

# 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

## Introduction

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.