Introduction

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This book has what might seem an impossible goal: to provide in a single volume a sophisticated analysis of the dominant figures in the development of Western moral thought from the pre-Socratics through to the present day. Chronologically, this spans close to three thousand years. Exegetically, most of the figures involved are already the subjects of a secondary literature running into thousands of publications – in the case of authors such as Plato or Aristotle, of course, it goes far beyond even that. Offering a synoptic treatment of the shifting development of ethical and meta-ethical thought over this time frame is thus difficult, but it is also, we believe, extremely important – and for at least three reasons.

First, and most obviously, the type of focussed analysis offered in this volume provides a natural point of orientation for anyone approaching a given thinker or school for the first time. This applies both to scholars of one period interested in examining how the questions and the debates with which they are familiar are developed, discussed or dismissed in a very different intellectual context, and to those working on contemporary ethics or meta-ethics who want to explore some of the sedimented background that shapes current thinking on these matters. We have sought throughout to ensure that all chapters are accessible without specific prior knowledge of the philosopher's terminology or technical apparatus. Contributors have also flagged, at the end of each chapter, secondary literature especially suitable for further reading: these items are marked with an asterisk.

Second, by offering an overview of each figure or school, the chapters in this volume are able to sustain a form of clarity that is not always possible in much lengthier and more detailed works. In short, there are benefits in operating at all of the possible levels of resolution when doing the history of philosophy, and we believe that the combination of concision and use of the latest research will allow the chapters here to shed new light even on authors whom the reader may know very well.

Third, the scope of the volume fosters an important type of conceptual juxtaposition. In some cases, this juxtaposition is formally recognised, as it tracks patterns of influence so significant that they dictate the agenda: for example, the chapter on Albert, Aquinas and the issue of 'Christian Aristotelianism'. In many other cases, however, the juxtapositions involved occur naturally in the mind of the reader as he or she sees questions, methods and concepts picked up, reformulated and transmuted by different authors. Sometimes this takes the form of cross-period thematic similarities – for example, the complex pattern of similarities and dissimilarities between aspects of Anselm's position and parts of Kant's. Sometimes it takes the form of changes in what one might call the 'standing constraints', the underlying assumptions in a given period on what any adequate moral theory or moral method should look like. A particularly prominent example is the question of how philosophy should interact with revealed religion, an issue central to the discussion of cases ranging from medieval Jewish thought through the Scholasticism of the later middle ages to Bayle, Kant and others. The developments in such constraints that this book chronicles are, of course, in part a result of factors outside of philosophical competence – industrialisation, for example. But by bringing together these authors and schools in a single volume, the hope is to provide a bird's eye view of some of the key conceptual shifts that feed into this type of large-scale change in the moral landscape.

Edited volumes often open with an introduction that provides a series of potted summaries of the various contributions. Given the scale of the present text, that would not be helpful, and we will leave the individual chapters to speak for themselves. It may help, however to make three brief remarks that can serve as background to what follows.

In the opening paragraph of this introduction, we moved fluidly between talk of 'ethics' and talk of 'morals'. This type of shift is particularly visible in contemporary writing. Indeed, it is to a large extent forced by current terminology: even those who see themselves as doing moral philosophy are unlikely to talk about 'meta-morals' rather than 'meta-ethics'. For some of the authors and movements discussed below much the same applies – over half of the contributors state that they will use 'ethics' and 'morals' interchangeably, with the same applying to their cognates. But for others the distinction marks a fundamental difference. Compare, for example, Hegel and the Habermas of texts such as *Justification and Application*. Both agree that there is a philosophical distinction to be drawn between ethics and morals; and they are readable as having opposing views on the explanatory priority of the two. More broadly there is also the further issue, one that arises particularly but not exclusively

when ethics and morality are equated, of whether the normative standards discussed in what follows are really best thought of as either moral *or* ethical (rather than, say, ontological). This type of issue is particularly visible in modern thinkers – it is discussed extensively here, for example, in relation both to Marx and to Heidegger. Ultimately, the philosophical theories that follow are attempts to gloss terms like 'morality' and 'ethics', and to trace their boundaries – this introduction can serve only to highlight the issue, and particularly the complex problems, problems of translation in the deepest sense, that arise when one tries to switch between these ideas in a Greek or German Idealist or French post-war context.

The next issue concerns scope. This volume is intended not as a history of moral thought *simpliciter*, but rather of moral thought within the Western tradition. Terms like 'Western' are evidently as contested and problematic as 'moral', but we have attempted to read the category broadly. It thus includes, for example, a study of traditions that existed to some degree in dialogue with the standard Western canon – for example, medieval Islamicate thought. Why is the text limited in this fashion? One immediate reason is simply scope – no global study of moral thought (one which would immediately make the issue of what constitutes the moral even more problematic) could hope to achieve the desired balance between tightness of focus and depth of coverage in a single volume. A second reason is that in concentrating on a single tradition, broadly construed, one in which many of the figures would have read or at least known of many of those who preceded them, the volume is able to track and illustrate the way in which arguments and concepts are appropriated, challenged and transformed by a philosopher and his or her successors. This is an important part of what makes the volume a *history*, rather than simply a chronological list or a study of certain conceptual problems that happened to have been addressed by many different people in many different places – and it would not be possible in a study that encompassed large numbers of authors who lacked this kind of common textual framework.[1]

The final issue concerns the distinctive status of moral philosophy and its interaction with other forms of reflection. Moral philosophy is characterised by the kind of urgency that other branches of philosophy lack. There is a perfectly coherent sense in which questions about the nature of time, the identity of

[1] One might agree with this and nevertheless object that the histories, in this sense, of non-Western thinkers have been inexcusably neglected by professional philosophers. We are sympathetic to that view, but rectifying that failing is not the task of the present text.

persons, the possibility of causation or life after death can be postponed; one may even reach the conclusion that they do not permit of definitive universal answers at all. Things are different in moral matters. If we suspend judgement about what to do we will, in effect, have done something already. Moreover, we will have done something about which we do not know whether it was justified. In this sense, action is inevitable in a way in which belief is not. Yet there are rarely any sharp boundaries between moral philosophy and other philosophical and non-philosophical disciplines. Which of the many other areas – epistemology, metaphysics, theology, political philosophy, psychology, education and aesthetics – are principally aligned with moral philosophy, even whether it is perceived as a distinct discipline and, if so, what it is called, largely depends on historical circumstances. One of the aims of this volume is to bring that out, and to show how ethics and morals have been variously aligned with ontology, politics, aesthetics, mathematics and others depending on the particular assumptions and goals of the thinker in question.

As will become clear in what follows, the solutions proposed to the question of how to lead our lives differ vastly. It is, for instance, tempting to assume that the moral status of an action depends on the effects it has on the well-being of the agent, the community, the human race in general or some even broader group of beings – which in turn immediately leads to the question of what well-being consists in. It is also plausible to assume that, as human beings, we ought to obey certain authoritative laws; but then we would also like to know what makes these laws authoritative, whether they are, for instance, imposed upon us by some higher being, by society or by the very nature of these laws. Or maybe we think that agreement among rational agents as such is what makes a good action good (to name but a few of many available options). And there are further problems that a moral philosopher, of whatever persuasion, needs to address. How do we come to apprehend the norms or values that underpin good choices? How do we come to act on them? What, if anything, separates judgement or apprehension from action? Can moral goodness be taught, and if so how? And do any of these answers depend on a notion of freedom of the will that is incompatible with the various determinisms philosophy and theology have to offer? What is more, disagreement about these higher-level as well as concrete moral questions among philosophers and ordinary moral agents may well fuel scepticism as to whether there *are* universal answers after all. For the reasons mentioned above, the challenge then is whether such scepticism is sustainable. The fifty-four chapters united in this volume reflect the diversity and richness of these questions, and of the methods and approaches which have been employed to make sense of them throughout the history of moral philosophy.

1

Ethics before Socrates

CATHERINE ROWETT

It is sometimes said that no one talked about ethics until Socrates diverted philosophy from its early investigations into nature towards matters of practical value. The popularity of this rather inaccurate claim may be due to Aristotle, or perhaps Cicero.[1] Part of my aim in this chapter is to put the record straight, to investigate what we can find among the Presocratic philosophers that can be construed as ethical, and to note a few small but interesting contributions made by these thinkers to the development of Western moral philosophy. Since the Sophists, who are sometimes counted among the Presocratics, are, for the purposes of this volume, included with Socrates in Chapter 2, our task in this chapter is to focus on ethical thought before the Sophists. That means we shall be covering the period up to the fifth century BCE. Before going further we should also note that most of the work of the Presocratic philosophers is lost, so we must reconstruct their ideas and arguments from a mixture of quotations in later writers and second-hand reports (*testimonia*). I cite the quoted fragments using the standard referencing system from Diels-Kranz.[2]

Obviously, the highly sophisticated challenges to traditional ethics that we find in the Presocratics, the Sophists and Socrates did not emerge out of nothing. When they investigate the notion of 'virtue', *aretê* – so prominent in Greek ethics – Greek philosophers are deploying and scrutinizing a concept that was familiar from ordinary language. 'Virtue' for any society consists in whatever characteristics command admiration and respect, which are the standard target in the society's education and training for young citizens. Just as modern societies privilege certain behaviors and attitudes of mind, so also

[1] Probably it was Aristotle (*Parts of Animals* 642a28; *Metaphysics* 987b1–4). See also Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.10 and *Academica* 1.5.15.

[2] Diels and Kranz 1951. All subsequent editions and translations have concordances that link to these references.

did the social conditioning of ancient Greek *polis* cultures. These values are then the starting point of their enquiries into ethics.

In archaic Greece, a male child from a good family typically took classes with a grammar teacher and a music teacher, learning to read, copy and sing the works of the poets. He would also learn wrestling and athletics at the gym. Training in body and soul were needed to turn a boy into what a man should be. The psychological part of this training included poetry by Homer and Hesiod, and also the lyric poets, such as Simonides (c. 500 BCE). In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, set in about 433 BCE, the characters discuss some lines from a poem by Simonides about how hard it is to be good.[3] Plato's character Protagoras asserts that the mark of a properly educated man is the ability to discuss poetry and to distinguish what is well said from what is not.[4] Such discussions were not primarily literary or aesthetic, as the example in *Protagoras* shows: Protagoras considers whether Simonides' views about virtue and its attainability are consistent. The discussion of poetry was clearly not just a way to entertain friends. It provided an opportunity to engage with the ideas expressed there, in critical thinking and discussion. The poet is taken as a partner in the debate: someone who offers an opinion. The educated man is then expected to explain it, debate it, compare it with rival views in other poems. In studying and discussing the poets, young citizens would learn to think and ask questions, not just habituate themselves to an existing moral code (though there clearly was some of that).[5]

DO THE GODS LIE?

Homer's poems portray many colorful human characters, many of them with failings and character traits unsuitable for emulation. Achilles and Agamemnon squabble because Agamemnon (who still has a wife at home) has commandeered Achilles' favorite war prize (a princess, whose parents and husband Achilles had killed when the Greeks sacked Lyrnessus). That squabble forms the starting point of the Iliad; and things show little improvement in the rest of the poem.[6] Equally, in the Odyssey, the wily Odysseus displays a canny habit of

[3] Plato *Protagoras* 338e–347b. The poem is otherwise lost, apart from the lines that Plato quotes.

[4] *Protagoras* 339a.

[5] On early Greek moral thought, including Homer and Pindar, see McKirahan 1994: 356–63.

[6] Arguably the Trojans appear more admirable, morally, than the Greeks. See Mackie 1996 and Hall 1989, and contrast the nineteenth-century attempt to show otherwise in Gladstone 1858.

lying to avoid trouble. Some Homeric characters are admirable (Penelope for instance); others are not. Rather than presenting these characters as ideal role models, schoolmasters surely must have valued the poems because they dramatize difficult choices in life, and illustrate the need for strength of character, to bear up through trials and misfortunes. There are also similar themes in Greek tragedy – as when Agamemnon must decide whether to sacrifice his daughter[7] and when Antigone opts to bury her traitor brother.[8] Students who read or performed these plays would clearly acquire a vivid understanding of the dilemmas and risks of adult life, and how to face misfortune with dignity.

It was not only the mortals who were portrayed as fickle and false, but also (more problematically, it seems) the gods. Homer's gods engage in deception, protect their favorites, set the odds against one in battle. Arguably such stories offer a salutary lesson for life. There is explanatory value in the idea that fortune is fickle, and that bad luck might be visited upon us by 'the gods'. We could see these motifs as evoking something equivalent to the idea that unfairness is built into the metaphysics of the world. Potentially this represents an ethical assessment of our predicament that we could still endorse even now.

On the other hand, by attributing this unpredictability to the disreputable behavior of the *gods*, the poets exposed themselves to potential criticism. In the sixth century BCE, the philosopher-poet Xenophanes developed a new philosophical notion of the divine as a single, unitary, all-powerful being, with perfect moral standards. In comparison with that ideal god, Xenophanes saw serious deficiencies in those all-too-human gods in Homer and the other poets.[9] In Fragment 11, he writes:

> Everything that's shameful and disgusting among human beings–
> all this, Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods!
> Stealing, adulterous affairs, cheating each other.

His implicit argument can be understood as follows: (1) proper gods are perfect, and cannot cheat or be deceived; (2) in Homer and Hesiod, the gods are immoral and easily corrupted; (3) therefore Homer and Hesiod present bad theology. His reasoning seems to draw on the following three ethical assumptions: first, the divine perfections include moral perfection; second, what is offensive among mortals is, or should be, equally offensive among gods, which implies that morality is no mere mortal convention; and third, one can criticize the poets (despite their reputation as the traditional

[7] Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 204–27. See Nussbaum 1986. [8] Sophocles *Antigone*.
[9] Plato *Republic* Book 3 continues the same campaign, a century or more later.

authority concerning theology and morality), because (apparently) reasoning trumps tradition in judging theological and ethical truth.

Besides philosophical poems, Xenophanes wrote after-dinner lyrics, of which two survive complete. In one of these (Fragment 2) Xenophanes remarks on the mistaken values of the *polis*, insofar as it typically bestows great honors on those who win at the Olympic Games. This is silly, he suggests, since athletic ability is of no real value to the athlete's city: no city improves its laws or fattens its coffers by winning in the Olympics. By contrast, real benefits can accrue if the city has a wise person in charge, so that is what should be honored and rewarded. It seems clear that Xenophanes is thinking of his own role as philosopher, and that he considers it a useful one and deserving of honor. The wise man contributes real benefits to the city's political and economic prosperity. Among other things, Xenophanes may well be thinking of the widespread practice of inviting a 'wise man' to draft the constitutions for new colonies, or to revise existing codes of law.[10]

In the other poem (Fragment 1), Xenophanes reflects on proper behavior at drinking parties. He is no puritan: 'It's not impolite to drink as much as you can take, so long as you can still get home without assistance.'[11] On the other hand, he has some ethical advice to give about what kind of stories to tell in the sympotic entertainment: one should not tell of the battles of Titans, Giants and Centaurs, he says, which are just figments of past ages. One should speak rather of historical deeds of valor (or virtue – the scope is unclear), based on actual living memory.[12]

NATURAL LAW AND HUMAN MORALITY

In Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) we find what looks like a rival to Xenophanes' views on divinity, although much is uncertain, due to the obscurity and brevity of the Heraclitean sayings. Certainly, Homer and Hesiod come in for further attacks. Heraclitus wants Homer beaten and expelled from the poetry contests (along with Archilochus);[13] he challenges Hesiod's reputation as a teacher of 'many things' (referring, perhaps, to the practical advice in *Works and Days*).[14] On the other hand, Heraclitus denies that we can read off

[10] Xenophanes fr 2.19 DK. Cf. Aelian *Varia Historia* 3.17 on known philosophers involved in political guidance or legislation (though Xenophanes is not included there).

[11] Xenophanes frr 1.17–18 DK. [12] Xenophanes fr 1.20 DK. [13] Heraclitus fr 42 DK.

[14] Heraclitus fr 57 DK. Cf. fr 40 DK which criticizes Hesiod, Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Hecataeus for achieving polymathy without wisdom.

theological ethical standards from human ones. As regards ethics (*êthos*), he says, 'human life lacks standards, while the divine life has them'.[15] And 'Compared to God, the wisest human resembles an ape, in wisdom, beauty and everything else.'[16] So when he says 'To God, all things are noble and good and just, but human beings have understood some of them to be unjust and others just',[17] it seems that Heraclitus probably means that we cannot discover absolute moral truths by looking at human moral codes. This could imply that there are no absolute moral truths. Alternatively he may mean that, if such truths exist, they are quite unlike morality as we know it. On the other hand some sayings suggest a close dependency connection between divine morality and civic customs: Fragment 114 claims that human customs draw nourishment from a divine law and are to be respected and defended. And in Fragment 53 Heraclitus pithily observes that war (here called 'king') is what divides people into the slaves and the free.

REINCARNATION AND CLEAN HANDS

Particularly characteristic of early philosophy in southern Italy (including the Pythagorean tradition) is an interest in the transmigration of the soul into other bodies (human, animal or plant) after death. These reincarnation theories typically include ethical components. For instance, there may be a way to escape from the cycle of lives, or advance to a higher life, by achieving certain exacting standards of purity and sanctity.

For Pythagoras himself (sixth century BCE) we struggle to reconstruct the doctrines reliably, due to limited and often contaminated evidence, but we have better resources relating to the poet-philosopher Empedocles (fifth century BCE). Empedocles holds that the world is alternately governed by forces of increasing love (drawing things together) and increasing strife (setting things at odds and apart), with intervening periods of unity and division. Alongside this cosmic structure, he has an ethical story about souls (*daimones*) that wander in exile, tormented by strife and longing to return to their divine home under love.[18]

[15] Heraclitus fr 78 DK. I have translated *êthos* as 'life' and *gnômai* as 'standards'. Alternatively *gnômai* might mean 'measures', or 'wits', or 'judgement'.

[16] Heraclitus fr 83 DK. [17] Heraclitus fr 102 DK.

[18] For present purposes we need not settle the controversy over whether Empedocles wrote separate poems about cosmology and ethics. I shall treat the two topics as interrelated, and I adopt 'soul' as a serviceable (but not loaded) term for what Empedocles means by *daimon*.

If this cycle of love and strife is cosmic and automated, what prospect can there be that the soul could voluntarily improve its chances of a rapid return from exile? What scope do we have to combat the inexorable advance of strife?[19] It seems that there must be some room for choice and moral responsibility; for according to the poem's protagonist, pictured as a soul in exile, we are held blameworthy for some offences, and for their dire consequences. There are passages that lament the sin of eating meat,[20] and exhort the listener to avoid killing animals for sacrifice and eating 'each other'.[21] The reason is apparently that the animals due to be killed and eaten are members of one's own family. The argument must be something like this: 'You would be horrified by eating your own child or mother; but you kill and eat some animal, supposing it is not your mother or child; but in fact it is, or might be, just that. So, you should be horrified.' The argument is not spelled out in this way, but is expressed as a myth, and a cry of despair. Nevertheless, it clearly appeals to motifs such as the sanctity of life, and the kinship of all living beings (or the impossibility of knowing which are kin).[22]

In other surviving fragments, Empedocles describes a world in which everyone was gentle and kind, humans and animals lived together, and there were no blood sacrifices.[23] This was apparently a sort of golden age, when Love was Queen.[24] Is this alternative regime something that we can restore by our own moral efforts, or does it just happen automatically when the time is right? The answer is unclear, but either way, it is clearly an ethically superior society, and an ideal that the true followers should long for.

DID DEMOCRITUS ANTICIPATE SOCRATES?

Our search for ethics before Socrates concludes with Democritus (fifth century, contemporary with the Sophists and Socrates). He is famous above all for his atomist physical theory, but we also have a considerable body of material, albeit fragmentary, that relates to ethics.

In approaching Democritus' ethics, there is a risk of falling into one of two problematic patterns of thought. One is to treat the texts as isolated

[19] For a more technical (and controversial) exploration of this question see Osborne 2005: 283–308.

[20] Strasbourg Papyrus, Ensemble d (probably identical to fr 139 DK, or repetition of identical lines).

[21] Empedocles frr 136, 137, 138 DK.

[22] For a fuller exploration see Osborne 2007: ch. 3.

[23] Empedocles frr 128, 130.

[24] Empedocles fr 128.3.