

# *Teaching the History of Moral Philosophy*



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UNDERGRADUATE COURSES called History of Modern Philosophy in most American and British philosophy curricula are generally courses on the history of epistemology and metaphysics from Descartes through Kant. They rarely cover the ethical thought of the philosophers they study, and the curriculum almost never includes an introductory course on the history of ethics that parallels the course on the history of epistemology and metaphysics. There may be courses on the history of ethics at a more advanced level. But the Descartes-to-Kant course is usually required for majors, and comparable historical coverage of moral philosophy is not.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I first raise some questions about the rationale for giving such curricular priority to the history of epistemology and metaphysics. I go on to offer some suggestions for one-term undergraduate courses that might serve both as introductions to the history of ethics and to satisfy the history requirement in philosophy departments. The courses I outline sometimes involve texts not usually studied these days. And they all involve contextualizing the philosophy by relating it to the social, religious, and political situations in which philosophers understood themselves to work. I discuss briefly some reasons for teaching the history in this fashion. And I end with some remarks on the significance of teaching moral philosophy and its history in the undergraduate curriculum as a whole.

## ONE

The standard Descartes-to-Kant course reflects the histories of their subject that philosophers have written. In these histories, the history of moral philosophy has typically received little if any coverage. Aristotle studied the metaphysics of his predecessors historically but not their ethics. Brucker wrote far less about the

history of ethics than about the history of the religious, metaphysical, and epistemological aspects of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Dugald Stewart's *Dissertation exhibiting the Progress of...Philosophy* (1815) falls into the same pattern, as do more recent histories of philosophy. There are 17th-century histories of natural law theories, of which Tim Hochstrasser has written an important study, but it was not until the 19th century that separate histories of moral philosophy began to appear.<sup>3</sup>

One possible rationale for this state of affairs lies in the religious heritage of the West. If morality contains God's instructions to us, then it might make sense to precede our study of it by asking what we know of God and how we know it.<sup>4</sup> If the questions here are not purely theological, they would fall to philosophical metaphysics and epistemology. More generally, if we supposed that morality must be rooted in metaphysical aspects of the universe, it would again seem to make sense to study these before moving to the ethics dependent on them.

This is the vision suggested by Descartes's famous tree of knowledge. "The roots [of knowledge] are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences...medicine, mechanics, and morals," he says.<sup>5</sup> If moral knowledge is dependent on knowledge about the metaphysical and physical nature of the world, including human nature, then morality and its philosophy will be comprehensible only once we understand their foundations and our ability to know them. On this view it may be reasonable to suppose that histories of philosophy should reflect the dependence of moral philosophy on what analytic philosophers view as the core disciplines: metaphysics and epistemology.

It may be possible to revive the view that all sound thinking must begin by acknowledging God and the limits of human abilities to understand him.<sup>6</sup> But secular thinkers would hardly appeal to such claims to justify the subordination of ethics to epistemology and metaphysics. And general foundationalist views of a Cartesian kind have been widely criticized and rejected in recent years. If we abandon foundationalism, we also give up the assumption that there is a natural order of knowledge, in which some disciplines are essentially more basic than others. Then it is hard to see on what a priori grounds we could insist that the history of epistemology or

metaphysics must be studied before getting on to the history of other parts of philosophy.

Whatever we think of foundationalism, when we are teaching history it is not very useful to presuppose that modern moral philosophy is best understood as an offshoot of views about more general or allegedly more fundamental theories in epistemology and metaphysics. Such foundationalist views may blind us to possibilities about the history that interests us. We need to be ready to examine the thought that just as changes in scientific belief may have stimulated new philosophizing about knowledge, so changes that upset accepted moral belief may have been the occasion for philosophical rethinking of morality. We will then want to explore the possibility that moral philosophy has a history of its own, which may have exerted its influence on other developments in philosophy and not merely been dependent on them.

Our thinking about the history of moral philosophy is constricted not just by religious or philosophical preconceptions of the proper order of knowledge but also by certain views about what moral philosophy is or does. Philosophers often write as if moral philosophy has always had a single aim or function, but for teaching the history of the subject, this is not a helpful assumption. Aristotle thought that “a knowledge of the Good is of great importance for the conduct of our lives,” since we all aim at the good and are more likely to get it if we have the kind of clear knowledge of our target that philosophy can give.<sup>7</sup> Sidgwick urged us to reject Aristotle by making the improvement of knowledge, not of practice, our philosophical aim. In Sidgwick’s opinion, “The predominance in the minds of moralists of a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science.” We should instead approach the issues with “the same disinterested curiosity to which we chiefly owe the great discoveries of physics.”<sup>8</sup> Sidgwick’s view was reinforced by logical positivism. In 1930 Moritz Schlick said that moral philosophy “is a system of *knowledge* and nothing else...the questions of ethics...are purely theoretical problems.” The philosopher, he urged, “must forget that he has a human interest as well as a cognitive interest” in morality. Moral philosophy is “in essence, theory or knowledge,” and therefore “its task cannot be to produce morality, or to establish it, or to call it to life.”<sup>9</sup> Schlick here assumes both that moral philosophy has only

one aim or purpose and that the purpose is simply to obtain knowledge about morality. Twentieth-century metaethics even after positivism worked on the same assumption.

We need not accept Sidgwick's suggestion that the sole alternative to treating moral philosophy as a search for theoretical understanding is to treat it as an effort to edify. Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, and Alexander Nehamas have argued that in antiquity, moral philosophy was treated as the source of a "way of life."<sup>10</sup> More recently, Ian Hunter has argued that at least some of the major contributors to early modern moral philosophy also had highly practical aims in publishing their theories and that their aims were as diverse as their theories.<sup>11</sup> John Stuart Mill agreed with Auguste Comte that most people take their opinions from experts and that "the moral and intellectual ascendancy, once exercised by priests, must in time pass into the hands of philosophers and will naturally do so when they become sufficiently unanimous, and in other respects worthy to possess it."<sup>12</sup> American moral philosophy from the early decades of the 19th century until the end of the Civil War was supposed to provide a system of values and goals that all citizens ought to pursue.<sup>13</sup> All of this goes beyond an effort at edification, with its suggestion of individual religious uplift and encouragement.

An open mind about foundationalism and a natural hierarchy of knowledge suggests that philosophy departments have no compelling philosophical grounds for refusing to give the history of moral philosophy equal weight in the curriculum with the history of epistemology and metaphysics. Awareness that some of the moral philosophers took their task to be practical and not solely or even centrally theoretical leads to the thought that even an introductory survey of the history of modern moral philosophy should present the philosophical writings in relation to the varying practical problems about morality and social life that different philosophers may have aimed to address. I begin by sketching some of the ways one might structure a one-semester course on the history of 17th- and 18th-century moral philosophy, keeping these points in mind.

## TWO

Any good undergraduate course in the history of philosophy needs a story line—a narrative with beginning and end. Both will be to some

extent arbitrary, dictated by current interests as well as by our understanding of the sources. For an undergraduate offering that can serve as an alternative to the Descartes-to-Kant course, I suggest a history of moral philosophy from Montaigne to Kant.<sup>14</sup>

Montaigne makes a good beginning. It is not the least of his merits that students like to read him. To the instructor he gives an excellent reason to present a brief review of both ancient and Christian ethics before launching into early modern efforts to rethink the whole subject. Montaigne himself looks to classical moral philosophy to provide a way of life, but he gives up that effort. “Men are diverse in inclination and strength,” he says. “They must be led to their own good according to their nature and by diverse ways.”<sup>15</sup> He stresses the importance of the goods of this life, including the bodily pleasures. He expresses extreme distaste for enthusiastic otherworldliness, whether it comes as Socrates’s appeal to his daimon or as extreme religious devotion. He says that although many thinkers assert that there are universal moral laws of nature accepted everywhere, he has never been able to find one. And he claims that each of us can discover a ruling pattern within which suffices as a guide. Well before Descartes asked each of us to make a clean sweep of the clutter of our inherited beliefs about the world, Montaigne gave an example of someone doing just that with the main positions on morality that were then available. In doing so, he opened up leitmotifs that run through much of modern moral philosophy.

Why end with Kant? It is not necessary to do so. It would be more fun to end the course with the Marquis de Sade’s critique of modern moral philosophy. But he was not influential in the respectable and increasingly academic circles that produced later moral philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Those who mattered were Reid, Bentham, and Kant. They superseded or overshadowed the work of their early modern predecessors. And it was their work that became the starting points of moral philosophy after the French Revolution. If departments sponsored a second course, covering the history of moral philosophy from Kant to Rawls, instructors could avoid the anguish of trying to cover Kant in a short time at the end of a term. (They would exchange it for the perhaps worse anguish of having to do so at the beginning of a term.) But Kant introduced some utterly new ideas into ethics, as neither Reid nor Bentham did.

So it is worth trying to include him in the one-term survey, as we do in the counterpart history of epistemology and metaphysics, which could also end with Reid.

Even when we have decided on a beginning and an end, we can shape the narrative in different ways. We might treat it as a story of progressive enlightenment, showing morality's breaking free from subordination to religious belief and ending with three paths that independent ethics took in the 19th century. We could go further in this direction and allow our own preferences to let us endorse one of the three, declaring Benthamism, say, the triumphant outcome of our story. But we need not be progressivist. We could see the history of moral philosophy as a falling away from insights once possessed. MacIntyre, explaining how a Thomist might account for Nietzsche's genealogical attempts to unmask morality as a front for the will to power, suggests that the Thomist would begin with what Aquinas says about the roots of intellectual blindness in moral error, with the misdirection of the intellect by the will, and with the corruption of the will by the sin of pride—both that pride that is an inordinate desire to be superior and that pride that is an inclination to contempt for God. Where Nietzsche saw the individual will as a fiction that conceals from view the impersonal will to power, the Thomist can elaborate out of the materials provided in the *Summa* an account of the will to power as an intellectual fiction disguising the corruption of the will.<sup>17</sup>

If we choose to work out the history of moral philosophy in terms like these, we would be in line with a criticism of Locke published in 1697.

[God has] imprinted all natural truths in created beings...from whence, by the vehicles of our senses, they are copy'd and transcribed into our minds...Thus was mankind put into a plain roadway of gaining clear intellectual light [by developing logic] ...But...the crooked bias of men's wills perverted their reason and made them disregard this well-grounded and regular method, given them by the Author of Nature.<sup>18</sup>

## THREE

The way we teach the history of ethics is almost unavoidably affected by our assessments of modernity and the current state of morality. Those with strong convictions on the matter may well decide to make their views explicit and embed them in their historical narrative. But that is not inevitable. Narratives of progress or of decline in moral thought suppose that the narrator knows the truth. So too does a Weberian position that reserves for natural science the categories of progress and the obsolescence of old theories and that views philosophy as more like art. But the historian does not have to be sitting in some assured judgment seat. We can avoid this, I suggest, by treating past moral philosophers as responding to large-scale practical problems that were urgent in their time. We do not need to decide on the truth or falsity of the views we discuss. We can teach the critical skills the students need by showing them how to assess the philosophers' arguments and positions in the light of the questions that actually concerned them.<sup>19</sup> It takes historical work to unearth those questions and to avoid substituting for them the issues that we consider central now. But this can be done, and the students need to learn how to do it. We can also use the criticisms later philosophers made of their predecessors to get students to discuss the merits of positions. Butler's objections to egoism, Hume's to cognitivism, and Reid's to Hume's sentimentalism all provide important introductions to major disputes in ethics and are excellent exercises for students.

Setting moral philosophy in the context of the issues disturbing the philosopher's culture allows us to be on the watch for the kinds of discontinuity or rupture that Kuhn and Foucault stressed. Nearly a century ago, Dewey put a similar point quite forcibly.

Intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them.<sup>20</sup>

The history of moral philosophy is a good place to go to observe philosophers abandoning old questions.

What then might a course on the history of moral philosophy from Montaigne to Kant look like? Here's a start, organized for three sessions per week in a 13-week semester.

## HISTORY OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY: MONTAIGNE TO KANT

- I. 1. Introduction; 2. Montaigne; 3. Montaigne
- II. 1. Modern natural law: Grotius; 2. Hobbes; 3. Hobbes
- III. 1. Hobbes; 2. Hobbes; 3. Hobbes
- IV. 1. Pufendorf; 2. Pufendorf; 3. Pufendorf
- V. 1. Intellectualism: Leibniz; 2. Leibniz; 3. Leibniz [Wolff]
- VI. 1. Self-interest and morality: Nicole; 2. Mandeville; 3. Gay
- VII. 1. Moral sense: Hutcheson; 2. Hutcheson; 3. Butler
- VIII. 1. Butler; 2. Butler; 3. Hume
- IX. 1. Hume; 2. Hume; 3. Hume
- X. 1. Common sense intuitionism: Reid; 2. Reid; 3. Reid
- XI. 1. Utilitarianism: Bentham; 2. Bentham; 3. Bentham
- XII. 1. Kantianism: [Crusius]; 2. Kant; 3. Kant
- XIII. 1. Kant; 2. Kant; 3. Kant

What carries the students through these authors is a narrative nicely opened by Montaigne's ambivalence about human beings. At the end of the essay on Sebond, Montaigne uses Seneca and Plutarch to say that man is a "vile and abject thing" if he does not "raise himself above humanity" and that he cannot do this unless he renounces his own means and relies on God to lend him a hand: only Christian faith can help. But in "On Repentance" he rejects the thought that he ought to regret being human. His conscience is "content with itself," he says, "not as the conscience of an angel or horse but as the conscience of a man." The judgment comes from his own "court and laws," and he does not look elsewhere. The *Essays* thus move from a view of man as lowly and needing external control to a much higher estimate of our capacities, particularly our ability to govern ourselves. I take this movement to be central to the development of modern moral philosophy. Not surprisingly, Kant provides a fitting end to the story.

To introduce the course, I discuss the Reformation and the religious wars tied to the ideological splits it introduced or

exacerbated. Religious controversy is a leitmotif throughout. Even after the worst of the wars were over, confessional controversy remained. And with it there remained the need—desperate, for those who remembered the horrors of war—to find a morality that could be widely accepted despite confessional differences. Most people could not live a morality to which God was irrelevant, but at the risk of renewed bloodshed, God, whose will naturally had to be passed on by his official ministers, could not play an active role in it. This forms a large part of the context in which I try to explain the history of moral philosophy.

It is important not to overdo the amount of departure from religion that occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries. If Bentham gives us a wholly secular morality, neither Reid nor Kant do. One function of the course, therefore, is to correct misleading views of “the enlightenment and secularization” that are still current. Another is to explore the different ways in which religion has been taken to be of importance for morality and to raise questions about what morality might be without it. The rise of science was of course important, as was religion. I do not make much of it in this course, but the Newtonianism that gave Hume the model for his naturalism and the rhetoric in which he explained his philosophical ambitions deserves brief mention.

As general background, and to be helpful for understanding Montaigne, then, I say something about St. Thomas’s views on natural law and about the strong positions of Luther and Calvin on our sinful condition. A lecture, with or without brief selections, suffices for Grotius, but it is important to bring in at the start his views on human sociability and the difficulties put in its way by our tendency to overreach ourselves. Hobbes goes further than Grotius in his estimate of the difficulty we have in living together. Comparing his view of the state of nature with St. Augustine’s, visible in *The City of God*, highlights his Montaignian refusal to call us sinful. And his view of how we give effect to the dictates that become morality is a step on the path toward showing how we can construct our own governance. Pufendorf brings out the voluntarism that Hobbes himself espouses more overtly and fully than Hobbes does, and argues—against Montaignian skepticism—that international and not just national law is a possibility.

I pick Leibniz to speak for intellectualistic perfectionism partly because Spinoza is harder to understand and partly because Leibniz's criticisms of Pufendorbian voluntarism exemplify a major theme in the development of modern moral philosophy. (One could use Cudworth's critique of Cartesian voluntarism for this purpose as well, but his own positive views are hard to extract and present briefly.) The disagreements between Pufendorf and Leibniz raise serious questions about what sort of foundation, if any, a moral outlook should have. Pufendorf himself might have offered reasons for not being convinced by Leibniz's critique. Leibniz is useful also because his views, mediated and somewhat transformed by Wolff, were important in Kant's development. It is, however, quite possible to teach Spinoza instead, using material from the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*. When I do teach him, I confess that I do not expect the students to master the arguments for the propositions in the latter work. I aim at most to give them an overview of the position. Either Leibniz or Spinoza will introduce the students to the view that moral improvement comes only from clarified and increased knowledge.

I put three mischief makers next—Nicole, Mandeville, and Gay—partly because the students get a kick out of them. And of course most of those who wrote later tried to come to terms with them. Hutcheson is direct in doing so and is easier to read than Shaftesbury. Butler, though students find him difficult, is vital. More clearly than many other thinkers, he uses the major alternative to voluntarism or divine command theory for keeping God essential to morality. God, for Butler, is the supervisor of the universe who makes sure that if each of us does our duty, as it is made evident to us through conscience, all will be for the best. Thus God is a utilitarian though we cannot be. In addition, Butler's arguments against egoism, his claims about the superior authority of conscience as distinct from its strength, and his pluralistic critique of Hutcheson's view that benevolence is the whole of virtue raised issues that have not yet disappeared from moral philosophy.

Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtues builds from Pufendorf's distinction between imperfect and perfect duties, and his conventionalist theory of justice is a response to Butler's objections to Hutcheson's quasi-utilitarianism. His insistence that

approval is directed primarily at motives, not at acts, is a direct disavowal of the severe protestant position that in order to show us our need for grace, God could command us to act in ways that we are unable to act. Putting Hume in this context helps students see his originality. And it gives them a good sense of how his sentimentalism goes far beyond the thought of his predecessors in developing a way to understand ourselves as capable of self-governance. In connection with Hume's theory of justice, it is worth pointing out that Hume wrote on economics and was concerned about the severe underdevelopment of his native Scotland.

Reid presents a different picture of self-governance as well as a host of arguments against Hume. And Bentham fires a huge battery of objections at all of his natural law, intuitionist, and sentimentalist predecessors. When he is done with them, utilitarianism seems to be the only show in town. But of course he did not know Kant. Like Bentham, Kant hoped to eliminate the views of all of his own predecessors, many of them the same as those of Bentham. I sometimes try to talk a little about Crusius to help the students see that Kant did not come just out of the blue and that he was using as well as criticizing earlier work. But time presses at the end of term, and there is enough to do in getting the students to have some understanding of morality as autonomy as it is spelled out in the first two sections of the *Groundwork*. I do not try to get them through the third section, though I summarize it for them.

There are several themes that keep coming up in the authors I have proposed for study. Montaigne abandons the search for a highest good that will be the same for all human beings, and Grotius follows him. Hobbes vehemently denies that there is any such thing. Even Bentham does not claim that there is, as his "pleasure" is merely a placeholder for preferences, and his defense of homosexuality makes it clear that he knew how varied those could be. Kant insists that we each be allowed to pursue the good as we ourselves see it—within limits, of course. The problem of finding a common morality without relying on a highest good is thus one central issue.

Here is another: Montaigne does not deny the authority of the Catholic Church in moral matters but sets it aside; Hobbes subordinates religious teaching to the secular ruler. This provides a reason to bring in the emergence of moral philosophy as a discipline

independent of moral theology.<sup>21</sup> It is worthwhile occasionally to point out that moral philosophy—as our curriculum conceives of it—is itself a discipline that emerged during the debates the course is covering. For the natural law theorists, morality was just a part of law. It was separated out by thinkers I have usually not tried to include: Malebranche and Thomasius. But one can't cover everything in one semester.

Is this a course on the rise of enlightenment moral philosophy? Yes, indeed, but it is an open question how useful it would be, while teaching it, to make enlightenment a major theme. To do so, one has to give an account of what enlightenment was. Using Kant's account in a semester ending with his ethics makes the voyage all too obviously destined for that goal from the start. If we take pure opposition to religion as the dominant focus of enlightenment, we will have a skewed approach to the moral philosophers who insisted on somehow keeping God involved in morality but who still must be considered enlightened. It is worth playing the enlightenment motif from time to time, but to do it full justice would pull the course away from its central subjects.

Another way of presenting the history of moral philosophy would be to offer alternating courses: one on the 17th century (roughly) and one on the 18th. They could be taught in alternate years and allowed to satisfy the same requirements. A 17th-century semester, starting with the religious controversies and Montaigne, could give more time to the natural lawyers and to the rationalist theorists than the course already outlined. Stoicism could get a little time, with some Lipsius or DuVair as text, and Spinoza can be presented partly in this light. Students are quite intrigued by Malebranche, but one can avoid his metaphysical oddities and teach Clarke instead as a sort of finale. For the 18th century Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and Butler make a good beginning; Hume and Reid show the kinds of position against which Bentham specified his view; and Rousseau can be enjoyed for a week or two before landing at Kant's doorstep.

A rather different kind of course on the history of moral philosophy could begin with Machiavelli by using material on the classical republic from the *Discourses* as well as a little on unscrupulousness from *The Prince*. The absence of Christianity from his treatment of social life provides a view of human self-governance against which to

teach some Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. I would then move to Hobbes's rejection of republicanism together with his subordination of religion to the ruler. Pufendorf might come next, raising questions about the importance of religion in society, to be followed by Mandeville, whose cynical take on morality as political manipulation links him more to Machiavelli than to Hobbes. Shaftesbury asked questions about what sort of moral psychology is presupposed in the citizens of a modern classical republic. Butler can be fitted into this narrative, though not, I think, as interested in the political bearing of his moral psychology. Hume rejected republicanism; Rousseau revived it; and Kant gave it a new shape. Here the religious themes would be less prominent, and questions about politics, moral psychology and the relation of individual and community would be more prominent than they would be in the other courses I have suggested.

Another approach to the history of moral philosophy would be to concentrate on modern views about virtue.<sup>22</sup> Here Machiavelli might be a good starting point, since he uses a term translated as *virtue* but does not use it to mean quite what the ancients meant by it. The development in modern times away from Machiavelli's understanding of *virtù* is a good story—one that can be set in the frame of the decline of admiration for the nobility and their warrior virtues, the rise of new views of courtesy independent of courts, and the admission of shopkeepers and other ordinary folk into the ranks of those who might possess all the important virtues. Montaigne is again important, since he comments on many ancient views of the virtues and is highly critical of the preeminence accorded to the character of the ruthless soldier or military leader.<sup>23</sup> Grotius's critique of Aristotle on virtue could be the focus for a brief discussion of his thought, followed by Hobbes's concerns about virtue in connection with republicanism and his attempt to create a law-centered alternative. Pufendorf's category of imperfect duties is best explained as his way of making room for something like the virtues of concern for others. In Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume, virtue takes center stage, and Rousseau deserves an important place in this narrative, bringing back Machiavelli's admiration for the classical republic but with a distinctly different twist. In ending with Kant, one would need to give the students some pages from his *Doctrine of Virtue* to supplement the usual reading in the *Groundwork*.

## FOUR

Any of these courses would give students a good idea of the richness of the traditions of modern moral philosophy. My suggestions show that I am not favorably disposed to the sometimes popular course on “the British moralists” as a first survey of the history of modern ethics. That has long been a standard offering, partly because anthologies of 17th- and 18th-century English-language ethics have been available for over a century. Moreover, the British writings are accessible to beginners, and it is easy to link the main authors in a narrative going from Hobbes to Bentham and Reid. Nonetheless, to teach the history of modern moral philosophy in this way is to leave out as much of what shaped its course as we would omit if we tried to teach only British thinkers in the other introductory history class.

To put it another way, British moral philosophers were deeply involved with many Continental thinkers. Including them in the introductory history course is one way of broadening the context in which we locate the philosophers. I have suggested also some of the nonphilosophical contexts in which I would try to situate the moral philosophy. A comment is now in order about why I propose to give so much emphasis to the broader cultural issues with which modern moral philosophy has been involved. Why, in a word, do we need the new histories of moral philosophy that I have been proposing?

Quentin Skinner and John Pocock have done more than anyone else during the past several decades to bring us to recognize the importance of situating philosophical thought in relation to historically local issues to which the philosophers were responding.<sup>24</sup> In working on the history of moral philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries, I have been influenced by their writings. But I must make two comments about their views in connection with undergraduate teaching.

First, their complex rationales for contextualizing the works we study do not need to be explained in any detail in a beginning course on the history of moral philosophy. It suffices, I think, to make a comment now and again about the need a writer has to be understood by the people he wishes to affect and about the ways in which this need requires us to understand his language as he and his readers would have understood it.

Second, I have found that the history of moral philosophy requires a somewhat different approach to contexts than those that Skinner and Pocock take when they discuss the history of political thought. To put it briefly, I cannot always find specific cultural or political events to which philosophers were responding when they worked out what we now take to be their moral philosophy. And even when specific needs for rethinking ethics can be located, the philosophical inquiries go beyond what initially occasioned the work. Hobbes was indeed concerned about the English civil wars spurred by religious controversies, and Spinoza and Pufendorf were responding to different religious controversies in different social and political settings. But all of them were aware that the issues went beyond the local controversies that provoked their theories. Their concerns extended to the more general issues that were made specific in different ways in England or the Netherlands or Germany. Those issues, as well as the particular embodiments of them, changed over time. We can bring out the pastness of past moral philosophy by relating it to the large-scale issues prominent at the time. They will frequently not be the same as the questions that concern us now.

Context is indeed vital if we are to be historically careful about the meanings of the assertions of past philosophers. For undergraduates, context has an additional kind of importance. Explaining the different sorts of practical problems in which philosophers hoped to make a difference helps students see that what they are reading was not intended to be of merely academic interest. Philosophy nowadays does not have a large appeal to the public, not even to the undergraduate public. If we are to make the history of moral philosophy significant now for students, we need to show them that it mattered in its own time for reasons that went beyond the classroom. What that suggests is that moral philosophy might be as important now as it was then.

## FIVE

A basic one-semester course in history of moral philosophy could have a role in the curriculum like that of the course on the history of epistemology and metaphysics that has been standard for nearly a century. For many students the history course is an introduction to

the problems of philosophy as well as to its history. Any of the history courses I have outlined introduces central problems of ethical theory and allows as much scope for their discussion as the Descartes-to-Kant course allows for its problems. At least as many students are interested in moral issues as are concerned about problems of knowledge. And the writers treated in the courses I have outlined are basic for the moral philosophy that follows. Aside from preconceptions about what is basic and what is derivative, a course on the history of moral philosophy seems as well suited as the traditional one to serve the purposes of a basic history course.

To allow such a course to satisfy the departmental history requirement would not, however, be a minor change. The standard history course serves, among other things, to prepare students for more advanced work in the subjects whose history it covers. There is more in the standard curriculum on epistemology and metaphysics than on ethics. Even advanced historical courses on rationalism or empiricism are not mainly, if at all, about the moral thought linked to these orientations. Giving history of moral philosophy a weight equal to the weight that has been given to epistemology and metaphysics might necessitate changes in the advanced offerings that have presupposed participation in the standard history course: less metaphysics, more ethics. Curricula are not easy to change in any case. And in this case, the curricular pattern displays some deep, or anyway old, currents in philosophy and in higher education that call for rethinking.

During much of the 19th century, American college education, like its British counterpart, was designed to prepare a leadership elite for positions of responsibility in the ministry, government, or business. In the United States, the capstone course during the senior year, often given by the college president, was a course on ethics. It provided an orientation to life in the form of a comprehensive overview of Christian morality. It criticized philosophical positions believed to be inimical to that morality and provided at least a rudimentary rationale for what the young men who took it were supposed to be assured of otherwise through revelation.<sup>25</sup> College presidents do not teach that course any more, and neither do philosophy departments. Colleges and universities on the whole no longer present themselves as preparing their students for leadership

roles. Many students think that the idea that they might go into politics is bizarre or foolish. And the thought that philosophy courses might help prepare them for such a career would seem equally if not more bizarre.

Philosophy's own contribution to this situation is complex. In ancient times, as I suggested earlier, philosophers were looked on as sources of wisdom about the overall care of the self, about how to conduct oneself in matters familial and sexual, about how to use power and how to lose it, and about how to sustain either success or misery with dignity.<sup>26</sup> We do not now expect philosophers to be wiser about practical matters than other people are: indeed, probably the contrary. Christianity took over the guidance of life from pagan philosophy, and modern moral philosophy never took it back.

For this failure or refusal there were several reasons. One was that the Reformation ensured that it would be at least as hard for moderns to achieve agreement about the good life as it had been for the ancients. Moreover, there were urgent public problems about morality and politics, about which philosophers hoped to have more useful things to say than they could about the good life. Priests and ministers might continue to claim the authority to direct the private lives of individuals, but the universities in which philosophers came to be at home did not confer any such authority on them. And the academicization of philosophy also played a part in moving philosophers away from the kind of claim that John Stuart Mill made in the last third of his century: that philosophers should shape public morals. To sustain funding for the work of philosophy in 20th-century universities dominated by science, it seemed necessary to make the subject look like the sciences. Analytic philosophy seemed just the right way to go for this purpose. It enabled Anglophone moral philosophy to present itself as a tough-minded discipline with an agenda of difficult and purely theoretical problems. But the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war protests, the women's movement, and developments in biology and medicine have moved different questions to the front. Rawls's moral and political thought and the rise of applied ethics have brought about remarkable changes in what can now count as serious work within the discipline.

What might justify allowing the history of moral philosophy to share the place traditionally accorded the history of epistemology and

metaphysics? I have claimed that moral philosophy itself has had different aims and purposes over its long history. Study of the history of the subject has had a much shorter life span, and we have no good examination of it.<sup>27</sup> But insofar as the history has been taught, its teaching has also had varying aims. For Sidgwick, one point of the function of the historiography of ethics was to show that there really was—that there always had been—the discipline of moral philosophy; it therefore should have a secure place in the curriculum. Today, I think, we need a different service from study of the history of moral philosophy. We need it to show us how moral philosophy at different times has served different practical purposes. Historicizing the past of the discipline raises questions about what is being done now. Is the debate about deontology, consequentialism, and now virtue ethics still worth continuing? Or are there other issues that might well be addressed? Can moral philosophy address the larger issues of the time? Or is it at best part of the training for the new casuistry of applied ethics?

Moral philosophy no longer needs to present itself as the spectator sport it was in the heyday of analytic ethics. Philosophy departments have not completely caught up with this development. If our universities and colleges were more interested in preparing students for leadership positions than they now seem to be, they might ask more of ethics courses and of courses on the history of moral philosophy than they now do. Philosophy departments themselves might even take the lead in bringing back this ancient and honorable function of their institutions. If they do, they will find that courses on the history of moral philosophy will need to occupy a far more central place than they do now.

## NOTES

1. Mr. Todd Beattie of Princeton University examined 200 college catalogs and found that almost all philosophy departments require a course in the history of modern philosophy for the major. In most cases, this is a course on the history of epistemology and metaphysics. Only about eight schools allowed a course on the history of moral philosophy to count. I am grateful to Princeton High School for permission to use its collection of college catalogs and to Mr. Beattie for his assistance.
2. See the explanation of this in T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 174.
3. The first, to my knowledge, was C. F. Stäudlin's *Geschichte der Moralphilosophie* of 1822. The only 19th-century history still in use is Henry Sidgwick's *Short History of Ethics*, 1886.
4. But well before Kant, both Lord Herbert of Cherbury and Pierre Bayle held that we must use moral knowledge to determine whether an alleged divine command really comes from God or not.
5. Preface to *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Writings I*, trans. Cottingham et al. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 186.
6. See, e.g., Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "What New Haven and Grand Rapids Have to Say to Each Other." In *Seeking Understanding*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ii.
8. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, London, 1874, vi–vii. Hegel, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. A. V. Miller, says, "Philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying." Oxford, England: 1979, 6.
9. Moritz Schlick, *Problems of Ethics*, trans. David Rynin. New York: 1939 (original in German, 1930).
10. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Davidson. Oxford, England: 1995; Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: 1986; Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, Berkeley, Calif.: 1998.
11. Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
12. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ch. VI, ed. Stillinger, 126–27.
13. See D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience*. Philadelphia: 1972.
14. My view of the history of moral philosophy is set out at length in *The Invention of Autonomy*, Cambridge University Press, 1998. My anthology, *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, Cambridge University Press,

1990, now reissued in a single volume, contains sufficient excerpts to keep students busy for more than a term, but the selections are not long enough to make possible the detailed study of any of the authors included.

15. Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. Donald Frame. "Of Physiognomy." Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958, 805.
16. For de Sade as precursor of nihilism, see Winfried Schröder, *Moralischer Nihilismus*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 2002, ch. V.
17. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Genealogy*, Notre Dame, 147.
18. John Sargent, *Solid Philosophy Asserted against the Fancies of the Deists*, 1697, A2–A3.
19. We will show what we consider to be important or unimportant as much by the practical issues we choose to highlight as by the philosophers we read and those we skip.
20. John Dewey, "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," 1909, *Middle Works* vol. 4, Carbondale, Ill.: 1977, 14.
21. On this, see Wilhelm Schmitt-Biggeman, "New Structures of Knowledge," in *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 489–529. And note Ian Hunter's objections to his views, *Rival Enlightenments*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 20–21, 37–38.
22. For an argument against those who claim that modern moral philosophy ignored virtue, see my "Misfortunes of Virtue," *Ethics* 101.1, Oct. 1990, 42–63.
23. See David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998.
24. See Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. I. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002, for Skinner's papers, and *Meaning and Context*, ed. James Tully, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988, for discussion. See John Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985, ch. 1, for one of Pocock's several accounts of his approach.
25. See Meyer, referred to in note 13.
26. See the work of Hadot, Foucault, and Nehamas referred to in note 10.
27. See Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth Century Harvard*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: 1981, and *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: 1981.