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Introduction

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1

Themes in the history of modern moral philosophy

Kant invented the conception of morality as autonomy. I use the notion of invention as Kant himself did in an early remark. "Leibniz thought up a simple substance," he said, "which had nothing but obscure representations, and called it a *slumbering monad*. This monad he had not explained, but merely invented; for the concept of it was not given to him but was rather created by him."[1] Autonomy, as Kant saw it, requires contracausal freedom; and he believed that in the unique experience of the moral ought we are "given" a "fact of reason" that unquestionably shows us that we possess such freedom as members of a noumenal realm. Readers who hold, as I do, that our experience of the moral ought shows us no such thing will think of his version of autonomy as an invention rather than an explanation.[2] Those with different views on freedom and morality may wish that I had called this book *The Discovery of Autonomy.* We can probably agree that Kant's moral thought is as hard to understand as it is original and profound. Systematic studies from Paton and Beck to the present have greatly improved our critical grasp of his position. In this book I try to broaden our historical comprehension of Kant's moral philosophy by relating it to the earlier work to which it was a response.

1 "Leibniz dachte sich eine einfache Substanz, die nichts als dunkle Vorstellungen hätte, and nannte sie eine *schlummernde Monade.* Hier hatte er night diese Monade erklärt, sondern erdacht; denn der Begriff derselbe war ihm nicht gegeben, sondern von ihm erschaffen worden." *Gesammelte Schriften* 2.277; *TP*, 249 where the translation is somewhat different. See also *Critique of Pure Reason* A729 = B757.

2 For a compact and learned review of the history of the term, see Pohlmann 1971. Initially standing for a political conception in Greek thought, the term came to be used in religious controversies during the Reformation; but its main use in early modern times was in political discussions. Kant seems to have been the first to assign broader significance to it, using it in his theoretical as well as his practical philosophy.

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i. *Moral philosophy and social change*

There are reasons beyond the particular importance of Kant's own views for studying the history of the moral thought out of which they emerged.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established conceptions of morality as obedience came increasingly to be contested by emerging conceptions of morality as self-governance. On the older conception, morality is to be understood most deeply as one aspect of the obedience we owe to God. In addition, most of us are in a moral position in which we must obey other human beings. God's authority over all of us is made known to us by reason as well as by revelation and the clergy. But we are not all equally able to see for ourselves what morality requires. Even if everyone has the most fundamental laws of morality written in their hearts or consciences, most people need to be instructed by some appropriate authority about what is morally required in particular cases. And because most people usually do not understand the reasons for doing what morality directs, threats of punishment as well as offers of reward are necessary in order to assure sufficient compliance to bring about moral order.

The new outlook that emerged by the end of the eighteenth century centered on the belief that all normal individuals are equally able to live together in a morality of self-governance. All of us, on this view, have an equal ability to see for ourselves what morality calls for and are in principle equally able to move ourselves to act accordingly, regardless of threats or rewards from others.[3] These two points have come to be widely accepted – so widely that most moral philosophy now starts by assuming them. In daily life they give us the working assumption that the people we live with are capable of understanding and acknowledging in practice the reasons for the moral constraints we all mutually expect ourselves and others to respect. We assume, in short, that people are equally competent as moral agents unless shown to be otherwise. There are many substantive points on which modern moral views differ from what was widely accepted at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but our assumption of prima facie equal moral competence is the deepest and most pervasive difference.

The conception of morality as self-governance provides a conceptual framework for a social space in which we may each rightly claim to direct our own actions without interference from the state, the church, the neighbors, or those claiming to be better or wiser than we. The older conception of morality as obedience did not have these implications.

3 Darwall 1995, p. 8 and n. 18, uses a narrower notion of self-governance than I do.

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The early modern moral philosophy in which the conception of morality as self-governance emerged thus made a vital contribution to the rise of the Western liberal vision of the proper relations between individual and society. That form of life could not have developed without the work of moral philosophers.

My attribution to moral philosophy of this essential role in aiding basic social change may seem surprising, but it should not be. Humanly meaningful differences among individuals and societies are in large part not biological. They are cultural and therefore impossible without shared vocabularies and concepts. This is certainly true of the moral, political, and religious aspects of life. In these matters we can only be what we can think and say we are. Philosophical debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a major source of new ways of conceptualizing our humanity and of discussing it with one another. Our own moral philosophy carries on from the point to which those earlier discussions took us. Seeing how we got to that point is not just seeing how we came to ask some of the philosophical questions we are still asking. It is also seeing how we came to a distinctively modern way of understanding ourselves as moral agents.

ii. *Morality and self-governance*

My main theme in what follows is the emergence of various conceptions of morality as self-governance. As early as Machiavelli and Montaigne there were thinkers who set aside the conception of morality as obedience in order to work out an alternative. But most of the philosophers who rethought morality in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries did not intend to replace the older conception with a conception of morality as self-governance. They were for the most part trying to solve problems arising within the older view. Most of them were hoping to show how Christian morality could continue to offer helpful guidance in the face of difficulties that no one had previously faced. To solve the problems that new social and political circumstances posed for their moral and religious commitments, some of them developed new ways of thinking about morality and politics. They could not have foreseen the uses to which later thinkers eventually put their ideas.

It was only from about the early eighteenth century that the effort to create a theory of morality as self-governance became self-conscious. Moral and political concerns led increasing numbers of philosophers to think that the inherited conceptions of morality did not allow for a proper appreciation of human dignity, and therefore did not properly allow even for the moral teachings of the Christianity that many of them still accepted. Such concerns had already been strongly voiced during the seventeenth century. Eighteenth-century philosophers could

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therefore draw on the work of predecessors as they sought ways to develop new understandings of morality. The moral philosophies of Reid, Bentham, and Kant are the final eighteenth-century efforts to articulate the normative belief about the dignity and worth of the individual that led to conceptions of morality as self-governance.[4]

Kant's explanation of this belief was fuller and more radical than any other. He alone was proposing a truly revolutionary rethinking of morality. He held that we are self-governing because we are autonomous. By this he meant that we ourselves legislate the moral law. It is only because of the legislative action of our own will that we are under moral law; and the same action is what always enables everyone to be law-abiding. Kant was the first to argue for autonomy in this strong sense. His theory is, of course, of more than historical interest. It is more fully involved in current philosophical ethics than is the work of any other early modern thinker, with the possible exception of Hobbes. In the narrative that follows, therefore, I have kept Kant in mind. Naturally enough this skews my selection of philosophers and topics for presentation. But I have tried to give a fair presentation of the complex debates out of which there emerged the questions Kant tried to answer.

Bentham, Reid, and Kant came to questions in moral philosophy with different concerns about politics and religion. If they all read some of the same earlier philosophers, continental as well as British, Kant knew the work of others who were not on the British horizon at all. Much of what he made of moral philosophy was shaped by his German predecessors. Unless we know something about them as well as about the more familiar thinkers from whom he learned, we will not see how profoundly different the sources were that contributed to his invention of autonomy.

iii. *Morality and religion*

Conceptions of morality as self-governance reject the inequality of moral capacity among humans that was a standard part of conceptions of morality as obedience. What is the role of God in these two families of conceptions? What is the moral bearing of inequality between God and human beings? If God's superiority is not acceptable, must all ties between morality and religion be severed? The debates about these issues form another major theme in what follows.

Events outside of philosophy itself were largely responsible for stimulating the rethinking of morality that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation

4 Reid's theory allows for self-governance but, as I point out in Chapter 20.v, it is not clear that Bentham's position does.

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made anything tied to religion a matter of controversy – and everything was tied to religion.[5] The warfare that racked Europe almost continuously from the sixteenth century until the middle of the seventeenth century, and the civil conflicts in Britain that lasted almost until the century's end, were understood in terms of issues about religion. If God's rule of the world as transmitted by the clergy was the only hope for order, it could well seem that peace was not to be obtained. Morality as interpreted by churches that were themselves rent by sectarian disagreements could not provide either an inner sense of community or external constraints sufficient to make civilized life possible.

Could politics by itself provide those constraints? Repressive force could indeed keep the peace for a while. But who was to control such force, and to what ends? The questions were pressing. Those who asked them increasingly wanted to be given reasons for submitting to authorities whose traditional standing was no longer enough. Religious controversy affected internal state authority as much as it did international affairs. New groups within each polity began to demand access to power, justifying their claims with theories about how government should be handled and limited, and who should be involved in it. Religious strife undermined the claims of clergy to be the sole authorities in morals; political strife led ever more people to demand recognition as fully competent to take an active part in affairs. A morality of self-governance was a better view with which to defend such claims than previously available theories. The need for new generally acceptable justifications of authority and the distribution of power made a rethinking of morality inescapable. Philosophy, appealing to reason and not to any authority, seemed an appropriate source of help.

It is often supposed that the amazing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century developments in science provided the impetus for new efforts in philosophy generally, and as part of that, in philosophical ethics. There is no reason to doubt that the development of science from Copernicus and Galileo through Newton and on into the eighteenth century was profoundly important in shaping the course of philosophy. But morality would have required reexamination and reshaping even if there had been no new science. Without the science, the course that moral philosophy took would no doubt have been quite different. But the problems arising from religious dissension and from calls for wider participation in politics were not themselves due to advances in scientific knowledge. And it was the former, not the latter, that primarily gave rise to modern moral philosophy.

5 See Febvre 1982, chs. 9 and 10, for a brilliant discussion of how religious belief so saturated sixteenth-century French vocabulary that it was nearly impossible to think beyond religion, or even to notice that one could not do so.

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What I have called conceptions of morality as self-governance are often thought to result from a major effort by Enlightenment thinkers to bring about a secularized society. It is assumed that there was an "Enlightenment project" to show that morality had no need of religion because it had its own, wholly rational, foundations. Modern views of morality are then assumed to have been thought out as part of this effort. I find the assumptions questionable in several respects.

There were, of course, some atheists who published their views during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bentham, after all, was not the first to crusade for a fully secular morality. But there were many more people who, without being atheists or even doubters, were taken to be antireligious only because they held that institutional religion was doing great harm. They certainly hoped to see the churches or the clergy reformed, but they sought no secular ethic. Anticlericalism is not atheism.

A wide variety of writers in the latter part of the period I shall be considering called themselves "enlightened" and wanted others to think them so. If some were atheists, the majority were not; and they differed in many other respects as well. Like many other scholars I consequently do not find it helpful to think in terms of a single movement of Enlightenment or *Aufklärung* or *Lumières*, still less of anything that might be called a single project involving all those who claimed to be enlightened.[6] The error about moral philosophy and secularizing enlightenment is particularly egregious.

Briefly, the claim that the main effort of the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century was to secularize morality simply does not stand up to even the most cursory inspection. Indeed, if I were forced to identify something or other as "the Enlightenment project" for morality, I should say that it was the effort to limit God's control over earthly life while keeping him essential to morality. Naturally this effort took different forms, depending on how the relations between God and morality were conceived.

As I shall be reiterating, there are two basic approaches to keeping God essential to morality. One is now usually called "voluntarism."[7] Voluntarists hold that God created morality and imposed it upon us by an arbitrary fiat of his will. He is essential to morality, therefore, because he created it and can always, in principle, alter it – as he seems to do on those rare occasions, such as his commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, when he intervenes in it. On the other approach, often called "intellectualism," God did not create morality. When he gives us moral

6 See Porter and Teich 1981, and for an overview, Outram 1995, ch. 1.

7 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term is a nineteenth-century coinage.

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commandments, his will is guided by his intellect's knowledge of eternal standards. He is nonetheless essential to morality because his providential supervision ensures that we live in a morally ordered world.

For both the intellectualist and the voluntarist, morality in practice is a matter of compliance with rules or laws, not of direct pursuit of the common good. But all agree that morality is meant to serve the common good. Hence it may well seem to us that individual obedience to moral directives is futile. Many people disobey, and chance seems to have a large hand in determining the actual results of what we do. God, for the intellectualist, is the divine supervisor, coordinating the actual results of individual actions so that all will be for the best on the whole. Morality is not, despite the voluntarists, God's creation; but we must be certain of God's existence to be sure that moral action is neither pointless nor self-defeating.

Voluntarists can accept the part of intellectualism that sees God as actively superintending the universe he created. But they need not do so. They do not have to hold that the universe is morally intelligible to us. Intellectualists cannot accept the most basic claim of the voluntarists. But they can agree that without God's command the truths at the basis of morality would not have the status of laws imposing obligations on us. Other mediating positions are also possible; but many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious believers vehemently rejected voluntarism in any form, and devoted much effort to making a thorough intellectualism acceptable. A concern with voluntarism was unavoidable in discussions of religion and morality during the period I shall be considering.

Among antireligious thinkers there were many who talked as if the only interpretation of religion on which God is essential to morality is that of the strong voluntarists. They presented the issue as if a religious believer who rejected voluntarism would have to hold that morality is wholly independent of religion. They could thus argue as if they had already won their point about morals; but we should not be taken in by their error, or, more likely, their pretenses. For everyone except the atheists, morality and religion remained tightly linked in early modern moral philosophy. The ethics of self-governance was created by both religious and antireligious philosophers.

iv. *Morality, epistemology, and moral psychology*

Proponents of conceptions of morality as self-governance all take it that moral agents must possess certain specfic psychological capacities. Normal adults are able to be aware of or to know, with no external help, what morality directs or approves, and to bring themselves to live accordingly regardless of threats and rewards. In the discussions out of

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which these conceptions emerged, questions about the epistemology of moral belief and of moral psychology played a central role. The topic of our awareness of morality and its relation to our motives forms a third recurrent theme in what follows.

Some fairly standard assumptions may get in the way of understanding this issue. Books going under the title of "History of Philosophy" ordinarily concentrate on the development of theories of knowledge and metaphysics, treating ethics, if at all, as a sort of appendix. The assumption seems to be that once the philosopher's epistemology and ontology are settled, the theory of morality is derivable as a consequence. The conceptual assumption is then treated as yielding a genuine grasp of the historical development of theories about morality. They are to be explained as results of the desire to make morality fit into a previously established epistemology or metaphysics. Starting with an interest in the history of thought about morality, however, I have not found this approach helpful.

I will point in due course to several cases of a different relation between theories of knowledge and theories of morality, but I will indicate here what is perhaps the most important instance. The conventional division of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of knowledge into empiricist, rationalist, and (eventually) Kantian seems to me essentially sound, despite objections that have been made to it. Empiricism from Bacon through Locke had a strong affinity with voluntarism in ethics. Voluntarism in ethics tended to be associated with extreme conceptions of morality as obedience to God. Objections to the latter, based as much on moral as on purely theological grounds, were therefore taken as objections both to voluntarism and to empiricism, particularly to empiricist views of meaning and the limitations they imposed on our concepts. Rationalists argued against empiricism as much because of what they believed to be the grave moral defects it entailed as because of the errors they saw in it about concepts and a priori knowledge.

Rationalism itself was not exempt from moral criticism. Critics thought that some of its versions were unavoidably tied to a conception of morality as obedience to a social elite. The critics thought that in those versions it could not explain how the knowledge its theorists held to be at the basis of morality could be equally available to everyone alike. For those moved by normative considerations to defend a morality of self-governance, this kind of rationalism was therefore unacceptable. And if for moral reasons they found empiricism equally unacceptable, they were forced to work out new forms of ethical rationalism.

Kant himself was moved by considerations of this kind. Like some of his predecessors, he sought a rational principle simple enough to be known and used by everyone, and carrying its motivational force with

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it. It seems to me not unreasonable to suppose that his normative commitment to a strong conception of morality as self-governance was at least a large part of what motivated him to develop his remarkable constructivist theory of knowledge as well as his motivational psychology. His is not the only case where the conventional portrayal of the historical relations between epistemology and moral philosophy is worse than useless.

v. *A map of the book*

All of the theorists I discuss were engaged in one way or another in controversies about morality and self-governance, the relations of morality and religion, and the epistemological and psychological needs of different moral outlooks. I have not tried to gather the arguments about these topics into separate chapters. I have, however, organized what follows in a way that is topical as well as roughly chronological. There seem to me to be four main phases of the development of modern moral philosophy, and I have grouped the philosophers I study accordingly. The lives of some of the philosophers whom I treat in one section overlapped the lives of some discussed in other sections, but within the sections I proceed chronologically.

In the first section I present what I take to be the dominant seventeenth-century view of morality, the natural law view. To bring out the novelty of the work of Grotius and his successors, I begin with brief sketches of Thomas Aquinas's classical natural law doctrine, and of some of the medieval alternatives to the view; and I consider the ways in which Luther and Calvin used these other positions in shaping their own views of the place of law in the moral life. Well before the atheists of the eighteenth century, there were those who asked what we could make of our lives together if we did not bring Christianity into our views. To illustrate the options open to later thinkers, I consider Machiavelli's radical secular politics and the skepticism that Montaigne made memorable. I then proceed to Suarez and Grotius, both of whom tried to restate natural law theory in response to the difficulties they saw facing it and their world. Suarez is a great traditionalist; Grotius is often – and, I argue, rightly – taken as initiating a new view. I discuss the major proponents of "modern" natural law thought, and end the section with a discussion of Locke and Thomasius, the last of the major advocates of the Grotian view. From their work it became evident why natural law theory seemed unable to meet the moral demands placed on it. Although Locke did not think it a failure, Thomasius did. There were no major natural law thinkers after these two, and I try to indicate why.

The main seventeenth-century alternative to natural law thought is my topic in the second section. Where the natural lawyers saw the

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