

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant
Edited by J. B. Schneewind
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

This anthology contains excerpts from some thirty-two important seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophers. Including a substantial introduction and extensive bibliographies, the anthology facilitates the study and teaching of early modern moral philosophy in its crucial formative period. In addition to well-known thinkers such as Hobbes, Hume, and Kant, there are excerpts from a wide range of philosophers never previously assembled in one text, such as Grotius, Pufendorf, Nicole, Clarke, Leibniz, Malebranche, Holbach, and Paley. Some of the writers, such as Crusius and Wolff, have never appeared in English before.

Originally issued as a two-volume edition in 1990, the anthology is now re-issued, with a new foreword by Professor Schneewind, as a one-volume anthology to serve as a companion to his highly successful history of modern ethics, *The Invention of Autonomy*. The anthology provides many of the sources discussed in *The Invention of Autonomy*, and taken together the two volumes will be an invaluable resource for the teaching of the history of modern moral philosophy.

J. B. Schneewind is Professor of Philosophy at the Johns Hopkins University.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by

J. B. SCHNEEWIND

Johns Hopkins University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant
 Edited by J. B. Schneewind
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521802598

© Cambridge University Press 2003

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

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

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Moral philosophy from Montaigne to Kant / edited by J.B. Schneewind.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-80259-8 – ISBN 0-521-00304-0 (pbk.)

1. Philosophy, Modern. I. Schneewind, J. B. (Jerome B.), 1930–

BJ301.M67 2002

170–dc21 2002067615

ISBN 978-0-521-80259-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-00304-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Information regarding prices, travel timetables, and other factual information given in this work is correct at the time of first printing but Cambridge University Press does not guarantee the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<i>Foreword to the One-Volume Reprint</i>	xix
Introduction	
Aims of the Anthology	1
European Religious Controversies	3
Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas	4
Luther and Calvin	7
Stoicism and Epicureanism	10
Skepticism	13
The Classical Republic	14
Montaigne's Two Attitudes	16
General Problems for Moral Philosophy	18
Reworking Natural Law	21
Intellect and Morality	23
Epicureans and Egoists	24
Autonomy and Responsibility	26
Conclusion	29
Notes	30
Bibliography	32

PROLEGOMENA: SOME QUESTIONS RAISED

Michel de Montaigne	37
Introduction	37
Apology for Raymond Sebond	38
Of Repentance	45

Of Vanity	55
Of Physiognomy	56
Of Experience	59
Editor's Notes	62
Further Reading	62

PART I. REWORKING NATURAL LAW

Francisco Suarez	67
Introduction	67
On Law and God the Lawgiver	68
Editor's Notes	86
Further Reading	86
Hugo Grotius	88
Introduction	88
On the Law of War and Peace	90
Editor's Notes	109
Further Reading	110
Thomas Hobbes	111
Introduction	111
Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society	112
Editor's Notes	136
Further Reading	136
Richard Cumberland	138
Introduction	138
A Treatise of the Laws of Nature	140
Editor's Notes	154
Further Reading	155
Samuel Pufendorf	156
Introduction	156
On the Duty of Man and Citizen	158
The Law of Nature and of Nations	170
Editor's Notes	181
Further Reading	182

Contents

vii

John Locke	183
Introduction	183
An Essay Concerning Human Understanding	184
The Reasonableness of Christianity	194
Editor's Notes	197
Further Reading	197

PART II. INTELLECT AND MORALITY

Guillaume Du Vair	201
Introduction	201
The Moral Philosophy of the Stoics	202
Editor's Notes	215
Further Reading	215
René Descartes	216
Introduction	216
Discourse on Method	218
Principles of Philosophy	221
Correspondence with Princess Elizabeth and Queen Christina	224
Replies to Objections	233
Editor's Notes	235
Further Reading	235
Benedict de Spinoza	237
Introduction	237
A Treatise on Religion and Politics	239
Ethics	246
Editor's Notes	254
Further Reading	255
Nicholas Malebranche	256
Introduction	256
Treatise of Morality	258
Editor's Notes	273
Further Reading	273

Ralph Cudworth	275
Introduction	275
A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality	277
Editor's Notes	290
Further Reading	291
Samuel Clarke	293
Introduction	293
A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion	295
Editor's Notes	311
Further Reading	312
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz	313
Introduction	313
The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason	315
On Wisdom	318
Felicity	320
Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice	322
<i>Codex iuris gentium (Praefatio)</i>	324
The Principles of Pufendorf	327
Editor's Notes	329
Further Reading	330
Christian Wolff	331
Introduction	331
Reasonable Thoughts About the Actions of Men, for the Promotion of Their Happiness	333
Editor's Notes	348
Further Reading	350

PART III. EPICUREANS AND EGOISTS

Pierre Gassendi	353
Introduction	353
Three Discourses of Happiness, Virtue, and Liberty	355
Editor's Notes	366
Further Reading	367

Contents

ix

Pierre Nicole	369
Introduction	369
Of Charity and Self-Love	370
Editor's Notes	387
Further Reading	387
Bernard Mandeville	388
Introduction	388
The Fable of the Bees	390
An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour	396
Editor's Notes	398
Further Reading	398
John Gay	399
Introduction	399
Concerning the Fundamental Principle of Virtue or Morality	400
Editor's Notes	413
Further Reading	413
Claude Adrien Helvétius	414
Introduction	414
On the Mind	416
Editor's Notes	429
Further Reading	430
Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach	431
Introduction	431
Universal Morality; or, The Duties of Man, Founded on Nature	432
System of Nature	437
Editor's Note	445
Further Reading	445
William Paley	446
Introduction	446
Moral and Political Philosophy	447
Editor's Notes	458
Further Reading	458
Jeremy Bentham	460
Introduction	460
An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation	462

Theory of Legislation	475
Editor's Notes	479
Further Reading	479

PART IV. AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Earl of Shaftesbury	483
Introduction	483
<i>Sensus communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour</i>	485
Soliloquy; or, Advice to an Author	486
An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit	488
Editor's Notes	501
Further Reading	501
Francis Hutcheson	503
Introduction	503
An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue	505
Editor's Notes	523
Further Reading	524
Joseph Butler	525
Introduction	525
Sermons	527
Dissertation on Virtue	542
Editor's Notes	543
Further Reading	544
David Hume	545
Introduction	545
An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals	547
Editor's Notes	566
Further Reading	566
Christian August Crusius	568
Introduction	568
Guide to Rational Living	569
Editor's Notes	585
Further Reading	585

<i>Contents</i>	xi
Richard Price	586
Introduction	586
A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals	588
Editor's Notes	603
Further Reading	603
Jean-Jacques Rousseau	605
Introduction	605
Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men	607
On the Social Contract	615
Emile	623
Editor's Notes	628
Further Reading	629
Thomas Reid	630
Introduction	630
Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind	632
Editor's Notes	640
Further Reading	650
Immanuel Kant	651
Introduction	651
Lectures of Mr. Kant on the Metaphysics of Morals	653
Editor's Notes	662
Further Reading	664
 <i>Supplemental Bibliography</i>	 665

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This anthology grew out of the frustration I came increasingly to feel because of the unavailability of texts I wanted to use in teaching the history of modern moral philosophy. Of course, the ethical writings of Hobbes, Butler, Hume, Bentham, and Kant are and have been regularly available, and it is easy to fill a term with discussions of their work. From time to time I taught the history of ethics doing just that. But I quickly came to realize that analysis and criticism of the arguments of these five philosophers did not give students a real picture of the development of moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The philosophers' writings alone could not convey a sense of the alternatives already available to each of them, nor could they give the students a sense of what besides technical considerations might have motivated their authors to accept, alter, or go entirely beyond existing views. I came to think that if I did not include some of the less frequently studied writers from the period and did not get beyond critical analysis of the arguments, I could not be sure that I was not using my canonical subjects simply as starting points for discussing problems I happened to find important at the moment. And however valuable such a course might be, it would not be a course in the history of the field.

When I tried to move beyond this way of teaching, however, I was blocked by the difficulty of providing source material. There was the old anthology by L. A. Selby-Bigge, *The British Moralists*, which is sporadically in print, and there was its excellent, more recent successor with the same title, edited by D. D. Raphael, which I used many times. Each has its own drawbacks. Selby-Bigge did not aim to cover the seventeenth century, although he included a little Hobbes and some Locke and Cudworth. Raphael, more comprehensive, likewise made Hobbes his earliest writer. But I was coming to think it a mistake to treat Hobbes as the starting point of modern moral philosophy. And as I learned more about the work of the authors whom these editors included, I came to think also that both anthologists were oversimplifying in treating "the British moralists" as a proper unit of study. The British philosophers were indeed carrying on a lively and interesting conversation among themselves. But they were talking about as much to writers from across the English Channel. Although I had taken for granted the influence of British moral philosophy on France and Germany, it now began to seem to me that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

Preface

the influence was reciprocal. If so, then the students needed to learn something of the Continental writers in order to understand the British discussion. But the works of these other participants are even less accessible than those of the British writers would be without the existing anthologies.

As I came to use more varied material in class – beginning with lengthy assignments from Montaigne’s *Essays* and only gradually getting to actual scissors-and-paste handouts – I found that my interests were changing. Much as I was still tempted to linger on the question of the validity of a specific argument or the soundness of an objection, I found more and more that I needed to trace patterns of development, the ways in which a thought introduced by one philosopher was taken up and altered by others or was dropped altogether. I could not, indeed, understand or explain why such changes were made unless I was clear about the philosophical strengths and weaknesses of the earlier position, and this, of course, required critical assessment. But I found equally that many aspects of a later position remained inexplicable until I knew what the earlier views were from which the philosopher had actually started his reflections. A satisfactory answer to the question “Why did he say that?” required a philosophical story, not just a philosophical analysis. And to be able to tell the story, I had to examine a variety of texts that were generally ignored.

The “story” part of what I was saying took me, moreover, beyond purely philosophical considerations into remarks about the philosophers’ social, political, economic, and religious situations and about the reasons they might have had or were known to have had for writing the kinds of things they did. Historical considerations of this kind shed light on the general orientation of a theory and helped the students appreciate the cultural importance of a philosopher’s work. They did not, however, suffice to explain the structure and inner workings of what the philosopher was saying. For that, philosophical discussion remained indispensable. It turned out that the different approaches to the texts could be combined in one course, but it was a different kind of course from the one I had initially taught.

In trying to learn enough to teach the history of ethics in this new way, I made another discovery: that there is surprisingly little secondary literature on many of the moral philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is particularly noticeable if one is looking for help in gaining a historical perspective on them. Among the innumerable studies of the ethics of Hobbes or Hume or Kant, few indeed make serious attempts to locate them in the controversies in which they took themselves to be engaging, and there are not even many critical studies of lesser figures – sometimes none at all. I came to think, therefore, that an anthology of primary material might help stimulate interest in a neglected but quite important part of the history of philosophy. In the bibliographies I give here I have usually omitted German and French writings; but even had I included them, many lists would have remained very short.

The present anthology obviously contains much more material than one

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

could teach in a term or even in a year. The excess is deliberate. It makes it possible for the instructor to give the same basic course several times while varying at least some of the readings. It also enables the instructor to assign several of the authors in each main section while lecturing on only one or two and to assign papers or ask examination questions in which the student is expected to show knowledge of more material than has been covered in class. Students will gain as much from finding out how to do a careful comparative study as from learning how to analyze in detail one philosopher's arguments. Finally, the quantity of material allows the instructor to refer to some of the less familiar philosophical works that constitute the intellectual context of the canonical great writings, knowing that the interested student can read selections from them in the course textbook.

Some of the material included here is so simple as hardly to call for assistance from an instructor, and some is quite difficult. The harder excerpts are, however, no more difficult than those we conventionally expect students to master in a survey course in the history of modern epistemology and metaphysics from Descartes to Kant. Like that course, an introductory course on the history of modern ethics would be accessible to students with little or no preparation in philosophy. The material assembled here can also be used for more advanced courses, including graduate seminars. I need hardly say that it is not suitable for intensive study of any of the individual authors represented.

To anthologize is to mutilate. The period as a whole is only partly represented, because I have not been able to include every philosophical writer who is entitled to a place. Pierre Bayle and Christian Thomasius are the omissions I regret most; readers will readily create their own lists of unfortunate absences. The individual writers suffer as well, with the mutilation more apparent in some cases than in others. The lecturer will, therefore, often need to supplement as well as to comment on what I have included, but I have tried to give enough in each case to ensure that the text presents at least the main points of each author's moral philosophy.

I hope the availability of these texts will enable the development of modern moral philosophy to find its place in the curriculum alongside the history of modern epistemology and metaphysics. The subject is at least as important, and it does not presuppose knowledge of the latter. If the biases in my story of the development of moral philosophy, and their consequences for the selections, turn out to provoke the reader to investigate the history of ethics more fully than the anthology itself makes possible, then my second hope for the book will be realized. The anthology was designed as an aid to teaching and learning. If it leads to more research in a neglected field, so much the better.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

At the end of the job it is a pleasure to thank the people who helped me create this anthology. Jonathan Sinclair-Wilson first encouraged me to present a proposal for it to Cambridge University Press. Terence Moore made important suggestions about its final form and provided thoughtful comments about many of its details. I am grateful to both of them. I thank the anonymous referee who wrote a thoroughly informed and very valuable report on a draft table of contents. My thanks also go to Knud Haakonssen, who commented on a first attempt to abridge Grotius and Pufendorf, and to Onora O'Neill, who read over the Kant selections. I am particularly indebted to Elborg Forster, who delivered an excellent translation of the selection from Nicole in what seemed like no time at all.

I am deeply indebted to Edna Ford, who transposed into the computer endless amounts of more or less unreadable seventeenth- and eighteenth-century text. Her skill is remarkable, and her willingness to tackle “just one more” – and then another – seems to be inexhaustible. Without her assistance it would have been much more difficult to make accessible many of these texts.

My greatest debt is to the students who have taken the courses out of which the anthology grew, listening patiently to my efforts to construct a sensible narrative and, in more recent years, offering their views of the usefulness of tentative selections.

Much of the work on this anthology was done during a sabbatical leave from Johns Hopkins University, whose administration in this as in many other ways has been understanding and helpful in fostering research.

Acknowledgments to publishers who granted permission to use excerpts to which they hold copyright are given in the introductions to the individual authors.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword to the One-Volume Reprint

In the Introduction to the original printing of this anthology I said that a proper account of the readings it contains would require a substantial volume on the history of modern moral philosophy. My attempt to provide such an account is contained in *The Invention of Autonomy*, published about nine years after the anthology was finished.¹ Not surprisingly, as I worked on the book I changed my mind about some of the views I held while preparing the anthology. In this Foreword I first try to supplement the original Introduction by discussing one major theme – the significance of religious voluntarism for moral philosophy – that I think I have come to understand more fully than I did. I then make some comments about how moral philosophers may benefit from the study of the history of their subject.

I have added a brief bibliography, listing some of the work on the history of early modern moral philosophy that has appeared since the anthology was completed. In the body of the reprint I have been able only to correct a few minor errors and typographical mistakes.

I

Contemporary moral philosophy outside the Roman Catholic tradition arose from debates about three views that had been developed by the end of the eighteenth century: utilitarianism, intuitionism, and Kantianism. These alternatives were not among the theories available to thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The texts reprinted here enable the reader to see how and why the newer positions emerged from discussions of moral philosophy in early modern Europe. To interpret the readings is to link them in a narrative that makes sense of them. Any interpretation highlights some aspects of the historical material and gives less weight to other aspects. No single interpretation is the sole correct one, but some ways of linking the readings are better than others.

One interpretation is better than another if it is more comprehensive and more accurate in its use of sources, links more of what they say together, and does a better job of enabling us to find and understand the reasons that led intelligent people to hold the conflicting views that were under discussion.

Other ways of comprehending such disagreements might come from explanations of them in terms of economic or sociological or psychological causes. As philosophers, however, we are interested in the debates insofar as they involved reasoned responses to the arguments and positions that were in question. And when we look at the debates historically we need to be sure that we are considering arguments and views that were known to the participants at the time. Otherwise we run the risk of substituting our own concerns for theirs.

In what follows I sketch a problem that was very much on the minds of philosophers – and many others – in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My interpretive suggestion is that the three main kinds of theory that came to be debated in the following two centuries emerged as attempts to solve this problem. Much of the evidence to support this interpretation is contained in the texts I have assembled here.

In the early modern period it was impossible to think philosophically about morality without considering what God had to do with it. Of course there were doubters and atheists, and some of them, like David Hume, tried to work out ways of understanding morality that made no reference to God.² But most moral philosophers worked on the assumption that God was indispensable for morality. For them the main question was: Just how is God involved?

At least two main kinds of answer were available. One was the straightforward view taught by Martin Luther. Morality is centrally concerned with our obedience to laws that bind all human beings alike. God makes those laws simply by willing that his creatures are to behave in the specific ways that he dictates. In instituting moral law his will is not governed by anything external to itself. In particular there are no values or laws that God must observe. Some of Luther's statements of that view are given in the Introduction (p. 8). John Calvin had a similar position. "God's will," he said, "is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous." We cannot ask why God has willed as he has: To ask that is to suppose something higher than God, which Calvin took to be absurd.³

Nineteenth-century scholars labeled this kind of view voluntarism. Nowadays moral philosophers and theologians think of it as divine command ethics.⁴ Descartes held a version of voluntarism, and more importantly for the history of ethics so did the Lutherans Pufendorf and Crusius. Many other writers on the Continent and in Britain also adhered to it. Thus William Law, an influential eighteenth-century English minister, insisted that "Nothing has a sufficient moral reason or fitness to be done, but because it is the will of God that it should be done." Law went further. God must continually will the rightness of certain acts if they are to continue to be right, just as his will must sustain the existence of the physical universe from moment to moment.⁵

Voluntarism brought together many aspects of Christian teaching. It gave a central place to God's total omnipotence. Indeed some thinkers held that

Foreword to the One-Volume Reprint

xxi

it was the view required by the admission of his omnipotence. Voluntarism seemed to make the foundation of morality clear. It fostered awe and humble obedience, the attitudes proper for human beings to have toward God. And it showed exactly how and why God is essential to morality. There would be no morality at all if God had not willed that we obey specific commands. We are obligated to obey his commands because they are his commands and he can back them with force. The sinfulness of our flawed human nature means that we will usually not obey out of love of God or out of gratitude to him. But we can be made to obey out of fear of punishment and hope of reward. This overall picture appealed to many deeply religious Christians.

It appalled others. It seemed to them to make God into a tyrant. His commands seem wholly arbitrary because they do not have to be guided by independent standards of goodness or rightness. We cannot know whether he loves us or not because we cannot understand his will. How can we love a being like this? This is no loving father caring for his children, but an unprincipled despot. Yet the scripture tells us that Christ commanded us to love God above all else. He also taught us to act with love toward other people, and not just from fear of punishment or selfish hope of reward. Voluntarism, its critics said, makes Christian love impossible. It was morally unacceptable and had to be rejected for that reason.

What, then, is the alternative? Two problems had to be solved to work out a satisfactory answer. First, the anti-voluntarist had to show how we can be sure that morality applies both to God and to humans. This required that the basis or foundation for morality – whatever makes it binding on us – be shown to make it binding on God as well. Second, the anti-voluntarist had to explain how it is that God is essential to morality. The second question was as important during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the first. A view that made morality wholly independent of God was taken to amount to atheism, which for the vast majority was unthinkable. But any adequate solution to the first problem seemed to make the second problem much more difficult than it was for the voluntarists.

We can see why if we see that the anti-voluntarists had to produce a basic principle or set of principles that met four conditions. First, the basic principles had to be necessarily tied to what makes anyone capable of acting for reasons. Otherwise the anti-voluntarists could not argue that such principles must be common to humans and to God. Second, the principles had to be able to answer all moral questions. Otherwise room would be left for God to make arbitrary moral decisions. Third, moral principles had to be accessible to us without any help from revelation. Otherwise we would be left without assurance of the ultimate justifiability of God's communications to us. And finally there had to be a tie between motivation to act morally and awareness of moral principles. Only then could we be sure that we would not be forced to rely on divine threats and offers to get most people to act as the principles direct – and that God, who cannot be threatened, would also act on them.

Each of the three kinds of theory that emerged by the end of the eighteenth century tries to meet these conditions, in different ways. Consider first the

view that right acts are those that produce the best consequences. Reasonable agents expect good to result from their actions and would not do them if only bad resulted, or if there were other acts that would bring about more good. This seems to be so obvious that it is easy to think that it is a simple definition of rational action. And we get started on a complete theory when the philosopher fills in the notion of the good that rationality requires us to maximize. Is the good taken to be pleasure? We get various forms of utilitarianism. Is the good human perfection? Then we get different perfectionist views. From this point on the philosopher's task is to show how all of morality follows once it is specified what constitutes the good.

Intuitionism starts from what was then a generally accepted view. Reasoning in every field starts with self-evident principles. After all, we cannot prove everything we say. We have to start from claims that can be seen to be true without argument. That is how geometry starts, and there seem to be moral principles that are every bit as obvious as the axioms of geometry. The mental ability to grasp self-evident truths is intuition. At least some of the basic principles of morals seem self-evident to any reasonable agent. The philosopher's job is then to show that there are enough such principles to cover the whole of morality.

And finally Kantianism. Kant presented his principle as articulating the core requirement of practical reason itself. All reasoning requires the avoidance of self-contradiction. As rational agents, we act not just from impulse or blind desire but for reasons. And if we have a reason to act in a certain way in a specific case, we have a similar reason to act in the same way in cases that are just like the first one. Kant argued that respecting this practical principle is a matter of respecting rational agency as such, and he claimed he could develop the whole of morality from these considerations.

Once philosophers found principles that met these conditions for responding to voluntarism, they were faced with the second problem. Any principle that meets all the conditions would seem to leave no part for God to play in morality. If we can by ourselves know what we ought to do in every case, at least in principle, and if we can always be moved to do it from within ourselves, what need have we of the divinity? The anti-voluntarists seemed to be moving toward atheism or, as we would now say, toward secularism. Most of them did not intend to do so. What, then, could they say of God's role? What is there left for him to do?

The general answer was that God is needed to assure us that the universe is friendly to morality. The morality that reason shows us engages us in a cooperative endeavor with others. Much of what it requires makes sense only if other people are trying to do their part along with us and if most people succeed most of the time. Otherwise the sacrifices called for by morality would be senseless. And of course it cannot be reasonable to engage in senseless activity. How can we be sure that doing what is required by a reasonable morality has any chance of resulting in a decent and livable world? Modern science was no help here. It presented a world that was completely indiffer-

Foreword to the One-Volume Reprint

xxiii

ent to the values that guide our lives and our societies. Nature neither helps nor hinders us. We need a God – a “divine superintendent,” as Adam Smith called him – to assure us that we live in a universe that is friendly to morality. The passage from Cumberland in the Introduction to this volume (p. 22) shows one way in which this point was expressed at the time.

The anti-voluntarists were moved by an intense feeling that voluntarism presented a morally degrading picture both of human beings and of God. They saw the view as fundamentally at odds with the Christian moral teaching that centered on love. They also saw it as having dangerous political implications. If God ruled us as a despot, why might not earthly rulers do the same? The political analog of God’s absolute will was never far from the minds of the anti-voluntarists.

II

The controversy about voluntarism illustrates two important points about the history of ethics. First, modern thought about our moral convictions and about the psychology and metaphysics presupposed by them was profoundly shaped by moral and political concerns. Philosophers did not simply apply to morality the theoretical views they worked out in response to problems posed by skepticism and the new science. Moral and political beliefs helped shape the epistemologies they developed to explain our awareness of how we ought to behave.

Second, the issues that shaped the development of early modern moral philosophy arose largely from problems specific to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were different from both the problems faced by ancient philosophers and our own problems. The point can be illustrated by looking at a kind of argument that anti-voluntarists repeatedly used against the voluntarists. “It is agreed,” Leibniz wrote, “that whatever God wills is good and just. But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just.” To take the first position, the voluntarist position, is to “destroy the justice of God. For why praise him because he acts according to justice, if the notion of justice, in his case, adds nothing to that of action?” (Leibniz, this volume p. 322; see also pp. 327–9). On the voluntarist view, saying that God acts justly is saying only that God acts as he wills to act. But we mean to praise God when we say he acts justly. The voluntarist makes this impossible.

Now this looks very much like the argument that Plato has Socrates bring to bear in the *Euthyphro*. Euthyphro claimed that bringing a law suit against his father would be right because the gods would approve it. Socrates asked him whether it would be right because the gods approved, or whether the gods approved because it was right. The former answer would yield something like a voluntarist view, and it seemed (so Plato suggests) so obviously wrong that Euthyphro would hesitate to accept it. The strength of the argument is clear.

Some of the anti-voluntarists explicitly appealed to this Platonic dialogue. But what they were doing in using arguments of the Socratic kind was confronting a widely accepted interpretation of the dominant ideology of Europe. It was an interpretation of Christianity that insisted on a humbling and deprecatory vision of human capacities, to which the anti-voluntarists were strongly opposed. Against the Augustinian view as restated by Luther and Calvin the early modern anti-voluntarists were creating and defending a new moral vision of human dignity. All of this was plainly not something that Socrates or Plato could even have imagined doing. They did not have the Christian conceptions of God and original sin and so could not have been trying to work out alternative interpretations of them.

We will therefore miss a great deal if we think that the point of the Euthyphro-like argument used by Leibniz and others was simply to get straight on the analysis of moral terms or to correct a conceptual error made by predecessors. The point was much larger. The philosophers' debates arose from problems that were vitally important within the culture in which they occurred. We must look outside of the purely philosophical debates to see why the issues were urgent. And we need the same frame of reference in order to understand the precise shape the problem took and the constraints on what could count as an adequate answer.

In our own time arguments against naturalistic accounts of morality often remind us of the Euthyphro argument. It can thus easily seem as if there is a recurrent problem, first noticed by Plato, with defining moral concepts in terms of non-moral ones (what the gods want, what the Christian God commands, what evolution leads to, what is pleasant). And we might take this as a model of the concerns of moral philosophy. We might think that philosophical problems arise simply from reflection on ideas that are always involved in morality. We can of course confine our philosophy within these limits. We get some useful analyses and arguments by doing so. But we miss the larger significance that moral philosophy has had and can continue to have if it remains as responsive to issues outside of itself as it has been in the past.

Histories of moral philosophy written in the last century and a half have not on the whole helped us to understand the way in which the works they study have been connected with the problems of the societies in which they were written. Such histories – the most influential early example is the *Outlines of the History of Ethics* by Henry Sidgwick (1886) – tend to confine themselves to discussion of issues internal to systematic philosophical thought about morality. They thus reinforce the image of the subject created by the academic study of it. They treat moral philosophy as if it had always been a self-enclosed discipline to be taught and advanced by scholars who are credentialed and evaluated by others in the same profession. They have often taken the problems and methods of the moral philosophy of their time as the way the subject has to be. They have not asked how and why those problems came to be discussed and those methods used. They assumed, that is, that the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80259-8 - Moran Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant

Edited by J. B. Schneewind

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Foreword to the One-Volume Reprint*

xxv

answer to the question “What is the moral philosopher doing?” is always the same: trying to solve philosophical problems.

Much valuable history of philosophy has been written in this style. But it would now be useful to realize that there can be many answers to the question of what the philosopher is doing. Philosophy can be and has been used to address problems that begin outside of philosophy and are of significance to the society generally. For example, in addressing the question of whether moral concepts can be defined in terms of non-moral concepts the early modern anti-voluntarists were attacking what they took to be a degrading view of human beings, criticizing a source of support for political despotism, and trying to free their societies from certain kinds of dictation by the clergy. If we see that in the past moral philosophers have used their philosophy for purposes like these we may feel freer to ask whether our own philosophical activity can help with the problems of our own times.

English-language moral philosophy during the last three decades of the previous century has increasingly turned toward such issues. Moral philosophers began to ask how their abstract theories might be of use in addressing the problems of fairness in the distribution of wealth and income, racial justice, peace, the equality of women, and new issues created by science and technology in medicine and elsewhere. They did less in asking how those problems might contribute to the reshaping of abstract philosophical theories. Recovery of past thought, its social contexts, and its purposes, is valuable in its own right. But in addition, a fuller and more varied historiography of moral philosophy might help to enrich the subject itself.

Notes

1. J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
2. Some philosophers who did not present themselves as atheists were widely taken to be unbelievers nonetheless. Spinoza is a prime example. See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2001), chs. 12–17, for an important study of his thought and its influence.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. (London: 1941), III.xxiii.2.
4. For a brief account of contemporary discussions, with useful references, see “Divine Command Ethics” by Janine Marie Idziak, in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 453–9.
5. William Law, *The Case of Reason, or Natural Religion* (London, 1731), reprinted in *The Works of the Reverend William Law* (Brockenhurst, Hampshire: G. Moreton, 1892), vol. 2, pp. 86–7, cf. p. 68. Voluntarism continued to be defended in Britain in the nineteenth century. John Stuart Mill took it seriously enough to write a scathing diatribe against it, one that echoes many of the earlier objections made to it. See Mill’s *Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy* (1865), ch. VII.