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Western Ethics to the Modern Age

*These are the main features of Aristotle's Man of Justifiable Pride . . . the Man of Perfected Self-Righteousness: he who is . . . so assured of his own perfect virtue and so secure in it, that he can . . . justly demand the highest honour in recognition of his perfect virtue . . . Having no sense of his own radical imperfection, he knows no humility and no gratitude. Having no fear of doing wrong, he never has need of forgiveness, or of repentance and expiation; . . . and in his perfect self-sufficiency is accountable neither to other men, nor to the God whom Aristotle occasionally mentions.**

*From the moment, then, when "by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, because all men sinned," the entire mass of our nature was ruined beyond doubt, and fell into the possession of its destroyer. And from him no one—no, not one—has been delivered, or is being delivered, or ever will be delivered, except by the grace of the redeemer.***

THREE BASIC QUESTIONS

The history of moral philosophy is the history of how our thinking about moral issues has been shaped by the wisdom of the past. All moral theories attempt to answer the following questions: (1) what is the intended goal of my moral action; (2) what is the source of or authority for my moral action; and (3) how do I evaluate my moral action?

All action, including moral action, is intended for some end. Moral theories differ about the ends they propose for moral behavior. Most suggest happiness, but happiness can be understood as sensual pleasure, serving others, intellectual contemplation, or in other ways. All moral

*Dorothea Krook, *Three Traditions of Moral Thought* (Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1959), p. 73.

**St. Augustine, "The Grace of Christ and Original Sin," in *An Augustine Reader*, ed. John J. O'Meara (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), p. 476

schemes rely upon some authority for knowing what to do: Reason, the will of God, intuition, and inclination are among the various sources of moral wisdom. The evaluation of moral action is as diverse as its various ends and sources. Some theories judge an act by its intention, others by its consequences.

In our survey of the major moral philosophies of the West, we shall be concerned with the significant answers they have provided to the three questions above. Those moral philosophies that demand our attention today have contributed in some lasting way to our self-understanding as moral persons. Each has offered us an insight into some aspect of moral reflection, which we can neglect only at our peril.

We will not, therefore, be attempting an exhaustive analysis of each moral philosopher. We will try to identify those elements in the history of moral thinking that have made a permanent impact upon the discussion of morality in our own time.

THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN FRAMEWORK OF WESTERN ETHICS

Although most major moral philosophers and most of those who analyze moral thinking today are not working out of a self-consciously chosen Christian or Jewish framework, it is a fact that most people in the Western world who make moral decisions do so within one of these two frameworks. Whether their choices are as carefully thought through or understood as are those of philosophers of moral theory is another matter. But if we were to allocate space in our historical review of moral theory according to the degree of influence moral theories have had, our study might be almost exclusively confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Regardless of our opinion of the harm or benefit of their moral teachings, the traditions of Judaism and Christianity influence the decision making of far more people than those who will ever read the moral thought of most of those philosophers examined in this study.

Morality and Religion

The influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been so deep and pervasive that many people equate morality with religion and religion with this Bible-inspired tradition. Both equations are misleading. It is possible for a moral philosophy to develop without conscious reference to a supreme being or to the traditional notion of God. Some philosophers (such as Paul Tillich) have argued that every philosophy presupposes some notion of an ultimate reality and thus has within it a notion of God, however different that notion might be from the view of God held by the orthodox theologies of the biblical religions. Religion itself is a broad phenomenon that encom-

passes a variety of beliefs and expressions, of which Christianity and Judaism are only two. Religion, one writer has argued, "is constituted by the most ultimate, least easily surrendered, most comprehensive choices a person or a society acts out. It is the living out of an intention, an option, a selection among life's possibilities."¹

This accent on the element of moral choice essential to religion is echoed by Ronald Cavanagh when he refers to religion as the "varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them."² Religion involves moral choice, and all fundamental affirmations of value entail some form of religion, no matter how different those forms are from the ones prevailing in Western culture.

RELIGION AS ULTIMATE CONCERN

Man, like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence, such as food and shelter. But man, in contrast to other living beings, has spiritual concerns—cognitive, aesthetic, social, political. Some of them are urgent, often extremely urgent, and each of them as well as the vital concerns can claim ultimacy for a human life or the life of a social group. If it claims ultimacy it demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim, and it promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name.

Modern humanist faith is a state of ultimate concern. This gives it its tremendous power for good and evil. In view of this analysis of humanist faith, it is almost ridiculous to speak of the loss of faith in the Western secular world. It has a secular faith, and this has pushed the different forms of religion into a defensive position; but it is faith and not "unbelief." It is a state of ultimate concern and total devotion to this concern.

Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 1, 68–69.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) was one of the twentieth century's most prominent Christian theologians. He taught at Union Theological

¹Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 2.

²Ronald Cavanagh, "The Term Religion," in *Introduction to the Study of Religion*, ed. T. William Hall (New York: Harper, 1978), p. 19.

Seminary, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. He was the author of a three-volume Systematic Theology and numerous popular works on theology in relation to culture, science, art, and philosophy.

THE ETHICS OF JUDAISM

The first of the biblical religions was Judaism. It emerged over 6,000 years ago as different tribes of people were brought together through the power of a unifying belief in a single God. In their scripture the Jews recorded their memory of the events that had brought their nation of Israel into being. In the recital of these events the foundation of their morality was laid. God, or Yahweh, had liberated them from slavery, granted them a set of laws (Torah), bound them in a covenant relationship with Him, and brought them to a land in which they were commanded to live out the moral laws He had given them. Judaism is a God-centered religion; consequently, the values its people are expected to adopt must ultimately have divine sanction. The living out of these values often involves following a complicated set of laws, such as dietary laws. Behind these beliefs is the claim that in God's covenant Jews (and potentially all persons) have found the source of their fulfillment. The token of that covenant is the law with which He binds the people to Him. Therefore, the law to Jews is not a burden but a gift.

Justice and Love

It is misleading to overemphasize the strict detail of Jewish ceremonial law as if it were the essence of Jewish morality. Although following the law is important, it does not replace the centrality of justice and love. The prophets are particularly emphatic about the need to restore justice, or righteousness, to its central place in Jewish ethics. Hebrew morality is as much concerned with the fulfillment of the community as it is with the fulfillment of the individual. The Hebrew Bible refuses to draw the kind of distinction between individuals and communities so often drawn by some contemporary moral philosophies. As a result, there is little or no difference between personal morality and the morality that "ties together" (*re-ligio*) all dimensions of social life. The goal of moral action—individual fulfillment—can be reached only if the individual is in relation to God and through Him to other persons in community. Moral action is evaluated chiefly by its effect upon and enhancement of community through love and justice. One finds few, if any, characters in the Hebrew Bible agonizing over the moral purity of their own souls. Rather, they feel real agony over

what their deeds have done to obstruct the establishment of a just and loving community.

One consequence of this emphasis upon social morality is a developed concern for the material, economic needs of others. By taking the doctrine of Creation seriously, in which God is declared to have created the material world and called it good, Hebraic morality believes very strongly in the importance of sharing and enjoying the material goods of creation. Thus, its prophetic voices call for attention to the political and economic systems by which such sharing and enjoyment are enhanced or retarded. Because of its belief in a God who has created and maintains dominion over the material world, Jewish ethics harmonizes its grounding in God with its concern for the material well-being of persons.

Because the created order is considered essentially good, Hebraic morality places a high value upon the essentially human part of that creation: the mind. Thus, while emphasizing that complete fulfillment involves the whole person living in community, this morality encourages the individual to make free, reasoned choices about the course of his or her life. Human reason and freedom are part of creation. Their intelligent exercise is part of the way persons demonstrate their gratitude for the gift of creation. This does not mean that a revelation from God is not on occasion necessary to provide insight into His laws and purposes. But divine revelations are not treated as incomprehensible, irrational absurdities that must be accepted on blind faith. They are seen as the kind of revelations persons provide each other in an interpersonal relationship. They reveal God's intentions and character and thus provide the basis for an intelligent response to Him. God's intentions, for Hebraic thinking, are the ultimate reasons for the existence of the universe. Knowledge of God's purposes, therefore, is based upon His revelations through His deeds and is the source of moral wisdom.

THE MORALITY OF JESUS

It is now a commonplace that Christianity, the other biblical religion, arose from the soil of Judaism. But some people believe that Christianity departs from Judaism over the question of how moral acts are to be evaluated. Some claim that Jesus was much more interested in the effect of a moral act upon the soul of the moral agent than in its effect upon other persons and social structures.

It is true that Jesus did not fulfill any of the political expectations some people had for a Messiah. But a major debate is still going on over whether Jesus' primary moral concern was the individual salvation of the soul or the enhancement of the Kingdom as a social and political reality.

As a rabbi, Jesus certainly endorsed the first two Hebraic answers to our basic questions. The goal of moral action was to live in fulfillment with God

and, through Him, with others. The source of moral wisdom was God's will made known through His revelations. One important interpretation of Christianity is that it differs from Judaism only in its insistence that in Jesus' life one sees the most decisive, clearest, and final revelation by God of what the fulfilled human life looks like. The validation of this revelation is held to be the resurrection of Jesus.

Whether Jesus understood the morality implicit in conforming to God's will in a way different from his Hebraic tradition depends on how one interprets his understanding of the Kingdom of God. He proclaimed its imminent coming and the necessity for repentance. At the heart of the Kingdom was reconciliation among human beings and between human beings and God. This reconciliation involved an inward renewal of the person in addition to an alteration in outward behavior. Jesus' lack of a developed social ethic is sometimes traced to his emphasis upon this inward renewal coupled with his belief that the Kingdom would come so soon that it would itself bring the appropriate transformations in outer social relations.

Love or Justice?

The heart of the morality taught by Jesus is the need for the healing gifts of forgiveness, understanding, and love. He embodied his teaching by reaching out to persons and making them whole, capable of turning in love to God and to others. He tried to touch the hearts and wills of individuals. Some have claimed that Jesus' concern for the subjectivity of the individual set off his moral position from Judaism. But no Hebraic morality would have denied the importance of the interior dimension of the individual. The crucial question in determining whether Jesus broke from his Hebraic tradition is deciding if the consequences of inspiring the heart and soul are essentially social or individual. If love is understood primarily as an emotional stance of forgiveness and acceptance of other persons, a Hebraic understanding would want to add immediately that this love must be coupled with justice. Justice would seek to extend to another person, in his or her political, social, and economic setting, the enjoyment and use of the created order. To put the question simply but starkly: Does Jesus' understanding of love involve nothing more than the ability of slaveowners to love their slaves as fellow children of God or does it also require them to abolish the conditions of slavery that keep slaves from enjoying the same political, economic, and social freedoms slaveowners enjoy?

Although Jesus himself regarded God as the ultimate source of moral wisdom, there have been varying interpretations of how Jesus is to be understood in relation to God. Is he primarily an authoritative teacher who explains the essence of morality, is he primarily one who embodies that morality in his life and thus serves as a moral exemplar, or is he someone to be worshipped as an ongoing bestower of moral wisdom after his death

and resurrection? Each of these alternatives has been chosen by one or more Christian groups. But because each regards Jesus as in some sense a revealer of God's love, each grounds moral wisdom in divine revelation, as the Hebraic view does.

Finally, it should be noted that in both Jewish and Christian ethics the whole person is affected by moral action. Unlike later moral theories, which distinguished between moral behavior and other kinds of action, the biblical view of morality insists that all action, mental and physical, is ultimately moral. This insistence is grounded on the assumption that all of life should be a response to the God who created it and that His intention is for all of creation to be fulfilled. What one thinks, how one feels, and how one acts in relation to others are all part of what a full response to God entails.

BIBLICAL VIEWS ON JUSTICE AND LOVE

Seek good, and not evil, that you may live . . .
Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate . . .
Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of
your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:14–15, 23–24

[Jesus] opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." . . . And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:17–19, 21

But Judas Iscariot . . . said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" . . . Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

John 12:4–5, 7–8

Pauline Ethics

One of the most important early interpreters of Jesus' meaning was the apostle Paul. He articulated the meaning of Jesus' teaching, death, and resurrection for the emerging Christian community. His ethical views have had a profound effect through the centuries on how Christians understand their moral obligations. Paul, a converted Jew, emphasized the need for divine grace in the fulfillment (salvation) of the individual. He believed that a person was not able by his or her own effort to obey God's revealed law and be saved. The only hope for a whole life was to accept, in faith, as a gift, the love of God, which forgave sinfulness and which had been incarnated in Jesus. The doctrine of sin, which played a large role in Paul's thought, was understood to refer to an originally free refusal to conform to God's will that had become so much a part of human nature that no one possessed the freedom to return to God on his or her own. Paul proclaimed that God had freely chosen to forgive and accept persons despite their being unworthy of forgiveness and acceptance. God's decision was spontaneous and uncoerced. Paul called it **agapaic love**. Unlike **erotic love**, which embraces another because the other can satisfy the lover's desires, agapaic love embraces another for the sake of the other. The ethical implications of God's agapaic love were at the heart of Paul's moral theology. Christians were now free to love others in the way God had first loved them. Paul put great emphasis upon the Christian fellowship, in which agapaic love flourished. The love of the Christian community was, in the famous words of his letter to the church at Corinth: "patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Cor. 13:4-7).

Paul's own understanding of the implications of love within the fellowship of believers and between believers and "outsiders" was complicated by the social values of his time, his expectation that the world was coming to an end in the near future, and by his own psychological character. On the one hand, his view of agapaic love as concerned only for the needs of others led him to proclaim that within the Christian community all the social and economic distinctions of the larger society had no place. "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). On the other hand, Paul set forth, almost as rules for Christian conduct, proscriptions on the role of women in worship and advice on sexual relations which betray strong anti-feminist and antisexual biases.

It has been difficult for Paul's interpreters to sort out in his teaching the values implicit in the ministry of Jesus, the values Paul developed from his reading of Jesus' teaching, and Paul's personal beliefs that are not an essential part of his Christian faith. This mix of views was handed on from

Pauline Christianity to the larger Roman and Greek world into which the Christian faith was spreading.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS ENCOUNTERS GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Socrates

As Christianity came into contact with other religions and philosophies, it was the teaching of Paul that proved the most influential in shaping Christian morality from the first centuries B.C.E. (common era) down through the Renaissance and beyond. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the encounter between the developing Christian religion and the philosophies emerging from Greece, especially those that had been influenced by the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The encounter was so influential that many people even today have trouble distinguishing the ethic of Jesus from the ethic of Socrates. The Greek philosophers brought the importance of rational reflection and the alignment of morality with truth to the forefront of moral thinking. Their voice of reason, which tended to call persons beyond the tyranny of passion and liberate them from enslavement to their own narrow biases, has been heard from their time to our own.

Interest in leading a life of reasoned conduct was not new with Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.). But he brought reflection on what a good life is to new heights and sophistication. Proceeding on the assumption that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates explored by sympathetic but critical questioning the tacit assumptions people rely upon in their beliefs and actions. By employing what has become known as the Socratic method, Socrates asked questions of his followers about the implications of certain assumptions. If the implications, logically derived, conflicted with the original assumption, the believer would be obliged to go back and straighten out his thinking. Implicit in this Socratic questioning is the conviction that a living grasp of knowledge or Truth is not only a goal of life but also a source of happiness and a liberation from bias and prejudice.

While Socrates retained to the end of his life a healthy scepticism regarding his having attained absolute Truth, he imparted to his successors the belief that if Truth could be secured, it would reveal the nature of the Good. We would then be obliged by our own inner nature to live according to it. One of the most appealing acts of Socrates was the manner in which he chose to accept his own death according to his principle that truthfulness is virtue. Condemned to die on the charge that he had corrupted the youth of Athens because of his teaching that no claim to truth or right go unquestioned, he accepted death calmly, freely downing the fatal cup of hemlock.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S MISSION: SOCRATES' FINAL DISCOURSE

Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend,—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens,—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? And if the person with whom I am arguing, says: Yes, but I do care; then I do not leave him or let him go at once; but I proceed to interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue in him, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less. And I shall repeat the same words to every one whom I meet, young and old, citizen and alien, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my brethren. For know that this is the command of God; and . . . Wherefore, O men of Athens, I say to you, . . . either acquit me or not; but whichever you do, understand that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.

Plato, *The Apology*, in *Works of Plato*, selected and ed. Irwin Edman. Jowett trans. (New York: Modern Library, 1928), pp. 74–75.

Plato

The philosopher who compiled the Socratic teachings was Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.). Like Socrates he was committed to the use of reason as the source of moral wisdom. Plato believed that the good of each thing in the universe was related to the Good of the universe as a whole. Therefore, if each thing follows what is good for it, it will be virtuous. For the human being, contemplation or knowledge of the Truth was good and therefore virtuous, according to Plato. But knowledge was not the sole good of the wise person. A balance or harmony between contemplation and enjoyment in moderation was necessary for complete well-being. The soul strives to know the Forms, or Ideas that transcend the changes of the empirical

world, but it also seeks to control or harmonize two other parts of itself: a feeling part that is the origin of sensation, and a desiring part that is the source of unbridled passion. The good life will consist in the proper harmony of these dimensions of the human person under the guidance of wisdom or reason.

One very important implication of Plato's view was that a person who knew the Truth would necessarily act according to it. The true philosopher, the one who has correctly reflected, will necessarily choose what is best in any given situation. It follows that evil acts are done not by choice but by ignorance of what is good. The evaluation of moral action, therefore, is its success in following rational knowledge of the Good and in maintaining within the self and the state a harmony between passions and desires. The importance of this view is that it conflicts explicitly with the claim made by many Christian moralists that evil resides in the will, in deliberate choice, rather than in ignorance, which is normally not willed.

Aristotle

Aristotle (c. 384–348 B.C.E.) was a disciple of Plato. Like Plato he held that human happiness means well-being and that it will be achieved by well-doing. If people do best what they are suited to do best, then they will be happy. Although the intellectual activity is the highest one, persons will find happiness in the exercise of their other faculties as well. The development of such faculties, including the moral ones, is the development of virtue. A virtue is a mean between two extremes and is based on a disposition or tendency within the individual to choose such a mean. Virtue is relative, however, to the end to which a thing is oriented. The virtue of a hoe is to dig, the virtue of a mind to think. Virtuous human beings are those who have harmonized all the different functions of which they are comprised. The source or model of moral wisdom is the perfectly virtuous person—the one who has achieved the perfect balance and ordering of all functions. This is equivalent to being the perfectly realized moral individual: the one who has achieved moral self-sufficiency. Notice how different this view is from that of the biblical notion that morality is the way to achieve not self-sufficiency but the fulfillment that comes from dependence upon a divine creator.

In a sense, the moral goal of Aristotle is the individual's feeling of intrinsic satisfaction at having brought all faculties under the control of reason and moderation. We learn how to achieve this satisfaction by observing and then emulating the rules for virtuous action that wise persons follow. The virtues are acquired by practicing them.

This practice involves primarily the attempt to live by the golden mean, or moderation, a balanced course between too much and too little. For example, courage is the middle position between rashness and cowardice;

self-control is the mean between overindulgence and repression. The finding of the mean is a result of the application of practical wisdom, the ability to see, in the actual circumstances of life, what is the appropriate thing to do. In this sense, Aristotle was much more attuned to the nonspeculative parts of human life, much more commonsensical, than was Plato. He did not rely upon strict mathematical rules for determining what a mean is: He says it should be determined "relative to us" by a rational principle, by that "principle as would take shape in the mind of a man of sense or practical wisdom."³

Part of Aristotle's commonsense approach led him to assert that no individual can be truly happy apart from social relations with others. He called the ordered relations among persons the **state**. He declared that "it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity."⁴

The Epicureans and Stoics

In addition to the schools of Plato and Aristotle, the moral philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics, particularly the latter, were decisive in influencing Western morality. Distressed by what they regarded as the suffering that comes from overindulgence of the appetites and too much attachment to aspects of this changeable, frustrating world, both schools developed a philosophy and ethic that was intended to free the individual from distress. Like Plato and Aristotle, the Epicureans and Stoics saw morality as a way of liberating the self from the uncertainty and pain of emotional attachment to the transitory things of the world. They sought a moral stance that would lift them above the prison of worldly concern. Epicurus (b. 342 B.C.E) was concerned with relieving people from worry about death, calamity, and misfortune. He found that belief in the determinism of all things made it possible to avoid the worrisome sense of responsibility for pleasing the gods or for avoiding evil. All people pursue pleasure as the goal of life, but Epicurus considered the best pleasure to be that which avoided pain and emphasized intellectual pursuits. Epicurus was not crass or sensual: He believed that real pleasure came from a calm detachment from the pleasures of the moment. The way to achieve this state of tranquility was to eliminate as many needs as possible, because unfulfilled needs produce frustration and pain. Self-control and a moderate asceticism were recommended. The source of moral wisdom is the individual's rational assess-

³Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 2, ch. 6, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1953), p. 66.

⁴Aristotle, "Politics," 1253a 1-4 in *Selections*, ed. W. D. Ross (New York: Scribners, 1927), p. 287.

ment of what will produce the greatest long-term avoidance of pain. One then judges one's actions by one's success at avoiding pain.

The Stoics were similar to the Epicureans in that they regarded the overcoming of pain as the goal of moral life. They believed that they could achieve this by living in accord with rather than in conflict with the laws of nature. Like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, they believed that the most important laws for man to follow were those of reason. Reason will enable us to know what the laws of nature are, and if we live in harmony with them we will not desire those things that cannot be ultimately satisfying. The laws of nature are so powerful that we would merely be frustrating ourselves if we tried to act against them. The virtue of a person is that by reason he or she can know these laws and willingly conform to them. The most troublesome part of the human character is the passions, which irrationally attach themselves to things which are unstable and transitory. The passions of pleasure, sorrow, desire, and fear are unnatural. If we can avoid being motivated by them we will experience a painless detachment from worldly struggle. As long as we are indifferent to events we cannot control, we cannot be hurt by the lack of material goods or an excess of physical illness. The wise person is the one who knows that goodness rests with the intrinsic satisfaction of the soul, not the extrinsic pleasure that comes from having the passions satisfied by worldly objects. Like Aristotle, the Stoics looked on self-sufficient individuals as moral exemplars. It was they who had achieved complete indifference toward all external objects and thus had removed from their concern things that could hurt them without their consent.

Summary

In summary, it can be said that all the Greek moral philosophers understood morality as the way by which individuals can bring themselves to happiness or self-realization. The essential meaning of happiness was a development of character that was sufficient in virtue unto itself. That is, it was intrinsically worthwhile and personally satisfying to reach that state in which one chose by rational contemplation those habits of mind, attitude, and action that were least dependent upon external objects for their fulfillment. This did not mean that the virtuous were oblivious to external objects or to other persons. But true virtue consisted in the ability to control one's acts and desires in accordance with the rational faculty. The perfectly self-controlled person, whose emotions are under the tight rein of reason, the person who knows that externally determined pleasure is not ultimately satisfying, is the perfectly autonomous moral being. Evil or vice are brought about by ignorance or by permitting the passions to dominate reason. But there is no inherent defect in the person that makes the over-

coming of vice impossible. Individuals, therefore, have the power through reason to achieve moral self-sufficiency, and thus the happiness that their nature makes possible.

Although persons might not share in the optimism of the Greek philosophers regarding the power of reason, few would ignore their valuable stress upon critical reflection. The need to base moral action on objective grounds and not be swayed by desire for private gain became part of all subsequent moral thinking. In addition, the notions of moderation and harmony among the human faculties reveal a wisdom even alternative moral systems would respect.

THE CHRISTIANIZING OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Augustine

As these Greek moral philosophies came into contact with Christian moral philosophy from the third century of our common era, they found themselves becoming Christianized and the Christian outlook influenced by Greek thought. For example, it was easy for some to equate the Christian distrust of this world with stoic detachment from all external objects. Others equated Plato's idea of the Good with the Christian God. Still others gave Socrates' noble death a moral importance equal to that of Jesus' crucifixion. But it was essentially the apparently similar attempt to develop a moral stance superior to that which accepted the common ways of the political and commercial world or that based itself upon a hedonistic desire to satisfy the sensual passions that caused Greek moral philosophy to have such an impact on Christian ethics. The joining of these views profoundly affected the morality of the West from the fourth to the seventeenth century.

But the influence of Greek thought on Christian belief encountered stiff resistance at a number of crucial points. We see this most clearly in the thought of the enormously influential Christian bishop and theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430). While clearly a Christian, Augustine was in some respects also a neo-Platonist. He had accepted from this school of thought that developed after Plato the belief that the true, the good, and the right had to have a supernatural origin. Nothing that was subject to change, time, space, or materiality could serve as the basis of truth. Therefore, God must be beyond all earthly conditions. Fulfillment could be found only with God. But Augustine's Christian convictions about the nature of sin prohibited him from accepting the hellenistic claim that human beings possessed the power to rectify their own moral inadequacies. He insisted that human creatures had so alienated themselves from God that they were unable to achieve happiness by their own efforts. Augustine declared that only an unmerited, agapastic decision by God to save the fallen human

creature could accomplish salvation. Augustine knew from his own experiences how difficult it was simply to decide that one is too attached to the things of this world. As a result he concluded that it could only be by God's grace that the will could attach itself to God. He thus broke with the hellenistic assumption that fulfillment could come about through the achievement of moral self-sufficiency.

Augustine also rejected the hellenistic notion that evil was due to ignorance and that the source of goodness rested in the reason. He knew too deeply the pernicious power of the will, and consequently he made it the source of evil. It was by wrong choices, determined by their passions or will, that people fell into sin. Perhaps Augustine's major contribution to moral theory was his insistence that self-determined morality was not a possibility for rational man. It was possible only by the grace of God breaking into the corrupt human condition from the outside.

The State

One important social effect of Augustine's views, which was to shape the attitude of the medieval period toward the social order, was his claim that because persons are corrupt, they need the order and restraint of law. The state exists primarily to serve this function. Social structures do not exist essentially to enrich and deepen our social nature: They serve to keep sin's manifestations within bounds and are therefore a gift of God to his fallen creation. The state exists primarily because of sin, and the ruler of the state is appointed by God as a punisher and controller of the external manifestations of sin.

This view of the social order as established, at least in part, to curb the excesses of sinful behavior justified (for later generations influenced by Augustine) restraint and coercion by the state. It also contributed to the view that efforts to redeem social corruption are naïve in underestimating the power of human pride and greed.

In the area of moral theory, Augustine's greatest contribution was to deny the efficacy of free will for salvation. In his famous debate with the monk Pelagius, Augustine declared heretical the notion that human beings can choose to cooperate with divine grace or to avoid sinning. He does not deny that the original man, Adam, had free choice to obey God, but following his fall a moral incapacity (original sin) has been transmitted biologically to all Adam's descendants.

Augustine's pessimism regarding moral ability apart from God's grace is a legacy bequeathed to the leaders of the Reformation and, through diverse and complicated channels, to many religious moralities in the modern age. It represents, perhaps in an extreme form, an understanding of God's role in the formation of morality that according to its defenders has been dangerously diminished in secular moral thought.

Aquinas and Thomistic Ethics

Augustine's almost total reliance upon God's grace and denial of human contributions to salvation was qualified in significant ways by later Christian thinkers of the middle ages. The most important of these was St. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274).

Aquinas was more concerned than Augustine to harmonize Christian faith with the best of philosophical thinking. Although he did not deny the priority and supremacy of revealed truth, Aquinas believed that the human intellect, created by God, had the capacity to understand the world of nature and to refute any rational attempts to deny the truth of revelation. The philosophy that he found most congenial to his Christian faith and to a rational understanding of the natural world was that of Aristotle. It is sometimes said that Aquinas Christianized the philosophy of Aristotle or that he Aristotelianized the Christian faith. Whichever view is more accurate, it is true that Aquinas accorded human reason much more worth than Augustine had.

We see this particularly in his moral theory. It is hard to overestimate Thomas's influence on vast segments of the Christian community down through the centuries. His thought has been virtually canonized by the Roman Catholic church and forms the basis of many other moral philosophies. Sometimes known simply as the natural law theory, the moral philosophy of Aquinas (the basis of Thomism) assumes a fundamental correspondence between the rational faculty of the human mind and the structures and laws of the natural world. Morality consists in acting in accordance with these laws as they are discerned by the rational mind.

As a Christian, Aquinas assumes that all persons have an ultimate end: the knowledge and love of God. Although he allows room for the love of God in humanity's final state of blessedness (happiness), the emphasis is clearly upon a rational contemplation of divine things. In this respect, Aquinas reveals his indebtedness to Greek philosophy and in particular to Aristotle. Unlike Aristotle, however, Aquinas holds that sin makes it impossible for human beings to achieve ultimate happiness by their own efforts. This is his debt to Augustine. God's grace is necessary, and it is to be found in the teachings, sacraments, and discipline of the church, which is the custodian of God's revelation.

Because Aquinas assumes God's supernatural status, he regards human beings as having a two-fold aim: supernatural happiness (to be achieved by faith and grace, and natural happiness (to be achieved by reason and the use of natural faculties). The two levels of happiness, although clearly distinct from one another, harmonize with each other in the sense that the natural world is ordained by the supernatural. This means that no natural end or desire of human beings is contrary to their supernatural end or desire (God), even though ultimate happiness requires the perfection of the natural world by supernatural grace.

In the moral world this means that persons are virtuous to the degree that they employ reason in understanding the natural laws that govern the created order and to the degree that their behavior conforms to those laws. The natural law is morally binding because its source is the divine law and because it is rational, that is, reflective of God's ordering principles:

In voluntary activity the proximate measure is the human reason, the supreme measure the eternal law. When a human act goes to its end in harmony with the order of reason and eternal law then the act is right; when it turns away from that rightness it is termed sin. To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God.

To crown his natural appetites man is given a directive for his personal acts, and this we call law. Law is the reason and rule of activity, and therefore is reserved to those who can know the reason of what they do . . . Rational creatures share in the eternal reason and this communication of the eternal law to rational creatures is called the natural law. The natural light of the reason, by which we discern what is right and wrong, is aught else but the impression on us of divine light.⁵

We know that we are dealing with a natural moral law when it is discoverable to our minds that it is universal for all persons, unchangeable under all conditions, and ineradicable from rational insight. It is a law of nature, for example, that the organs of reproduction seek to fulfill their end. Thus it is a moral law that human beings should not artificially obstruct the primary end of their reproductive organs through contraception. To do so is to obstruct that which God intended through his creation of the natural order. There are other teachings of the Roman Catholic church on such topics as abortion and euthanasia, among others, that are drawn from the moral philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.

Although we will take up these issues later, in our consideration of contemporary moral problems, it is important to understand the underlying strength of the Thomist position as its proponents interpret it. It has clear answers to our three basic moral questions: Happiness, consisting in the harmony of the will and intellect loving and contemplating God, is the end of moral action. Moral wisdom is provided ultimately by God but proximately by our own human reason, which is a creation of God and, as such, is in conformity with the natural end of human beings and the created order as a whole. Therefore, there need be no inherent conflict in our moral determinations as long as we follow our own rational insights. Finally, we can evaluate our moral acts by the degree to which they conform to our rational understanding of the natural law. In all our moral deliberations, we are supported by the knowledge that what is truly natural is what is

⁵Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Philosophical Texts*, selected and trans. Thomas Gilby (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 284, 356-358.

moral and just because God has willed it this way in accord with his reason. Thomistic morality proceeds in a tight circle, but one that is large enough not to exclude anything significantly human or natural and that ties the human to the divine without contradiction or paradox.

The significance of this circle is that it links our moral choices directly to the reality of God through the divinely sanctioned medium of reason, to which, by virtue of being human, we have privileged access. Although specific applications of moral law in concrete situations can be tricky and less than certain, the knowledge that we will be moral as long as we proceed rationally and in accord with the intent to conform to the natural law is spiritually and psychologically comforting. Although infused grace may be necessary for supernatural beatitude, the use of our natural faculties will suffice for determining our moral obligations in our natural state of existence.

Given Aquinas's stress upon the natural ends of man in this world, it is not surprising that the moral virtues he advocates are very similar to those of Aristotle. There are four cardinal moral virtues in his theory: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. (These are perfected or complemented by the theological virtues, infused into humans by God alone, which direct them toward God: faith, hope, and love). Like the Greeks, although in a Christian framework, Aquinas leaned toward the view that the morally upright persons were the individuals of virtue, whose good habits had perfected their rational powers toward their right use.

Although Aquinas's confidence that the natural and supernatural realms could be harmoniously related without either paradox or recourse to the irrational was modified in the centuries after his death, his lasting contribution to moral theory was his view that reason, natural laws, human desire, and divine sanction must complement each other. As long as human reason, penetrating the order of nature, is able to discern laws and regularities, human moral choice will have a solid foundation. To violate the rationality and orderliness of the natural world in the name of a private or singular end is to violate the very basis of morality. Although the divine complement and supernatural perfection of the natural order was to be slowly and subtly removed by later, more secular thinkers, the rational core of Thomas's thought would be a lasting legacy to all later moral thought.

REFORMATION ETHICS

Before religion began to lose its exclusive hold upon moral thinking, however, one last contribution to the moral consciousness of the West was to come from religious thought. The dissolution of the medieval synthesis of reason and faith, church and state in the events of the Reformation was to have as one of its offshoots a loosening of the bonds

between reason and morality. In their anxiety to remove the absolute legitimacy of human intermediaries between the individual and God, the reformers, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, tended to undermine the absolute authority of human institutions. Afraid lest men rely upon these institutions to earn the love of God (which they insisted God dispensed freely, without human merit, and despite human corruption), these reformers undercut the authority of human reason, as the primary determinant of morality.

Although they insisted upon the necessity of a moral life (still equated with the Christian life), the origin of that morality and its evaluation had to come from God's grace alone. Thus they almost buried the natural, rational half of the Thomistic synthesis. Human reason and will were too corrupt to be trusted either to discern the natural laws or to follow them. In many respects, the reformers returned to the moral thinking of Augustine and even Paul. While trusting the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide moral action within the Christian community itself, the reformers held, like Augustine, that in public, social settings, like the state, human sinfulness needed to be checked by the coercive powers of law, threat, and punishment. As a result of these views, dualism slowly developed between the morality sanctioned within the church and that which prevailed in the world beyond its walls. The state and its institutions were given the power of the sword to restrain and punish the inevitable outbursts of sinful inclination. The morality incumbent upon Christians in their relation with one another was not to substitute itself for the orderly running of the social and political life of the society at large.

Social Versus Private Morality

Although the views of the reformers were to be swept aside by the tide of rationalistic and secular thought in the modern age, they continued to have a powerful effect on the lives of millions of people within one half of the now divided Christian church, most of whom would never read the works of secular theorists such as Kant, Hobbes, or Bentham. Perhaps the most important long-term consequence of these Reformation moral assumptions was the division of morality into private and social realms. It became axiomatic for many Protestants that if God's grace was necessary for the enactment of any good deed, then it would be found most likely in the personal deeds of individuals and not in the impersonal acts of institutions and the state. It might be wrong for an individual to strike another, but no such prohibition should be placed upon the acts of the state when defending its territory or laws. The office of the person entrusted with social or political power should be morally distinguished from the person holding such office. Whereas a ruler might be severely judged by God for hardening his heart to his wife, he would be expected to

uphold his moral duty by condemning to death someone convicted of stealing.

It is instructive to note the difference between this Reformation view and that of the Thomistic moral philosophy. Because Thomas had insisted that all natural law conformed to the dictates of reason, he was justified in excluding no part of the natural order from rational, and hence moral, consideration. For example, the economic transactions of society were as much a matter of moral judgment as the relations within a family. Thus it was not unusual to find moral laws, sanctioned by the church, expressly forbidding certain economic practices, such as usury (money lending). But with the reformers we find a striking change of outlook. Although they were equally hostile to usury, they condemned it essentially for the sake of the individual soul. The attempt to prohibit it by social legislation they considered an improper intrusion of private morality into public concerns. In the words of R. H. Tawney, speaking of Luther's views on economic injustice, "the prophet who scourged with whips the cupidity of the individual chastised with scorpions the restrictions imposed upon it by society . . . He preaches a selfless charity, but he recoils with horror from every institution by which an attempt had been made to give it a concrete expression." The result, according to Tawney, was that the views of Luther "riveted on the social thought of Protestantism a dualism which, as its implications were developed, emptied religion of its social content, and society of its soul."⁶

In many respects the Reformation signalled the end of the religious unity that had prevailed in the West since the early days of the Christian church. Although it continued to influence the lives of millions of people, Christianity, now split in two, no longer dominated the mainstream of intellectual and moral thought. Modern moral philosophy began when thinkers no longer felt obliged to consult a theological system or to direct their thought by a sense of divine revelation or judgment.

Until the modern age, most theologians and moral philosophers tried to take seriously both the demands of reason and the reality (as they understood it) of sin. Reason required faithfulness to intellectual integrity and an acknowledgment of the human ability to participate in the creation of moral consciousness and behavior. Sin demanded an awareness of the need to rely upon a nonhuman power to overcome the corruption and blindness of moral action apart from God. As the modern age dawned, the consciousness of sin diminished and the attention of the moral philosopher turned more and more to the pragmatic need to provide guidance to self-motivated individuals struggling to realize their autonomy but living in sometimes conflicting and ambiguous relation with other individuals.

⁶R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, 1926), pp. 86, 90.

CHAPTER REVIEW

A. Three basic questions

1. All moral theories attempt to answer three basic questions: What is the goal of moral action? What is source of or authority for moral action? How is moral action evaluated?

B. The Jewish and Christian framework of Western ethics

1. Judaism and Christianity influence moral decision making for millions of people.
2. A moral philosophy need not have a religious foundation in the traditional sense, but all religions involve moral choice and all moral choice presupposes some ultimate values.

C. The ethics of Judasim

1. Judaism is based upon a belief that morality arises out of a covenant relation with God.
2. Its morality is concerned primarily with the community and with the establishment of justice among its members.

D. The morality of Jesus

1. There is debate over whether Jesus' ethics are essentially inward or whether they have an equally important social dimension.
2. Paul formulated the ethic of Jesus for the emerging Christian community. He emphasized unmerited love, *agape*, within the Christian fellowship.

E. Christian ethics encounters Greek philosophy

1. Socrates contributed the notion of the examined life to moral thinking.
2. Plato emphasized the notion that to know the good is to do it.
3. Aristotle provided a portrait of the virtuous person who lives by the golden mean.
4. The Epicureans and Stoics developed an ethic of indifference to transitory pleasure and the overcoming of pain through reason.

F. The Christianizing of Greek philosophy

1. Augustine challenged the Greek philosophers' assumption that virtue could be achieved by reason alone. He stressed human dependence upon God for moral wisdom.

2. One implication of Augustine's view was his notion of the state as an ordering and restraining power.
3. Thomas Aquinas developed a moral philosophy that gave prominence to the notion of natural law and the role of reason in discerning it.

G. Reformation ethics

1. Luther and Calvin challenged the medieval reliance upon reason in the formation of morality and returned to some of Augustine's concerns.
2. The reformers helped to create a dualism between private and social morality.

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Krook, Dorothea. *Three Traditions of Moral Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1959.

The first part is a stimulating discussion of the relation between the moral philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and Paul.

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Sidgwick, Henry. *Outlines of the History of Ethics*. New York: St. Martin's, 1967, pp. 1-162.

A classic, short survey.

Troeltsch, Ernst. *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. 2 vols. Trans. Olive Wyon. New York: Harper, 1960.

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