Irwin, Terence. *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study*. Vol. 1, *From Socrates to the Reformation*; vol. 2, *From Suarez to Rousseau*; vol. 3, *From Kant to Rawls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 2832. $125.00 (paper).

The Development of Ethics is enormous in many ways—as an undertaking, an achievement, and as an object of review. Consisting of three volumes, and coming in at 2,743 pages, Terence Irwin's book traces the history of Western ethics form Socrates to Rawls. Simply reading it requires commitment, not because of the prose, Irwin's is lucid throughout, or the difficulty of the material, although it can be challenging, but because of its sheer bulk. *The Philosophical Forum*, having failed to find a single reviewer up to the task, had 82 reviewers for Irwin's ninety-six chapters. In contrast, I was tapped at the bar at the Pacific American Philosophical Association. And while there are familiar questions about whether and to what extent drink impairs consent, I am grateful to have accepted the opportunity. It is, quite simply, a tour de force in the history of ethics. But I fear that I would not have finished the book had I not undertaken the commitment to review it. And this thought gives rise to another greater fear—that *The Development of Ethics* is destined to be one of the great, unread books of the twenty-first century. (The great, unread book is an interesting literary genre, and going unread need not, as potentially in the present case, be due solely to length. How many have read past chapter 2 of Quine's *Word and Object*?) It would be a shame if this were so. q1

The history of ethics is much more prominent nowadays then it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is a very welcome development. Especially, if like Wiggins, one suspects that a problem with contemporary ethics is that it has not too many ideas but too few. Familiarity with its history can broaden one's sense of what is possible. *The Development of Ethics* is perhaps the most important work in the history of ethics since Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy*. Schneewind's book makes an interesting contrast, both in doctrine and methodology. Whereas Irwin is an Aristotelian naturalist, Schneewind is not. Whereas Schneewind sees a profound paradigm shift in modern ethics, Irwin sees continuity (although understood in such a way that is consistent with Aristotelian naturalism declining in the modern era). Finally, whereas Schneewind is a contextualist historian, Irwin is not (although Irwin is not as partisan about his approach to history as some contextualist historians can be).

In the introduction, Irwin suggests an ampler, alternative title: "The Development of Ethics being a selective historical and critical study of moral philosophy and the Socratic tradition with special attention to Aristotelian naturalism its formation, elaboration, criticism, and defence." Being a fan of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, I prefer the suggested alternative. And not just because of my literary proclivities but because it more accurately describes Irwin's project. Charting the development of ethics is a broader project then the one articulated by the alternative title. Indeed, if the broader project were Irwin's, it

would be fair to complain about omissions. There is no discussion of Neoplatonism or the Church Fathers apart from Augustine. Jewish and Arabic philosophers are absent as are Medieval Faculty of Arts scholars, as are several important 'continental' figures such as Levinas and Habermas. And forget about non-Western sources. But Irwin's much narrower remit renders such omissions intelligible. Irwin understands Aristotle's use of dialectical argument as an outgrowth of Socrates's own critical examination of ethical views and the Aristotelian position that is the book's focus "is teleological, in so far as it seeks the basic guide for action in an ultimate end, eudaimonist, in so far as it identifies the ultimate end with happiness, and naturalist, in so far as it identifies virtue and happiness in a life that fulfills the nature and capacities of rational human nature" (1:4). **q2**

Not only is Irwin's remit narrower than the title might suggest, but it is also, importantly, partisan. It is Irwin's conviction that Aristotelian naturalism, as exemplified by Aristotle and Aquinas, is the only ultimately viable alternative in ethics. Other positions that conflict with it are not only false but potentially have immoral consequences if practically enacted. So Irwin's project is not merely to trace the history of Western ethics structured around the themes of the Socratic tradition and Aristotelian naturalism but to make a philosophical case for his preferred view. It is in this sense that it is a critical study.

That the book is partisan in this way is not a shortcoming, although the (sometimes hostile) way Irwin treats the historical critics of Aristotelian naturalism perhaps is. It is entirely fitting that Irwin engage with such figures, but a more sympathetic and searching treatment would surely have enriched the defense he mounts of Aristotelian naturalism. Moreover, it would have helped to articulate and develop a view that many, rightly or wrongly, regard as vague and potentially vacuous. So the short shrift that some of the critics of Aristotelian naturalism are subject to comes with a cost, not just to the historical project but to the underlying philosophical project as well.

There are, perhaps, other shortcomings. Early on, Irwin observes that "we can compile a reasonably full and instructive case against Aristotle by attending to Epicureans, Cyreniacs, and Skeptics in ancient philosophy, to the Christian views that form an Augustinian and anti-Aristotelian tradition, to the criticisms of Aquinas by Scotus and Ockham, and to the trends in moral philosophy that originate in Hobbes and Hume" (1:5). That pretty much sets the agenda for the first two volumes, but not the third. It is much harder to see how Kant and subsequent developments in ethical theorizing were dedicated to either a defense or a critique of Aristotelian naturalism. There is a missed opportunity here. After Suarez, Aristotelianism goes into precipitous decline with no major modern figure being aptly described as an Aristotelian naturalist (although, of course, vestigial remnants of that position persist even among early modern critics). What explains this decline? No answer to this question emerges, not even a partial and imperfect conjecture. Not only is this an important historical question, but it bears, as well, on Irwin's philosophical project. If the truth about ethics is broadly Aristotelian, how is it that it absented itself from Western theorizing for centuries? Why was the truth about our practical affairs so thoroughly hidden from view? **q3**

That said, volume 3 is a tremendous achievement in bringing disparate views into a coherent narrative. It is at its best in its discussion of Kant and idealism. Irwin's critique of the constructivist reading of Kant, promulgated by Rawls

and Korsgaard among others, placing him closer to the natural law tradition is notable. And while many will disagree, there is much to be learned about Kant and the relevant ethical issues by a close examination of Irwin's case. Less successful, I think, is the discussion of utilitarianism. Partly this is a result of Irwin's keenness to distinguish eudaimonism from hedonism and his impatience with the latter. Irwin is right to insist on a clear distinction but could have been more sensitive to the ways in which hedonism might sensibly be developed. What's more, Irwin confines himself to more or less familiar objections to utilitarianism to which contemporary utilitarians have replied. While neither a utilitarian nor a sympathizer, I found this disappointing, since the history of utilitarianism, and specifically its association with progressive politics, is potentially revealing. Consider Mill's *The Subjugation of Women*, not discussed by Irwin. While Irwin treats Mill as a moral conservative, at least compared to Sidgwick, Mill holds that we should accept commonsense morality until we can do better. And, presumably, with respect to the legal treatment of women, Mill thought we could do better and moreover provide utilitarian grounds for doing so.

A Cantabridgian, at least with respect to historiography, might conclude from this last remark that a contextualist approach to utilitarianism would have yielded more insight. Irwin's approach to ethics is to discuss selected themes addressed through the examination of canonical figures. (In this regard, Irwin, like Ricoeur before him, exercises "the right of every reader, before whom all the books are open simultaneously"; Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], xvii.) Moreover, despite the precipitous decline of Aristotelianism in the modern era, unlike Sidgwick or Schneewind, Irwin sees no paradigm shift or radical departure in the modern period. Could he have been blinded to such a shift by the nature of his approach to ethics and its history? Perhaps. To be honest, methodological disputes in historiography bore me. Insofar as histories are selective narratives, there will be as many historical approaches as there are practical reasons for producing such narratives and the selections they inevitably make. And while I believe that there are some questions that only a contextualist history may answer, that is too slim a basis for a universal prescription. Still, one wonders whether deploying a more contextualist approach at certain points of the narrative might have supplemented Irwin's overall ambitions.

The book will be of interest to philosophers, both ethicists and historians, and students (the material is suitable for advanced undergraduates). But I struggle to see how exactly it will be read. Not many will plow through all three volumes. With respect to teaching, any single volume is too large to cover in the course of a semester. Moreover, the three volumes are not independent of one another. For example, the discussion of Suarez as a natural law theorist in volume 2 is more naturally read with the material from volume 1, serving as a capstone of the Aristotelian synthesis developed therein. Perhaps it might be read as a reference book. That is, it might be dipped into, plucking a chapter relevant to one's current interests say, but that has its drawbacks. Not only would one lose the focus of the overarching narrative, on the Socratic tradition and Aristotelian naturalism, but reading the book in this way can give rise to serious distortions and misimpressions. Consider just one example. Suppose, interested in Aquinas's ethics, one turned to Irwin's nine chapters on that topic (indeed, one of the high points of vol. 1). The focus of these chapters is Aquinas's con-

tribution to Aristotelian naturalism. Having read these and these alone, one would be forgiven for not appreciating the contribution of Aquinas's Christian faith—he is, after all, a canonized figure—to his ethical reflections. So how exactly is *The Development of Ethics* to be read? There is an additional factor here. There's a sense in which *The Development of Ethics* presents a literary paradox. Finishing the book left me with the vivid and paradoxical impression that it was both too long and not long enough. (Perhaps there is some optimum ratio of density of ideas to length that has been missed.) Let me stress again how very grateful I am for having read it, in being forced to read it having undertaken a commitment to review it. But this just makes more poignant my earlier worry that this may very well be destined to become one of the great, unread books of the twenty-first century. For it truly is a great book, and I doubt that we will see a history of ethics similar in scope and ambition for some time to come.

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QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

q1. AU: Book header details specify 2,832 pages, yet text here states 2,743. Difference OK?

q2. AU: Here and throughout, quotations were run into the text when they did not meet the minimum 100 word requirement for block quotations.

q3. AU: Sentence reworded slightly (replaced "as" with "were"; does this accurately reflect your intended meaning ("Kant and subsequent developments in ethical theorizing were dedicated")? If not, please revise original for clarity.