is to misconstrue what cowardice is' (pp. 121–2). It is important to note that whilst this is entirely correct – and is indeed sufficient to dispose of Williams' claim that the ancients did not possess the notion of a moral reason because they did not recognise a class of reasons which were vitally different from other kinds – it is not in itself sufficient to show that the ancients did have the notion of a moral reason, precisely because of the inadequacy of Williams' characterisation of a moral reason here. Annas herself provides further reasons for her claim that the ancients are concerned with morality: see [71], 122–31 and ch. 22.

[11] Irwin, who also takes issue with Williams over the attribution of the notion of morality to Aristotle, and so who also has to give some reasonably determinate sense to the claim that the ancients lacked the notion, culls three theses from Williams [979] in an attempt to see what Williams might think to be at stake: that moral obligation is concerned with action that 'must be in the agent's power'; that moral obligations cannot conflict 'ultimately, really or at the end of the line'; and that they are inescapable. As Irwin points out, however, there is a suspicion that Williams identifies that notion of morality too closely with the Kantian version of it: see [505], 117. It would, of course, be less interesting to discover that the ancients did not share Kant's particular conception of a moral reason. I do not take up the question of responsibility here – although see Sauvé Meyer's chapter below.

[12] [70], 245.

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have for performing actions which are directly in the interests of other people is that a general practice of so acting will in fact serve the interests of all the participants. Williams quite rightly sees Plato's response to this as one which is concerned to attack the contingency of the link between acting self-interestedly and acting justly. Glaucon and Adeimantus – and, indeed, Thrasymachus in book I – assume that what is in an agent's own interest can, and should, be fully characterised independently of considerations of justice, so that these latter considerations will be in competition with the agent's own interests unless they can be shown to serve those interests. Whilst Thrasymachus denied that they could be shown to do this, and so affirmed what he claimed to be the irrationality of acting justly, Glaucon and Adeimantus allow that, as the world is, people are better off by acting justly, as this will in fact secure their interests better than acting unjustly. Plato, in contrast, seeks to show that being a just person, and thus someone who will perform just actions because they are just, is itself something which it is in one's interests to be – in which case, considerations of justice will no longer even in principle be in competition with reasons of self-interest. An agent who is not disposed to act justly will thereby not be an agent who leads a fully valuable life, and it cannot be properly self-interested to lead a life which is less valuable than it might be.

Williams comments:

> It has been said by Kantian critics that Platonic morality is egoistic, in a sense incompatible with real morality. This misses the point. It is formally egoistic, in the sense that it supposes that it has to show that each man has good reason to act morally, and that the good reason has to appeal to him in terms of something about himself, how and what he will be if he is a man of that sort of character. But it is not egoistic in the sense of trying to show that morality serves some set of individual satisfactions which are well defined antecedently to it. The aim was not, given already an account of the self and its satisfactions, to show how morality (luckily) fitted them; it was to give an account of the self into which morality fitted.[13]

We can leave to one side the question of how accurately Williams here captures the Platonic aim – worries over this would perhaps focus, for instance, on whether it is entirely happy for him to cast it in terms of providing a moralised account of the *self* – what is of present concern is just the propriety of his construing the argument of the *Republic* as being about morality at all. If the terms of Williams' construal of that argument are used merely for the sake of convenience, and so it is at best misleading to describe Plato as having views about morality, then the defence of Plato against the

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 246.

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Kantian critics will be meretricious: instead of taking Plato to provide an account of the relation between morality and the self which is not in fact vulnerable to the Kantian charge of egoism, one should rather say that since we can find in the *Republic* no attempt to show how moral reasons might rationally motivate an agent, the Kantian charge was simply misdirected. For Williams' defence of Plato to be appropriate, there must be a notion of morality, of what it is for a reason or an action or an agent or a practice or whatever to be a moral reason etc., which is both non-technical and yet sufficiently determinate to be contrasted with other kinds of reason or agent, and which one can employ when reading, for instance, both the argument of the *Republic* and the practical philosophy of Kant.[14] If there is no such notion, then, whatever the convenience of using the term 'moral' when interpreting the writings of the ancients, the distorting effect of doing so will make its use simply improper.

Should Williams, then, have followed his theoretical instincts and rewritten his account of the argument of the *Republic*, removing the now, for him, inconvenient references to morality? The official topic of the dialogue, after all, is that of being *dikaios*, a term which is traditionally translated by 'just' rather than 'moral'.[15] Perhaps we should do best to minimise the risk of distortion, take Plato's concern in the *Republic* simply to be that of warranting being a *dikaios* agent, and forget about trying to match this with whatever concerns others have expressed using the terminology of morality. Here, however, the very naturalness of Williams' construal of the *Republic*'s challenge as being to show how it can be rational to act morally, given that such action is directly motivated by concern for other people's interests and not one's own, should make one hesitate before imposing such interpretative limitations.

That it is natural to construe it in this way does not, of course, follow simply from the contrast between reasons of *dikaiosunē* and reasons of self-interest: reasons cannot be straightforwardly divided into those which derive from self-interest and those which come from considerations of

[14] It might have been open to Williams to claim that whilst Plato does not have the notion of morality, nevertheless his discussion of justice (*dikaiosunē*) contains the materials which we could use in discussions of the nature of morality: this would not sit happily, however, with his contention that Plato's *aim* is to place morality within his account of the self. It may be, however, that a more carefully framed discussion might have avoided inconsistency here.

[15] Although note that a recent translation – Waterfield [324] – does in fact translate it as 'moral' and the cognate noun, *dikaiosunē*, as 'morality'. In a translation, this is over-bold: the reader should be aware that taking Plato's concern to be with the justification of morality is, even if correct, a matter of some interpretation and not just a matter of seeing it on the page.

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morality. Thus, a pianist who practises to perfect his technique need not be doing this for either of those kinds of reason, but may simply regard the acquisition of the ability to perform music without technical impediments as a valuable goal in its own right. That the requirements of *dikaiosunē* may conflict with those of self-interest is not in itself sufficient to show that those requirements can properly be taken to be moral requirements. Nevertheless, whilst aesthetic reasons or perfectionist aims could sometimes be taken to conflict with considerations of self-interest (at least given a restricted notion of self-interest of the kind which motivates the puzzlement about the rationality of moral action and which it is part of the point of the *Republic* to challenge), someone who fails to be motivated by such reasons will not thereby be characterisable as selfish or egoistic in the way that someone who fails to recognise or be motivated by moral reasons will be. It is striking in this context that Thrasymachus in *Republic* I should find it natural to characterise justice, *dikaiosunē*, as 'what is in the interests of another' – the characterisation which sets the problem of how just action can be rational which the argument of the *Republic* is intended to solve. Nor is this characterisation simply a tendentious requirement of Thrasymachus' argument that to be just is to be stupid or weak. When Aristotle discusses the different types of *dikaiosunē* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) v.1, he describes the broadest kind as being 'complete excellence, not absolutely, but in relation to others': 'justice, alone of the excellences, is thought to be another's good, because it is related to others; for it does what is advantageous to another, either a ruler or a partner' (1130a2–3). Neither Plato nor Aristotle denies that to act justly is indeed to act in the interests of other people – their aim is rather to show how such action serves the agent's own interests as well.

It is partly in this link between justice – and hence virtue – and altruism that we can find the needed relation between the ethical concerns of the ancients and the interests of later moral philosophers – a relation which will vindicate Williams' discussion of Plato, despite his own theoretical protestations. This link is not sufficient by itself, however, since one cannot simply equate altruistic behaviour with behaviour which is motivated by moral reasons. For one thing, if someone acts against the moral reasons which obtain, then his action is wrong, but one can fail to act altruistically without acting badly. Whenever I can promote someone else's interests, I have reason to do so – and that reason will be an altruistic one – but it need not be wrong for me not to act accordingly. Further, someone can act altruistically without his action's being motivated by a moral reason, and so altruism is not by itself sufficient to capture the notion of a moral reason. Even a simple, and effective, concern for someone else's interests is not in

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itself sufficient to make an agent a moral agent: there is a space between being an entirely self-interested agent (an agent, that is, whose desires are all for his own well-being) and an agent whose actions are motivated by moral reasons. One can act on desires for the well-being of other people without thereby acting for a moral reason – or a requirement of virtue. Thus, a parent may have the desire that his child should flourish and act on this, by, say, bribing examiners to give the child favourable treatment: his actions would not be self-interested, but neither would they be motivated by a moral reason. This requires not just that one act for the sake of someone else's interests, but that one regard the reason they provide for acting as independent of one's desire to act that way. Someone might have a passing fancy to give money to a tramp in order to help him out, but this would not count as a moral action – an action motivated by moral reasons – if, in the absence of this desire, the agent would see no reason to give the money.

To see what needs to be added to the account, it is helpful to contrast two rather different styles of the assessment of action. One might ask, concerning an action, how successfully that action satisfies the agent's existing desires and goals. Thus, if someone wishes to become wealthy, one might well view his investing in the low-priced shares of a newly privatised industry as an appropriate action. In this mode of practical assessment, the success of an action is determined by considerations which are internal to the agent himself. Alternatively, one might assess an action by reference to criteria whose applicability is not circumscribed by facts about the agent's own motivations. Thus, if one judges an action to be, say, unjust or greedy, then the force of this judgement is not dependent upon whether the agent himself has any desire to act justly or to avoid acting greedily. In this sense, moral reasons are 'categorical': their normative force is not derived from reasons of other kinds, and so, in particular, is not dependent upon the motivational states of the agent to which they apply.[16]

By focusing on these two features – that the agent should be motivated by

[16] Note that one can accept this Kantian claim without accepting the stronger claim that it is *distinctive* of moral reasons to be categorical in this way. The force of one's judgement, or complaint, that another's action is inelegant or graceless or impolite is similarly independent of his motivational states. So, one can accept, say, Philippa Foot's arguments in her [944] that there is as much reason for treating the requirements of etiquette as categorical as there is for taking those of morality to be so without thinking, as she does, that this casts doubt on the categorical force of moral reasons (for Mrs Foot's own reconsideration of these issues, see her [946]). There are those, of course, who deny that any reasons are categorical in this way; but we can take this to involve the denial that there are any moral reasons. It is perhaps helpful here to see that taking a reason to be a moral reason is not to be committed to its having overriding normative force. One can plausibly deny, that is, that any reason which is categorical should defeat any reason which is not.

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sensitivity to the interests of other people and that the force of the reasons which motivate him is independent of his current desires – we can come up with a core notion of a moral reason, even if this turns out not to provide the conditions for dividing all reasons clearly into the moral and the non-moral.[17] Indeed, it is important when seeking to clarify the notion of a moral reason that one does not assume from the start that conditions of that kind can be found. One can maintain that there are certain reasons which are certainly – paradigmatically – moral without being committed to the claim that all reasons can be determinately divided into the moral and the non-moral. Thus, whilst it is obvious enough that the notion of justice should be classified as a moral one and that of elegance should not be, it is less clear how one should classify, say, the tacky. To say of something that it is tacky is to give a reason for not doing or having it – but is this a moral reason? That one can criticise the way someone dresses as tacky might suggest that the notion of the tacky is an aesthetic, and not a moral, one; but one can also criticise the way someone treats, for instance, his boyfriend as being tacky, where this is not an aesthetic complaint. It may well be that the question whether the reason not to perform tacky actions is a moral one is not capable of a determinate answer. Such indeterminacy should not be found troubling, however. It is not a constraint on any proper characterisation of a moral reason that it should be sharp enough to allow us to decide of any reason for action whether it is to be classed as a moral reason.[18]

If, however, we do take the two central features of moral reasons to be, first, that they arise from considerations to do with the interests of other people than the agent (considerations which could in principle turn out to extend to those of other sentient beings as well) and secondly, that their normative force is not dependent upon the motivational states of the agent, then we indeed have good reason for thinking that the ancients did recognise the distinctive character of such reasons. The *Republic*'s central concern is, as we

[17] Someone who sought to maintain that there are moral reasons not to engage in certain types of, say, sexual acts, even though these reasons have nothing to do with altruism, might wish to deny the centrality of the reference to other people's interests and to limit the range of moral reasons by replacing this feature with a condition that moral reasons should be secured in some way or other – for instance to their having the status of divine injunctions. Whilst this would be a possible strategy, however, it is difficult not to feel that those who do claim that there is *moral* reason not to have non-marital sex are using the term 'moral' merely to impart a spurious dignity to superstition.

[18] This will be problematic only if one thinks that moral reasons have their force in virtue of being moral reasons. Such a thought is not a compelling one, however. The notion of a moral reason is a second-order one: something is a moral reason in virtue of being a reason of some other kind. The force of the reason not to be tacky does not depend on whether that reason is a moral one or not.

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