

Introduction

The development of modern science from the sixteenth century onward altered the European culture that was its home, and the philosophies that arose from the effort to comprehend and to aid or halt the growth of scientific understanding have occupied a central place in our thinking and teaching ever since. A second change in European culture during this period, no less momentous, was equally intertwined with philosophy. The view people had of themselves as moral agents changed, and with it their view of their responsibilities and their possibilities. The philosophy involved in this change, resisting it or helping create and understand it, was moral philosophy. Its history has not been as carefully studied and as regularly taught as has the history of epistemology and metaphysics. Yet the problems that engaged moral philosophers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have their own distinctive motivations and are at least as significant as those of epistemology and metaphysics. It is not necessary that our work on the history of modern philosophy be mainly concentrated – as it conventionally has been – on the latter issues. The history of ethics is an equally significant field of study.

Aims of the Anthology

The readings gathered in this anthology were chosen to show what the issues regarding morality were and how philosophical thought about them developed during this period. I have, of course, included the well-known philosophers to whose work we commonly trace the origins of our current problems and options in philosophical ethics: Hobbes, Butler, Hume, Bentham, Kant. I have set their writings amid selections from some of the now lesser-known writers who were their predecessors and contemporaries. The views of those who have become the canonical great thinkers emerged from protracted interchange with these writers, as well as with such writers from classical antiquity as Cicero, Seneca, and Sextus Empiricus. But reading only the famous figures is like hearing only one or two voices in a complex discussion. Unless we catch something of what the others had to say, we will not understand what the philosophical problems were or why the discussions took the turns they did. We will also fail to see just why we now understand the problems of moral philosophy as we do.

Many other kinds of writing about morality might have been included. Commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, books of both Roman Catholic and Protestant casuistry,¹ political and moral tracts, polemics against theorists and their theories, exhortations to the virtuous life, demonstrations of the truth of Christianity and its morality, volumes on the way to true happiness, and popular moralizing journals like the *Spectator* and its innumerable imitations – all contributed to public debate about morality and to the changing understanding of it. An ideal anthology showing the growth of thought about morality would represent writings of all these kinds. But the ideal anthology would demand more time for the subject than most readers are likely to have.

In choosing and organizing the selections, I have had to adjust the past. One of the adjustments was necessary because the very subject of this anthology, moral philosophy, was not always understood as we understand it today. We distinguish the subject from both political theory and religious ethics, and we do not think it includes discussion of how to be successful, polite, and happy. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writings in which we find the material we think of as part of ethics did not generally have so narrow a focus. Rather, moral philosophy was simply the study of the whole of human action, undertaken with the hope of improving practice. In selecting material for studying the history of thought about morality, I have frequently had to be anachronistic in deciding that some parts of a book were moral philosophy and other parts were not.

I have further adjusted the past in organizing the selections topically rather than chronologically. The organization that I have imposed comes from my own view of the historical development of modern moral philosophy. Other views of its development would naturally result in somewhat different selections and in other ways of grouping them. Indeed, even in the light of my own outlook, my groupings are to some extent arbitrary. Some of the philosophers I have put in one section might have gone into another one. Hobbes, for instance, is placed among the natural lawyers, although he might have gone in with the Epicureans. I hope, however, that there is enough in these excerpts to enable the reader to judge whether my way of organizing the material is helpful and to improve on it or to ignore it where called for.

A full introduction to the readings I have assembled would require a substantial volume interpreting the course of modern moral philosophy. In the comments I prefix to each of the selections, therefore, I try only to relate the specific contribution of the writer to the kind of view he represents and to the issues he addresses. As an introduction to the readings generally, I first outline some of the earlier views of morality that formed the intellectual context within which modern moral philosophy began its course. I then explain the categories into which I have divided the moral philosophy of the period, by discussing briefly some of the themes and problems running through its development.

European Religious Controversies

Modern moral philosophy originated in the need to rethink the inherited ways in which European culture defined proper conduct and good character. There was a certain amount of general agreement about how civilized people were to behave, but there was increasing disarray in the ways in which the accepted demands on action were explained. The new natural science, by its challenge to the authority of received opinion rather than by any direct assault on religion, was slowly beginning to arouse questions. Europeans were also perplexed by the stories that travelers brought back from remote parts of the world – reports about people living peacefully and happily in ways quite different from those that were known at home. Yet neither of these sources of disquiet raised problems as difficult as those that came from within the Christian framework of Western culture.

The reformation of religion begun by Martin Luther in 1517 and carried forward by John Calvin had broken up the seeming agreement of the Western world about the truth of the Christian faith as taught by the Roman Catholic church. Many versions of the Protestants' new theology offered interpretations of the faith, and traditional Catholic teaching was reiterated and developed to answer the Reformers and to resolve new social and political problems. Demands for loyalty and service to one's sovereign were often made in the name of the truth of one or another variety of Christianity, and the savage and brutal wars that devastated Europe during much of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries were usually explained and justified in religious terms. Until the middle of the seventeenth century the warfare must have seemed interminable. The continuing slaughter reinforced the conclusion that the endless controversies of theologians made inescapable: that religion could no longer provide a commonly acceptable account of the ways in which we should live.

Christian visions of the virtuous life and the decent society were not the only ones available. More significant than the travelers' tales were the works of the pagan writers of classical antiquity. New editions and translations were making them more accessible to a wide readership than ever before. Stoicism and Epicureanism had long been known, and the teachings of Pyrrhonic skepticism were rediscovered during the sixteenth century as well. These philosophies were taken as doctrines concerning how to live and were understood to be more or less in competition with Christianity. It was natural for thoughtful people to ask what one was to make of all this and what bearing it had on one's behavior.

There was an evident dilemma. It was dangerous if not impossible to appeal to specifically Christian doctrine to justify proposals for settling disputes about political and social issues, because such appeals rapidly degenerated into the standard unresolvable arguments about religion. Yet for most people a wholly secular morality was not a genuine option. Christian Europe might

be divided into warring factions, but it was Christian still. Open doubt about religion was rarely expressed; a declaration of atheism could be dangerous even in the later eighteenth century. For a small elite, a private life lived in terms provided by pagan writers might be acceptable, although even such views were usually “Christianized” to a greater or lesser extent. But the language of statecraft, like the language most people used in thinking of personal relations, was religious. An acceptable public morality thus would have to present itself as a reconstruction of Christian morality, however that might be understood.

A bare minimum of Christian morality would be taken in the seventeenth century as the Decalogue interpreted in the light of the summary Christ gave of the law: Love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:37–40).² The teaching of Saint Paul added two dimensions to these precepts. First, he declared that knowledge of God’s requirements is not restricted to those who have a written revelation of them. For “when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves” (Rom. 2:14).³ At the same time Paul stressed the sinfulness of fallen man and the general decay of human nature that is its outcome. These biblical texts made it necessary for Christian theologians and moral philosophers to explain the relations between law and love and between natural awareness of what morality requires and sinful temptations to ignore that awareness. Two earlier explanations of how all these things fit together were essential to our period: those proposed by Saint Augustine and by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Augustinianism was a major source of the distinctive views of Luther and Calvin, as well as of the Catholic Jansenist movement in seventeenth-century France; Thomism shaped the positions of numerous Protestants as well as of Catholics. I offer here only the most compressed reminders of the main pertinent aspects of the two positions.

Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas

Augustine (353–430 C.E.) began by interpreting the creation in Neoplatonic terms, as the overflowing of God’s infinite being into an ordered hierarchy of entities that exist or possess being in lesser degrees than God does.⁴ For Augustine, being and goodness were essentially the same, so that whatever God made is good. What we take to be evil, Augustine held, is only an absence of good, an absence we notice when we see something to be less good than others of its kind or of some other kind. Things of even the least degree of being or goodness have a role and a place in declaring God’s glory, and the world would be less perfect without them. Admitting that we see things as ugly, as destructive, or in other ways as suffering from defects, Augustine insisted that all of this is unavoidably part of the infinite variety that expresses God’s essence. We, of course, with our limited minds, do not see this. “We cannot observe the whole design, in which these small parts, which are to us

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Excerpt

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so disagreeable, fit together to make an ordered scheme of beauty.”⁵ And so we think that there is evil.

The one kind of evil whose existence Augustine admitted is the kind that humans do. We were created, he held, loving the good, and we were meant to pursue different things in accordance with the degree of goodness embodied in them. Because we are finite beings, we have needs and desires, and there is nothing wrong with satisfying them, nor is there anything evil about the things and actions needed for our sustenance and enjoyment. Rather, what is evil is the love that loves things more than they deserve. God, being infinitely good, is our true final end. Only in union with him can we find satisfaction and final peace. But our desires tempt us to want things regardless of their true place in the hierarchy of being. We want worldly wealth, for example, as if it were our final good. And because we were created with a free will, which enables us to choose among the various goods that are presented to us, we can choose to act for the sake of a wrong love. When we do so, we are acting evilly. The good person is one who chooses what he or she knows, through reason or faith, to be truly good; the evil person is one who chooses to follow desire even when it leads to the pursuit of overvalued ends.

Adam’s decision to follow Eve rather than to obey God – to choose the lesser rather than the greater good – was not only the prototype of all bad willing; it was also the cause of a disaster to the human species. Since Adam’s Fall our nature has been spoiled, and the second nature we have acquired is a sinful one. We are no longer able to choose freely between true good and merely apparent good. We are able to choose freely only to do evil, for we can no longer choose freely to do all things for the love of God. We act always for the gratification of our own desires, and even when these are relatively decent, as they were in many of the fabled pagan heroes, they still are sinful because they are the expression of the pride and self-will of their possessors. And pride – reliance on himself rather than on God – was the sin of the chief of the fallen angels, the devil.

The consequence of the Fall was that although God has let us know what he expects us to do, we do not have the moral capacity to do it, at least not as we should. No effort of ours will enable us to be what God commands us to be. We will be lost eternally if he does not aid us. And of course, through the coming of Christ, God told us that he will aid us. Augustine held that God’s aid must come to us without any merit on our part. It is “prevenient,” or coming before we deserve it. From our point of view, therefore, it looks arbitrary. God saves whom he will, and according to Augustine, he saves very few indeed. To those whom he saves he gives right love; they constitute the members of the City of God, and they will see him after death. The others, members of the earthly city, remain cumbered with wrong love, condemned even after death to exile from God’s presence.

In his own time Augustine’s position was challenged by an Irish monk named Pelagius (c. 360–431 C.E.), who denied that the Fall had ruined anyone besides Adam himself. God would not be so unjust, Pelagius believed, as to

command us to do what he himself had made it impossible for us to do, and he was not so ignorant of our abilities as to misjudge them. Our freedom remains with us and, with it, the sole responsibility for our condition. We can at any time cease to live sinfully and begin to live righteously, and if we do so, we can come to deserve an eternal reward. Augustine was appalled by this view, however: It presumed that humans could make God into their debtor. It seemed to make the coming of Christ superfluous. It offended Augustine's sense of the majesty of God and the littleness of humanity, and he wrote tract after tract to refute it.⁶ Augustine was a mighty dialectician and a convincing writer. Pelagianism became a heresy, but the position did not die. Indeed, some see traces of it in the highly orthodox position of Saint Thomas.

Thomas accepted the Augustinian vision of the world as a hierarchy of creatures possessing different degrees of being and goodness. His own explanation of this ordered whole was given in terms of laws and Aristotelian ends or goals natural to each kind of thing. God's eternal wisdom is contained in the eternal law, which leads each kind of thing to work for the common good as it strives to attain its own natural end. We humans are unique among the visible created beings in that we participate in the eternal law through our reason. The natural law is what results from our sharing in the divine reason, and it is what Saint Paul alluded to in his dictum about our being a law unto ourselves. The dictum, Thomas made clear, does not mean that we are independent of God's rule:

Law is present not only in the ruling principle but derivatively as well in the subject ruled. In this last manner each is a law unto himself, in so far as he enters into the plan of the governing authority. So St. Paul goes on to say that people show the work of the law written in their hearts.⁷

In addition to the natural law, which directs our striving for our natural end – earthly happiness – there is another law, the divine law, which shows us how to attain our supernatural end, union with God. The natural law is given to reason, by being imprinted in the special part of conscience that Thomas occasionally called the “synteresis,” or repository of principles.⁸ The divine law, however, can be known only by revelation.

For Saint Thomas, all knowledge starts with self-evident principles, and practical knowledge is no exception. The Decalogue contains some of the laws of nature but does not itself spell out the most basic axioms. They are contained in it only as its presupposed principles. Of these the first is that good is to be sought and evil avoided. This tells us that the main features of our nature are to be turned to good. Although we can come to know the laws of nature directly from the synteresis, we can explain them by seeing that they instruct beings with our nature about their proper good. Some precepts of natural law pertain to not killing and to honoring parents, for example, because as animals we all desire life and offspring. We are rational as well as animal beings, and the natural law tells us that it is for the good of such beings not only to seek the knowledge of God through which we can be united with

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him but also to live with others of their kind. Hence we must worship God and do whatever facilitates life in a community of rational beings. The other precepts of the Decalogue, and all the rest of the natural law, can be given similar explanations. Everyone can grasp at least the most basic principles, although only few can see everything they entail. Although all of these laws may be carried out in many different ways – as there are many ways of paying a debt or of honoring God – the basic moral precepts are always valid “because they belong of themselves to the nature of virtue.”⁹

Thomas’s doctrine of natural law is at heart a doctrine not of natural rights but of natural responsibilities. “The good of the part is for the good of the whole,” Thomas asserted, “hence everything, by its natural appetite and love, loves its own proper good because of the common good of the whole universe, which is God.”¹⁰ The laws of nature show us what we are to do as our proper work for the common good, and other people should allow us to do those things. In this way we might have rights arising from our responsibilities in the cosmic venture. But the responsibilities come before the rights, and both belong to us only as members of a community. Only the laws of nature, and not rights as such, can place any restraints on the laws that humans can pass.

Within this vision of entities of every kind striving for their natural ends or goods and thereby working to create a common universe that declares God’s glory, what place is there for sin and grace? Thomas’s doctrine is too complex for adequate summary here but in outline is roughly as follows: Even Adam unfallen had need of God’s grace to enable him to win salvation, and we now, damaged by his Fall, need it more. For us it is harder than it was for Adam to know our duty and to do it as we ought, from love. Yet a first grace is offered to all of us, and although it comes without our deserving it, our active participation through our natural power of free choice is required if it is to be effective within us. That power was not destroyed by the Fall, and the grace that is offered to everyone does not remove it. We can and must continue to cooperate in the acceptance of grace in order ultimately to merit salvation; and if we do so, we are cooperating in a work that does not replace our nature but restores and perfects it.¹¹

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If Thomas is not a Pelagian, he at least sees us as able to contribute voluntarily to our salvation. Martin Luther (1483–1546) revolutionized Christianity as an organized institution and did so in part because he held views of our moral and religious capacities that were considerably grimmer than Thomas’s. Luther accepted the belief that God had created an ordered cosmos to express his glory. He agreed that the cosmos was governed by laws, the natural laws for humanity among them. Like all his predecessors, Luther saw God as humanity’s final end, and people as mistakenly and fruitlessly seeking for the highest good among earthly possessions and pleasures. But he followed Saint Augustine rather than Thomas in stressing the disorder introduced by human

sin, and our inability to address it adequately by institutional actions. It was in part because Luther felt that the Catholic church was underestimating the seriousness of that disorder that he thought reform was needed.

Saint Thomas tried everywhere to remove the mystery of the Christian teaching and to make it as reasonable as possible. Luther insisted that God surpasses human understanding and that consequently his actions must often be incomprehensible. Why does a just and loving God create beings who, as he knows, will inevitably sin and thereby come to deserve eternal punishment? This question, Luther declared,

touches on the secrets of His Majesty. . . . It is not for us to inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them . . . God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule or standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. . . . What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because he so wills it.¹²

Here Luther is in the company of the voluntarist thinkers who from Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) to William of Ockham (1285–1349) and Gabriel Biel (c. 1410–95) opposed the intellectualism of Saint Thomas and his followers. They all denied that God wills things to exist because there are independent and eternal standards of goodness or rightness to which his willing must conform. Any such standards, they thought, would impose a limit to God's omnipotence, and such limits cannot be accepted. Although they allowed that God could not contradict himself, they did not see any problem in supposing that God might have willed laws for human conduct other than those enshrined in the Decalogue. Had he done so, those other laws would now be as binding on us as the Ten Commandments currently are.¹³ John Calvin agreed on this matter with Luther: God's will, he said,

is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are. For if it has any cause, something must precede it, to which it is, as it were, bound; this is unlawful to imagine. For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.¹⁴

The most important way in which the sovereignty of God's will shows itself in our lives is in the distribution of salvation. Both of these Reformers held that we can do nothing to deserve God's saving grace. He chooses – arbitrarily as it must seem to us – some to be saved and most to be cut off forever from the contact with him that is our only enduring good. To ask why just these people are saved and all others damned, why so few are saved and so many lost, is to display the pride characteristic of our fallen condition.

Like Saint Augustine, Luther and Calvin saw unredeemed humanity as utterly selfish. The sinner, Luther observed,

does not seek God. . . . he seeks his own riches, and glory and works, and wisdom, and power, and sovereignty in everything, and wants to enjoy it in peace. If anyone stands in his way . . . he is moved with the same perverted desire that moves him to seek them, and is outraged and furious with his opponent. He can no more restrain his fury than he can stop his self-seeking.¹⁵

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Although Luther takes us to be free on one level – we can control much of our publicly observable behavior such as eating or accepting an offer of help – we are not inwardly free to reject our selfish motives and act from loving ones. Only grace enables us to do that, and grace comes only to the few. The saved must live in society with those who are not saved, and the latter would be like wild savage beasts¹⁶ if they were not restrained by laws and magistrates with power to enforce them. Hence there is justification for earthly power and earthly law, and earthly law must conform to God's laws for humankind. But God's laws have a function more important than that of showing how the wicked must be constrained so that people can live in peaceful societies.

The first function of the law – Luther is thinking of the Ten Commandments – is to show us that without God's aid we are hopelessly sinful and weak. It shows us what we ought to do, or what it would be good to do, in order to show us first of all that we cannot do what it directs.

Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability.¹⁷

This view of the old or Mosaic law was anticipated by Saint Thomas. The new law, he stated, is the law of grace. It could only function after man had been "left to himself under the state of the Old Law," which taught him to "realize his weakness, and acknowledge his need of grace."¹⁸ Luther was far more emphatic:

The law is . . . to reveal unto a man his sin, his blindness, his misery, his impiety, ignorance, hatred and contempt of God, death, hell, the judgment and deserved wrath of God. . . . This . . . is the proper and principal use of the law . . . and also the most necessary. . . . For as long as the opinion of righteousness abideth in man, so long there abideth also in him incomprehensible pride, presumption, security, hatred of God, contempt of his grace and mercy.¹⁹

Calvin agreed that the first use of the law was to strike down pride and presumption and to convict us of our sinfulness by increasing our transgressions. He, along with Luther, saw the law's second use as restraining the wicked, through threats of punishment. And Calvin added a third use, which Luther did not admit: "The Lord instructs by their reading of [the law] those whom he inwardly instills with a readiness to obey." He took Saint Paul's dictum in Romans 2:14–15 to be saying that we understand the laws needed for sociable living – the precepts of the second table of the Decalogue – better than we do the precepts of the first table ordering our relations with God. Reason alone can hardly grasp the latter, and even with the former, Calvin insisted, we persistently fail to see everything that is required. Without divine assistance we would be not only unable to act in the appropriate loving spirit but also ignorant of much that we should do.²⁰

Luther and Calvin divided human concerns into the worldly and the other-

worldly.²¹ The scope of the former was whatever pertains to peaceable social life on earth; and of the latter, all that affects our attainment of salvation. For the most part our worldly affairs are matters of the way we act and usually not matters of the spirit in which we act. According to the Reformers we are able to develop habits of acting in ways that conform to the requirements of law, but our sinful nature would not permit us, without divine assistance, to go beyond that to genuine loving motives. In all our worldly affairs we need to be ruled by the magistrate; and in all our other-worldly ones, by God. There is no realm in which we govern ourselves both inwardly and outwardly. We do not have the capacity to do so.

Stoicism and Epicureanism

Along with their Christian heritage – however it was to be interpreted – educated Europeans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries knew a good deal of the culture of classical antiquity. Aristotle was still a presence, although the acceptance of many of his views by Catholic theologians made him suspect in the minds of some (though not all) Protestants, and the new science had done much to shake his authority generally. Plato, despite the efforts of Renaissance scholars and admirers, was not as widely read or taught as Aristotle was. And in the development of moral thought neither of them was as significant as Cicero and Seneca were.²² These Roman writers were far more universally read and did more to provide the topics and starting points for discussions of morals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than did either Plato or Aristotle. Not everyone studied Greek, but everyone learned Latin: What Cicero and Seneca had written for grave Roman gentlemen was taught as lessons for schoolchildren and was not forgotten.²³

Neither Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) nor Seneca (4 B.C.D.–65 C.E.) was a philosopher of any originality; in all their writings they drew heavily on the work of earlier Greek philosophers. They wrote consolatory or exhortative essays on topics to which a “philosophical attitude” – a vaguely Stoic refusal to feel distressed by the difficulties of life – was appropriate. Among other things they reflected on old age, death, pain, grief, the shortness of life, and the loss of friends. They examined more thoroughly special points of personal life and politics. For example, Cicero’s essay on friendship explores not only one’s duties to one’s friends but also the limits a virtuous man will place on what one friend will do for another. Seneca explained the importance of the virtue of clemency for rulers as a means of remaining loved by their subjects. Seneca also wrote a lengthy treatise, *De beneficiis*, on the importance of generosity or liberality and gratitude in holding society together. He discussed the importance for one’s character of a genuine concern for the well-being of one’s beneficiary, the proprieties of giving (to whom should one give? from whom may one receive?), the difference between what is truly given and what can be demanded by law, the ways in which everyone in society – slaves as well as free men – must be involved in exchanges of benefits, and many related sub-