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**MORAL PHILOSOPHY
AND CONTEMPORARY
VIRTUE ETHICS**

*It is a necessary feature of consequentialism
that it is a shallow philosophy.*

G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"



Before a critical appraisal of any philosophical system can be provided, one needs to have made sense of the system. The more familiar work involved in that process is a set of inquiries with the goal in mind of providing a detailed examination of the main features internal to the system. Less familiar, but no less important, is the work of understanding that system's situational features with respect to the history of investigations concerning the questions that the system is meant to answer and the status of that system relative to competing explanations. No one working in the field of virtue ethics refers to virtue ethics as a system, for the associations between the various virtue ethical approaches are too loose to merit the label. However,

G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"; first published in *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19; my page numbers in the quotations follow one of its many anthologized printings in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26–44.

movements are analogous to systems, and the same sort of work is required for critically appraising a philosophical movement as is for making sense of a philosophical system.

There are advantages to beginning with a consideration of some of the ways that contemporary virtue ethics is situated within moral philosophy before turning to an examination of its main features. This chapter seeks to understand contemporary virtue ethics within the wider context of contemporary moral philosophy. It is also the task of this chapter to identify the foundational questions of moral philosophy and to argue for their priority and their importance for judging the relative strengths of different approaches to moral philosophy. These two tasks are related insofar as both require reflection on the state of contemporary moral philosophy and the relation between moral theorizing and metaphysics.

Contemporary Moral Philosophy: Competition and Incongruities

What exactly is contemporary virtue ethics? Both adherents and detractors of the movement have an interest in providing a relatively straightforward answer to this question: an adherent, to clarify what it is that her efforts are advancing; a detractor, to set up the target at which she will take aim. If, however, we attempt to take on the perspective of a mere observer of this movement, one whose interests in it have been attracted because she wants to know what motivates its adherents and detractors, say a perceptive graduate student, what will she say after working through the literature of those usually identified as its major proponents? Sarah Conly, I think, accurately describes one likely reaction: "One's first impression on reviewing literature on virtue is that here, more than most places in philosophy, anything goes."¹ Conly could make that claim in 1988, short-

1. Sarah Conly, "Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 83–96, 83.

ly before a swift acceleration in the number and variety of virtue ethical approaches that were produced in the next two decades. On the one hand, mainstream elements in the movement have become more unified since the late 1980s by developing a set of strategies for responding to its critics; on the other hand, the fissures between competing virtue ethical approaches have become deeper. On both hands, the variety of virtue ethical approaches and the divisions between them reflect variety and divisions within contemporary moral philosophy in general.

The level of disagreement about basic issues in moral philosophy is staggering. There is no shortage of evidence on this point: simply open any anthology or handbook of moral philosophy and read through the table of contents. Sentimentalism is pitted against deontology, both of which are pitted against utilitarianism, all of which are contrasted with divine command theory, which is again contrasted with contractarianism, which are all again opposed to virtue ethics, and so on. Add to this the striking contrast between the sorts of inquiries that ancient and medieval philosophers pursued and those pursued by philosophers today, and the picture of the state of ethics is even more complex. There simply are no questions settled once and for all in contemporary moral philosophy.

Still more unsettling, there is not even basic agreement about what it is that a philosopher engaged in ethical inquiry ought to be doing. Some contend that the task of the ethical philosopher is to clarify the principles by means of which people are already living their lives. Others contend that the task of ethics is to bring clarity to what ought to be the main goals of human life, as well as to the means by which we attain it. Others seek to unearth the foundations from which sure and certain rules governing human action are derived. Others, with the significant addition of a sense of moral obligation, seek to find the foundations from which sure and certain principles that ought to govern human action are derived. Those producing textbooks often seem to take it as the basic task of moral philosophy to compare and

contrast the varieties of ethical theories, and then either to argue for the superiority of one of those approaches over others or to leave it to one's readers/students to select their own preferred approach. One can forgive a student who has received instruction along these lines if he develops a consumer's mindset about ethical theories, not unlike a shopper surveying a shelf full of perfumes and selecting one on the basis of the leading principles of appeal—like its smell (hedonism), its effects on the opposite sex (consequentialism), its ability to bring to greater perfection natural aromas (eudaimonism), or its popularity (contractualism).

Judged by normal standards for distinguishing between disciplines, moral philosophy's status as a discipline would seem in jeopardy. Imagine physicists who deny the existence of atoms, or astronomers who contend the earth to be at the center of the solar system, or chemists who continue to promote the phlogiston theory of combustion, with all of them regarded as respectable members of their disciplines who, far from being censured, are given major grants to continue their research and teaching. The degree of disagreement between these researchers and their familiar counterparts—subatomic physicists, post-Copernican astronomers, and post-Boylean chemists—is no greater than that between different partisans of opposed ethical theories. The glaring difference, of course, is that in those other disciplines the theories proposed have all been proven false, and have been accepted as such by reputed members of the discipline, whereas no manner of experimentation or argumentation has proven sufficient to mark similar progress in ethics. In fact, by some measures, moral philosophy has degenerated rather than progressed over the course of its history.²

Compounded with the general failure of moral philosophy to

2. Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) can each be read as advancing that conclusion, albeit in very different ways.

have as yet sorted out its basic principles is the proximity of this discipline to the lives we all lead. "Ethics" has at least two main senses: it is often used as a byword for "philosophical ethics" or "moral philosophy"; but "ethics," outside of academic circles, means those customs and principles by which a person attempts to guide his or her life. We can make do without philosophical ethics, but not ethics. Human action, which is acting with reasons, however underarticulated they may be, is as common as pulling on some clothes in the morning; in fact, doing that, and any other mundane matter about which we may deliberate, such as whether to brush our teeth and for how long and with what sort of substance, implies some degree of choice and so is, I would argue, ethical. Although determining how the academic discipline of moral philosophy relates to our everyday lives, which are necessarily fraught with moral deliberation, remains a matter of dispute for moral philosophers, there is no denying the fact that moral philosophy seems the most easily accessible field of philosophy, at least from the perspective of initiating students into the sorts of questions that philosophers ask and the strategies employed to answer them.

It is because of the proximity of praxis to theory in ethics that the issues pertinent to moral philosophy are those about which we take special care, and often do so with great passion. The conclusions arrived at by moral philosophers can, and often do, have a tremendous impact on the sorts of decisions we make in our everyday lives, and the stakes of those decisions are often exceedingly high: Should I abort the radically dependent human being within me, especially when my formal education will be imperiled if I do not? Should I lie to my employer to seek advancement, especially when he is an oppressive boss? Should I put my failing mother in a nursing home, especially when having her live with me will cause tension in my marriage? It is, as we will see Anscombe argue next chapter, a sign of our times that many of the moral theories most popular today could be used to justify both a positive and negative answer to each

of these questions, and not a few moral philosophers would count that feature in their favor. In addition to these questions of a discrete and thorny dimension, there is also a holistic and personal dimension to the grounding question of moral philosophy, at least of classical moral philosophy, which is “how ought I to live?” Pressing an answer to this question reveals the most expansive and pertinent dimensions of moral reflection: it is a field of inquiry that concerns our whole way of life.

There seem to be, then, two seemingly incompatible features of moral philosophy: on the one hand it is a discipline in disarray, with first principles, aims, and methodology all still very much in dispute; and on the other hand it is a discipline in which the stakes are especially high and about whose conclusions academics and nonacademics alike care very much, even if many people seem not to care particularly about the philosophical strategies employed to arrive at those conclusions. Of all the fields of inquiry in which one could expect the best minds to have devoted themselves to good effect, it would seem that moral philosophy should hold preeminent place. Yet no field of inquiry, judged in terms of its status as a unified discipline, seems in a worse state than moral philosophy.

Not every moral philosopher finds the current state of moral philosophy problematic, and for reasons that extend beyond the overused joke about philosophers being put out of business should solutions be found. Some claim it is a sign of health for a discipline to be fraught with conflict, pointing to the degree of passion to which many of its practitioners approach its subject matter. Others take the stance of the cool-headed skeptic who looks to moral philosophy as the most striking example of our inability to secure knowledge about important matters. It is also the case that in ethics, more than other areas in philosophy, students are encouraged to develop what is sometimes called their own “personal philosophy,” and variety in ethics could be looked on simply as an indication of the variety of persons who write and think about philosophical ethics.

Against such reasons, imagine a young and earnest aspiring philosopher who is deeply concerned about issues pertinent to ethics. She thinks that through studying philosophical ethics she will be helped in her reflections on issues important to her. Now imagine the alarm she feels after surveying the moral philosophical landscape and discovering what a jumble of theories, methodologies, questions, and presuppositions it actually is. She is no longer sure that the different characters in this philosophical drama are talking about the same things. She wonders if there are any principles or even aims shared across the whole spectrum of positions, and whether there could be any legitimate means to claim that genuine progress is achievable in this field. As disturbing as her experience may be, it is only once she has analyzed the broad framework of ethics and grasped its confusions that she can more fully appreciate and adopt the Socratic strategy of pressing for answers that reach deeper than conventional ones.

What is perhaps most discomfiting for those students of moral philosophy who avoid the temptations to specialize too early and who study a wide array of ethical approaches, hopefully with some sensitivity to differences between ancients and moderns, is that there appears to be no golden thread weaving through the labyrinth of the history of moral philosophy. The reason for this is that moral philosophy is not composed of just one maze; there are many, and each has its own parameters and motivating questions. Nietzsche is the better guide, not Rawls, for recognizing that what is at work in the history of moral philosophy is that there are different moralities. Though hardly Nietzscheans in the conventional sense, Anscombe, MacIntyre, and a few others often counted in the early virtue ethical camp extend this Nietzschean insight in their own distinctive critiques of modernity.³ Not only are there different moralities, but

3. "This book (1886) [*Beyond Good and Evil*] is in all essentials a *critique of modernity*, not excluding the modern sciences, modern arts, and even modern politics, along with pointers to a contrary type that is as little modern as possible—a noble,

there are opposing moralities—opposing scales of values, opposing descriptions of practical rationality, and opposing descriptions of foundational virtues, such as justice. Some moral philosophers, including some virtue ethicists, seek to downplay these oppositions. Often, the strategy in such efforts is to paint the opposing side in colors drawn from one's own favored palate. Consider how Rawls, for instance, presents his *Theory of Justice* as an extension in important ways of Aristotle's project; this is possible because he reads Aristotle as endorsing a notion of practical rationality as tantamount to enlightened self-interest, and justice a matter of fairness.⁴ Close readers of Aristotle, I will argue in chapter 8, will not find him in Rawls's descriptions.

The reaction of those attentive to basic oppositions between different moralities ought not to be, Bernard Williams's nuanced reflections notwithstanding, that of the cynic. Although it is the case that there are foundational conflicts within moral philosophy, and not much in it to teach us how to live well (for that is left to parents), there is nevertheless much to gain from studying moral philosophy. Yet, it can be gained only if we are attentive to the cross-purposes at play between different theories, as well as to the deeper reasons for such oppositions. I think it the case that the most significant reasons for conflict between different moral theories lie outside the boundaries of moral theory itself. These are the cultural, historical, political, and religious presuppositions that inform a person's, or a people's, ethics in the first place, and give shape to distinctive ethical theories in the second. Though there are still many who insist on a presuppositionless approach to moral theorizing, the works of MacIntyre,⁵

Yes-saying type." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 766.

4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1999), 10, 22, 372–80.

5. This claim is explored in detail in MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

Rist,⁶ Adams,⁷ Appiah,⁸ and others, though different from each other in other respects, show that moral philosophy must rely upon additional theoretical and nontheoretical resources for its own vitality. Attention to the background sources for differences in moral theories does not prevent one from judging that some moral theories have got things more right than others, or that there are better and worse resolutions to moral conundrums. What it does preclude, however, is the attempt to make such a judgment from a neutral perspective, for any would-be adjudicator of philosophical disputes is always shaped by a distinctive set of historical, cultural, political, and religious presuppositions.

If we are to take the traditional approach to distinguishing one discipline from another and look for the common subject matter, aim, and methodology at work across all varieties of moral theories, our search will be vain. Moore and Hare were engaged in a different inquiry than were Plato and Aristotle, for the former were seeking to explain the meanings of moral articulations, and the latter to describe how best to organize one's life as a whole. Similarly, Rawls and Singer have advanced a different sort of project than had Augustine or Aquinas, for the former have sought to clarify the procedures for the successful use of instrumental reason without making any recourse to principles transcending a naturalistic perspective, and the latter insisted that human reason fails to be fully rational if not nurtured by eternal reason. All eight of these thinkers are counted moral philosophers, but aside from consideration given to voluntary action little else remains to unite their efforts under a single inquiry.

An approach to moral philosophical inquiry that employs careful reading, sensitivity to historical context, and the shifting meaning of key terms, as well as attunement to the most basic questions

6. John Rist, *Real Ethics: Rethinking the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

7. Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Eternals Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

8. Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*.

animating moral philosophy, is necessary to move beyond the impasses that are readily apparent between different approaches to foundational questions. Though Aristotle was perhaps less attuned to points of conflict between different moral traditions than we are, it is false to say, as some do, that Aristotle had no historical sense or ear for genuine conflict between moral traditions. And it is from Aristotle that we learn “it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs.”⁹ Moral philosophy cannot be judged by the standards used to judge another discipline, so our study of it requires a hermeneutic shaped by the subject matter rather than one imported from other fields. However, one of the points I have tried to emphasize is that not all moral philosophies, at least at first glance, share the same subject matter. Nor do they employ the same methodology. Nor are they pursued with the same aims in view. Once again one can ask, what justifies the claim that they are members of a single discipline?

It is the commonality of the foundational questions animating all traditions of moral inquiry, no matter how opposed they may be, that justifies grouping such disparate inquiries together. In some traditions of moral inquiry, these questions are made explicit, whereas in others they lie below the surface, but are no less motivating. Whereas it is the questions that unite different moral theories, it is the different answers to them, and the subsequent questions to those first set of answers, that account for variety and conflict between different traditions of moral inquiry. So for example, even though inquiring into the foundations for a metaphysics of morals is very different from inquiring into what it means to be truly flourishing as the sort of creatures we are, there is nevertheless a common set

9. *NE* I. 3, 1094^b24–27

of questions behind inquires like Kant's or Plato's and Aristotle's that makes comparison between their respective approaches possible. What are the questions?

The Most Basic Questions of Moral Philosophy

These basic questions are not always articulated in the same way, and it is much better to think of them in terms of categories of questions, of which, I argue, there are three. It is not always the case that particular adherents of a moral tradition recognize their answers to these questions as being in conflict with the answers provided by adherents to other moral traditions; it is not even always the case that such adherents recognize their approach as having adopted a particular answer to these questions. Answers to these questions, nevertheless, are always implied, even if only tacitly, by every party to moral inquiry.

The first category of question has to do with what a moral philosopher takes a human *being* to be. What is a human being? There is always both a particular and a universal dimension to this class of question: "What am I?" and "What is it to be a human being?" are two different, but related, questions. In contemporary discussions, this sort of question often takes the form of, "What is a person, as opposed to a mere human being?" Theories about human nature, whether it is good or bad at root, whether it is end-directed or open-ended, whether we find in it the basis for norms that we live by, whether it is the product of evolutionary development or a special act of creation or some combination thereof, whether there really is a human nature or if we misleadingly speak of human nature to describe beings who only come to be defined after they are acting, and more besides, all wrestle with questions that belong to this class. It is not only moral philosophers who worry about these questions—there are many philosophers working in philosophy of mind, per-

sonal identity, ethnology, and other subdisciplines who take a special interest in these questions—but worrying about these questions, or at a minimum adopting a set of positions with respect to them, is necessary for one to engage in moral philosophy. Why so?

Whether one takes the basic task of ethics to explain what we are to *do*—a decision-centered approach to moral philosophy, or how we are to *live*—an integrated approach to moral philosophy often identified with an ethics of virtue, it is impossible to proceed without exercising some conception of what *we* are. It is *human* action and life at issue in moral inquiries, and no matter of attempting, for the sake of avoiding controversy, to avoid positing a theory of what a human being is can eradicate the logical priority of employing one.

The second category of question pertains to what a moral philosopher takes a human life to be about. What is my purpose? What is the purpose of human life in general? Is there some overarching purpose to human life? This can be thought of as the teleological—in the widest sense of the term—class of questions. Ancient and medieval answers to these questions typically point to virtuous activity as in some way providing a solution insofar as it is tantamount to living a flourishing or happy life. So too do many contemporary virtue ethicists. One of the marks of the transition into modernity, as many of the more unconventional virtue ethicists have emphasized, is a rejection of classical answers to teleological questions. Some modern moral philosophers have taken great efforts to avoid formulating a careful answer to the question of what life is all about in order to deny an overarching purpose to life. Others have shifted the very meaning of the term “teleological” to construct a framework that emphasizes the consequences of actions as opposed to the classical emphasis on activity as its own end—in fact, in contemporary analytic circles of moral philosophy “teleological” is usually taken as a synonym for “consequentialist.”

We can set the classical versus modern controversy regarding this category of question aside for the moment, for here it suffices merely

to point out that denying that there is some overarching purpose to my life in particular, or to human life in general, *is* in fact an answer to this category of question. So too is living as though life is about the pursuit of pleasure, or the easing of other people's suffering, or the having of many far-ranging experiences, or the acquisition of a good will, or the exercising of one's will to power, or the enjoyment of aesthetic experiences, or the respecting of other people's points of view, or any other number of platitudes that one hears when one is pressed to say something summative about the purpose of human life. When plain persons describe,¹⁰ often in a jocular fashion, the activities of philosophers, it is with philosophers' engagement with this set of questions in mind—as in “Philosophy? That's when professors talk about the meaning of life.” The “professors” in question often conjure images of bearded men, canes, pipes, and jargon-laden discourse. It is ironic then that one seldom finds contemporary philosophers taking up this set of questions in an extensive fashion; perhaps they, too, find the activity somewhat ridiculous.¹¹ But, is there a more pressing set of questions than the teleological—pressing, that is, if we are to care for how we act and live?

Whether put under the spotlight of philosophical scrutiny or not, whether carefully developed or merely presupposed, one's answers to the questions in this class are necessary to the activity of moral philosophy. There is no thinking about what we are to do without thinking about ends. Action cannot help but be goal-directed, no matter how discretely we limit the goal in a particular decision-theoretic framework. What goes for particular actions goes as well for organizing our lives; one needs an organizational principle, and organizational principles are by definition telic. There is no thinking

10. I am using “plain person” in the sense employed by MacIntyre in “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues, and Goods,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992): 3–19.

11. Talbot Brewer suggests that questions about the overall purpose of life have become a matter of some embarrassment for philosophers as violations of good taste. See *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 6–7.

about how to live our lives without thinking about its overarching purpose, no matter how fastidiously we strive to scrub our view of life's purpose of any definite dimensions.

The third class of questions pertains to what a moral philosopher takes as the source of normativity in ethics. Why should I live this way rather than that? Why should I acquire this virtue rather than that vice? What are the reasons for comporting myself in this manner rather than that? By what rule ought I to determine what to do in this or that situation? Is God the source of normativity? Or nature? Or evolutionary determinism? Or our will to outdo all others? Or reason alone? Or society? It is on questions of this sort that modern moral philosophers have trained their attention with nearly single-minded focus.¹² One can find answers to questions about the human being and human life merely presupposed by modern moral philosophers, but no modern moral philosopher fails to give special attention to normative questions. Ancient and medieval philosophers certainly deal with these normative questions, but not in the same way. The question for Aristotle or Aquinas, for instance, is not so much "How do I come to know the right thing to do?" as "Why is this action I know to be right, right?" The facts of our moral life, what counts as good or right, as noble or ignoble, were not in dispute for premodern moral philosophers as they are so often for us.¹³

This difference is one of the more salient reasons why so much of modern and contemporary moral philosophy has been focused on moral conundrums, a process in which one proposes a purported

12. The twentieth-century preoccupation in Anglo-Analytic philosophy with meta-ethics falls under this set of questions. For a history of that preoccupation, and one that reveals the very narrow focus of many contributors to it as well as the interminability of the debates within it, see Stephen Darwall, Alan Gibbard, and Peter Railton's "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends," *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 115–89. See also John Rist's reflections on this article in his *Real Ethics*, 140–44. .

13. The reasons for this difference are many, and one way to regard the projects of Anscombe and MacIntyre, as well as Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, Philip Rieff, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and others, is that the exploration of those reasons are a central feature of modernity with which to wrestle.

dilemma, looks to the intuitions we have about how to answer it, and then tries to find which principles need to be employed to solve it. Worries about whether Jim should shoot an Indian, or whether we should pull a trolley lever, or shove a fat man onto some tracks, to name a few of the more vivid examples of thought-experimentation in the literature, have a prominence in current literature that is not to be found in classical. This is not to suggest that questions of applied ethics are sidestepped in classical philosophy, for we do find Aristotle, and especially Aquinas, dealing with issues of applied ethics, but they do so to show how to apply their moral principles, not to discover what those principles are.

The constant disputativeness among modern moral philosophers about the basic facts of human life and action suggests to some contemporary observers that moral philosophy is in disarray. Often, too, inferences are made between the state of moral philosophy and the state of culture under the principle that as moral philosophy goes, so goes culture. It is not, however, so certain that the state of things today is that different than in the time of moral philosophy's infancy. Socrates faced a similar set of challenges when confronting the sophists, those busybodies seeking to subvert what every good Athenian took to be right. Against the false perception that philosophy is simply the product of an advanced civilization, it is worth noting that ancient philosophy thrived at the nadir of Athenian culture, at that point at which classical Greece rent itself to pieces in the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath. A good case can be made that we have reached a similar cultural low point, in which case it is natural to ask: who are our Socrateses and who are our sophists? If we are to follow Plato's strategy, we can discern the veracity of normative positions only by weighing them against truths concerning human nature and its intrinsic purpose.

Discovering how a particular moral philosopher answers questions belonging to the three categories of questions sketched above, whether they do so explicitly or not, proves essential to making

sense of his or her moral theory. The descriptive role of this way of inquiring into moral theories yields the principles we can assess as being either strengths or weaknesses of various moral theories. Such assessment cannot proceed without making recourse to a set of standards, standards that are built from what one considers the correct answers to these same basic questions of moral philosophy. The evaluative work of judging moral theories cannot, then, be done from some neutral point of view, but rather must be done from the position of the moral tradition of inquiry we identify, more or less explicitly, as our own.

This butts us up against one of the significant challenges for those who would approach moral philosophy in the way I have recommended: Are we justified in working from the position of our own—and with the use of this “our” I do not suppose yours is mine—tradition of moral inquiry and using it as a standard from which to judge others? If there are so many conflicting moral traditions of inquiry on offer today, how does identifying largely with one of them even come about? Is this merely a matter of the accidents of one’s life, of moral luck?¹⁴ Is it simply accidental that you have had this upbringing, in this country, went to these schools, had those teachers, and so on? Of course the whole of human life is hemmed all about by such accidents, but it would be wrong to think we are simply the product of these accidents. One of the central tasks of any philosophical approach is that of bringing to light the beliefs that have already shaped our perspectives, and determining whether or not they ought to be held on to. It is Plato who first teaches us how to do this, inviting us to sort through our false and true beliefs and striving to “give an account of the reason why” for our true beliefs, tying them down so they don’t wander off like a statue of Daedalus.¹⁵ Such Platonic

14. I mean this in Nussbaum’s sense of the term as explored in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

15. See Plato’s discussion in *Meno* 96d–98b.

efforts are, loosely speaking, metaphysical, which is to say foundational in a way that goes beyond the efforts typically identified as metaethical.

Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics

To appreciate the sense of “metaphysical” applied in the last sentence, it is helpful to consider some features of practical judgments. To be human is to face difficult practical decisions with life-changing consequences. On such occasions, principles of practical reasoning are applied, even when not fully grasped or justified. Such principles are often little more than unexamined beliefs about how one ought to act when circumstances have forced us to apply them. Sometimes they appear in the form of exhortative idioms: “Always be kind,” “Do unto others as you would have them to do to you,” “Do the right thing,” “Don’t be dishonest,” “Don’t murder,” and so on. More often, as many virtue ethicists have pointed out, they are prepropositional and emulative; we are animated by a desire to be like the courageous person, the just person, or the practically wise person, and so are motivated primarily by a desire to imitate those whom we admire. These principles are available to us sometimes as prepropositional and sometimes as propositional beliefs about the world and how beings like us are supposed to respond to it.

It is not that we carry such principles around like tools in our action-making toolbox. Rather, they are embodied beliefs that are experienced as though proceeding from our nature because each contributes to our second nature, that is to say, our ethical character. Such embodied beliefs themselves depend on still other background assumptions about how the world works, who is more and who less deserving of our attention, why the Golden Rule should be applied, what honesty’s connection is to truth and being, what justice entails in the person we admire, and so on. It is these more basic presuppositions, presuppositions informing the presuppositions of practi-

cal deliberation, which I am identifying here as metaphysical. For moral philosophers and plain persons alike, it makes a tremendous difference what sort of metaphysical principles they hold, for they give shape and scope of application to the basic principles informing moral action.

It should be clear that nothing too austere or precise is intended by “metaphysics” here. What metaphysics as a discipline is, whether it is a legitimate discipline in philosophy, if it is then how it is to be conducted, and other related questions do not need to be answered to justify the claim that one’s metaphysics, in the sense outlined above, is of the greatest importance for one’s moral philosophy.¹⁶ The modest and everyday sense of metaphysics is nevertheless at the same time surprisingly bold, even audacious, for it stakes out positions on how things stand with respect to the world. Is the universe ordered, or disordered? Was it created, or has it always been? Are beings end-directed, or merely the product of a vast number of efficient causes? Is there a God, or no God? Are goodness, truth, and beauty properties of beings, or only fabrications of our own evaluative powers? Plain persons may not ask these questions in precisely this way, but they do indeed wonder about such matters and hold views on them.

In fact, I would go still further and contend it is impossible to be human and not to have at least some vague set of beliefs about these and related issues. We are, as Etienne Gilson frequently pointed out, metaphysical animals. For most people, the positions held on these issues are in large measure a matter of inheritance—that is, they are received passively and inhaled in the cultural air we breathe. For

16. I do consider such metametaphysical questions important, and address them elsewhere, including in “An Aristotelian Critique of Gracia’s View of Metaphysics,” in *Revisiting Metaphysics: Essays on Jorge J. E. Gracia’s Metaphysics and Its Task*, ed. Robert Delfino (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rudopi, 2006); and “Categories and Metaphysics: Aristotle’s Science of Being,” in *Categories: Historical and Systematic Essays*, ed. Michael Gorman and Jonathan J. Sanford (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

those striving to live reflectively, inherited positions are scrutinized in the effort to build a considered set of answers to these metaphysical questions. For all, holding a position on metaphysical issues supplies a background for the answers given to the questions pertaining to anthropology, teleology, and normativity that were just specified as basic to efforts in moral inquiry. To be sure, one can argue about the meaning of moral propositions, the status of moral claims, and the difficulty of certain moral conundrums without seeming to make recourse to ultimate positions, but moral philosophers do themselves and others a disservice when they pretend their metaphysics does not matter for their moral philosophy. Moral philosophy is concerned with reflective action, with our interactions with the world and those beings that compose it, and one cannot envisage deliberating about different courses of action without some ideas about the ways things are within the arena of the world in which actions occur.

Metaphysics is then being used here to designate one's positions on first causes and principles, even when one thinks that such first causes and principles can be discerned from an exclusively natural scientific investigation of the world. With this sense of metaphysics in mind we can see that for the greater number of moral philosophers writing today, "naturalism" is the preferred term used to encapsulate their basic metaphysical commitments.¹⁷ Naturalism takes many forms, but in recent usage it entails the belief that there simply are no explanations that extend beyond the field of observable phenomena. Naturalism takes, then, Aristotelian second philosophy, physics in the sense of natural philosophy, to be in fact first philosophy. Although it is often triumphantly hailed as an anti-metaphysical position, it nevertheless entails a view of how things stand with respect to the world, and so is a metaphysical position in the sense of the term meant here.

17. One measure of the prevalence of naturalism is to be found in the 2009 Philpapers survey of what philosophers believe, see <http://philpapers.org/surveys/>. The prevalences of atheism, naturalism, and physicalism among philosophers are all notable.

So too are idealism, realism, skepticism, theism, physicalism, and the other -isms that entail pronouncements about first things.

Though broad, this use of “metaphysics” does not conflate one’s views about first things with religious commitments. One’s metaphysics are a matter of judgments about ultimate causes and principles that, at least in theory, are defensible by means of rational scrutiny. The principles of one’s religion are received in faith and, though open to philosophical scrutiny and potentially rationally defensible, ultimately are a matter of holding beliefs about what one owes God. I think it important to maintain the distinction between metaphysics and religion, in part because I think that metaphysics names a legitimate philosophical discipline whereas religion, strictly speaking, names a virtue, that of justice toward God. Neither is metaphysics the same as theology, at least not sacred theology, even though theology bears a closer kinship to metaphysics than does religion.

Nevertheless, it is the case that theological doctrines do entail a set of positions about first things, such as: there is a God, the world is created, and our lives are directed toward union with God. The objects of metaphysical inquiry are canvassed in theology, and it must be this shared range of concern about ultimate causes and principles that is the source of the popular confusion of metaphysics with religious views. However, theological doctrines extend beyond the metaphysical scope of concerns with the special attention given to understanding the interrelations between grace, sin, and salvation. Moreover, theology draws its principles from revealed texts, rather than from rational inquiry into the nature of reality.¹⁸ The special concern with salvation and the distinctive methodology of theology make it clear that it is a distinctive mode of inquiry, a distinctive science, from metaphysics. Nevertheless, one’s religious views, that is to say the beliefs that inform one’s religion, do have a profound impact on one’s metaphysics in the more general sense in which the word

18. *Summa theologiae* I, q.1,a.1, *resp.*

is being used here. In a similar way, among those who identify as nonreligious one finds a connection between those beliefs informing their nonreligion and their metaphysics.

It would be a mistake, then, to pretend that one's religious views, or lack thereof, are irrelevant to one's moral philosophizing. Thinkers as diverse as the cultural anthropologist René Girard,¹⁹ the sociologist Philip Rieff,²⁰ and philosophers Robert Merrihew Adams and Alasdair MacIntyre²¹ have all made clear both the historical and the ongoing connections between religion and moral theorizing. No great perceptive powers are needed to observe that it makes a tremendous difference for the positions one holds with respect to the three foundational classes of questions specified above whether one is committed to a secular or to a religious way of life.²²

This connection is even more easily observed when philosophy is viewed not merely as a specialized activity, but as a whole way of life.²³ This all-encompassing conception of philosophy is prevalent not just in the ancient Greek philosophers, but in those of the Hellenistic period as well. Even in the early Christian church, for example, the Christian way of life was commonly called a philosophy, or, as St. Justin Martyr calls it, the true philosophy.²⁴ Whatever one thinks about Justin's claim, there is something admirable in his bold honesty. He was a philosopher, which meant he was committed to

19. See Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

20. See Rieff's seminal *Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), and his posthumous work *Sacred Order/Social Order: My Life among the Deathworks* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

21. See Adams's "Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984): 392–401, and *Finite and Eternal Goods*; and MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.

22. The reasons why philosophers often have acted as though that is not the case is a subject worthy of analysis, some of which is pursued in the works just mentioned.

23. See Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

24. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 8.1.

a way of life in search of wisdom that entailed the highest standards of ethical conduct, just as it did for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle before him. He encounters Christianity as a man already committed to the philosophic life. Never once does he imagine his embrace of Christianity as the abandonment of his life of philosophy, but rather only its fulfillment.

We contemporary philosophers tend to be more narrow-minded than St. Justin Martyr in this regard. Philosophy is often treated as something we do, as opposed to an all-encompassing way of life. Pressures on philosophers in the academy to justify their tenured existence has no doubt played a part in our efforts to make it seem like we are doing the same sorts of things that our colleagues in the sciences do: investigating narrow questions, collecting data, collaborating with other specialists, and developing ever more precise—and so often obtuse to outsiders—terminology. Of course, many of these efforts are fruitful, but only if they are properly regarded as limited contributions to the grander aims of philosophy.

One way or another, the classical and expansive approach to philosophy will have its due. Try as we might to contain the contents of the different compartments of our lives, the demands for consistency and integrated living cannot be denied. Putting aside the demands for reflective integration leaves us at a disadvantage, whereas we are better served when we strive to be attentive to the ways in which the principles we rely upon in our moral inquiries are nurtured by our views concerning how things stand with respect to the world. In fact, it seems that no solution to the apparent multitude of moral conundrums discussed in the literature of moral philosophy today can be given without recourse to metaphysical presuppositions. Consider one relatively simple test of this that we will have occasion to revisit in more detail next chapter, the question of moral absolutes.²⁵ If one

25. I do not mean that supporting a position on moral absolutes is a simple affair, but rather that one's position on moral absolutes provides a simple test for showing the relation between metaphysics and applied ethics.

thinks there is no point at which one can rightfully abandon a moral absolute, that is because of some view about the metaphysical status of moral absolutes and their source that one has. If one argues for some nuanced points at which one can abandon a moral absolute, then one does not really think that there are moral absolutes, and that too is a position on the metaphysical status of moral absolutes. One's views on the metaphysical status of moral absolutes have profound effects on the conclusions one arrives at with respect to questions of applied ethics.

The case of one's position on moral absolutes brings to light another feature regarding the relationship between moral philosophy and metaphysics, and that is the significance of religious belief to one's metaphysics. Though there is not necessarily a causal relationship between religious belief and the endorsement of moral absolutes, it does tend to be the case that religious believers identify and rely upon moral absolutes at a far higher rate than nonbelievers. The prevalence of atheists in professional philosophy and a prevailing tendency to think of religious belief as a blind act of faith notwithstanding,²⁶ the differences with respect to religious or secular positions on moral absolutes is not indicative of a seriously religious believing philosopher being any less of a philosopher than an unbelieving one. If it were, we would have to say the same for the seriously secular or naturalistic philosopher, whose embrace of the secular or naturalistic worldview demands his or her allegiance to certain principles that have not been demonstrated because they are, necessarily because of their status as first principles, indemonstrable. Fortunately we do not need to sort through the claims to greater reasonableness on both sides of the religious and secular aisles to stress the importance one's ultimate views of reality make for one's moral philosophizing.

26. For the prevalence of atheism among professional philosophers, see again the 2009 Philpapers survey cited above. Brian Leiter's popular blog, leiterreport.typepad.com, provides a useful gauge of the status quo attitude about Christianity in academic philosophy.

The difference between a seriously religious and a seriously secular moral philosopher does not come through in the degree of analytical acuity either achieves,²⁷ for one is not in a better or worse position than another on this score, but rather it is in the metaphysical principles that inform one's moral philosophizing that we find these differences most pronounced. Is human life sacred? Do human beings have a destination beyond the natural world? Is God the ultimate foundation for our moral principles? Jewish and Christian philosophers, with of course all the appropriate qualifications, would answer "yes" to these questions, whereas those committed to a secular worldview, again with a bevy of qualifications, would answer "no." To be sure, much common ground can be found between the two camps on issues pertaining to what sometimes goes by the name of metaethics, or a consideration of the formal features of virtues, or the proper application of one or another principle. And perhaps this common ground, and the hope of achieving consensus, explains why there has been so much attention paid to such issues in recent moral philosophy. But, on the questions I have argued to be most fundamental to ethical inquiry, the questions pertaining to anthropology, teleology, and the sources of normativity, one's deepest commitments make the greatest difference. This is a matter of the metaphysical presuppositions undergirding one's ethics, and to pretend either that they are not there or that they do not matter can only serve to perpetuate one of the leading causes of what can seem intractable disagreements in moral philosophy today.

The metaphysical presuppositions undergirding this book are for the most part identified with the Aristotelian tradition, particularly the thread in the Aristotelian tradition that grants to Aquinas a preeminent place. There are of course many varieties of both Aristotelianism and Thomism, and so one should not imagine that adherence to this multifaceted tradition will yield results necessar-

27. By "seriously" is meant a position held with so significant a degree of conviction that consistency is sought between one's views on first things and all other principles.

ily acknowledged as true by other adherents of this tradition—far from it. Neither does adherence to this tradition render it an unsuitable resource to other philosophers not working in this tradition. The resurgence of Aristotelian studies in the last century, to which important additions have been made by those working in the analytic, various continental, and other traditions and the ways in which philosophers from so many different backgrounds have been able to learn from each other belie the claim that one must embrace a tradition of inquiry to really learn from it. Nor does being an adherent of the Aristotelian tradition yield ready-made answers to the challenges facing contemporary moral philosophers—even if one accepts a basic set of Aristotelian principles and his methodology, there is no assurance from the outset that one can use these to address adequately the challenges that face us today. What we do, however, have from this tradition are not only exemplars to model, principles to rely upon, and some tools to work with, but an approach to fundamental questions in which we can have some confidence for a number of reasons, not the least of which that Aristotelianism has withstood the test of time, and from which we can begin to go to work on current challenges.

Virtue Ethics and Moral Philosophy

The attention given in this chapter to the current state of moral philosophy, the fundamental questions of moral inquiry, and moral philosophy's necessary reliance on extra-moral principles has been sought to establish the basis for a critical evaluation of contemporary virtue ethics. Focus has been given to some of the deep-seated problems in contemporary philosophy because it is precisely the claim, first and most forcefully articulated in G. E. M. Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," that something has gone terribly wrong with modern moral philosophy, combined with her suggestion that we return to the sort of philosophical ethics advanced by Aristotle,

which set the contemporary virtue ethics movement on its course. Anscombe's claims will be examined in some detail in the next chapter, but the point needs to be underlined at this stage of the argument that the initial momentum of contemporary virtue ethics, and that which garnered the interest of other moral philosophers similarly disenchanted with modern moral philosophy, was to find a way to jettison the dominant preoccupations and methodologies that have given shape to modern moral philosophy and to seek either to retrieve a classical approach to moral philosophy or to develop a new one. It was by and large this revolutionary impetus that defined contributions in the early stages of the contemporary virtue ethics movement. What happens to a revolutionary philosophical movement after its initial energetic period? One of three things generally occurs: either it fades away because it lacks the depth necessary to sustain itself, or it successfully establishes itself as a new paradigm, or it loses its rough edges and accommodates itself to the prevailing paradigm. We have already previewed how it is the latter two options that characterize the difference between unconventional and conventional virtue ethics.

The distinction between unconventional and conventional virtue ethics is not readily discernable in the early works of this movement.²⁸ The ethical writings of Elizabeth Anscombe,²⁹ G. H. Von Wright,³⁰

28. James D. Wallace's *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978) perhaps provides an exception. His intention, he tells us in the introduction, had been to follow Anscombe's recommendation and provide an account of the virtues that is not reliant on a normative structure. He found, however, that he cannot, at least not for some of the virtues. The normative structure he employs, however, is variously Kantian, Humean, and Rawlsian. Some other features of his work, however, are on the unconventional side of the divide, such as his view of life as fundamentally normative—a teleological perspective that one finds in general disfavor in modern and contemporary moral philosophy.

29. Several collections of these can be found. See *Ethics, Religion, and Politics*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981); *Human Life, Action, and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Charlottesville, Va.: Imprint Academic, 2005); and *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Charlottesville, Va.: Imprint Academic, 2008).

30. *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). Von Wright is less well known now than the other writers in this list. His seventh chapter takes up the

Philippa Foot,³¹ Peter Geach,³² Alasdair MacIntyre,³³ Bernard Williams,³⁴ and others were all regarded with a high degree of suspicion by dominant voices in moral philosophy because of the radical nature of their proposals. One of the things they all share in common is a deep suspicion of that notion at the heart of the modern moral project, that acting in a morally right manner is dependent on the correct application of a particular rule. Whether that rule is Kant's categorical imperative or Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle, what the modern project shares in common is the insistence that there is a special class of human actions that can be described as moral, and only those rule-grounded actions belong to it. This, the unconventional defenders of virtue insisted, inappropriately narrows the range of ethical reflection and so forestalls inquiry into areas of moral philosophical reflection that are in fact of central importance.

More conventional virtue ethical approaches tend to be marked by a similar narrowing of focus characteristic of the modern moral project. The development of these approaches that accommodate themselves to the prevailing paradigm in modern moral philosophy is gradual and eclectic. There remain, moreover, significant efforts to establish the revolutionary elements as a new paradigm while combining these features with elements of the conventional approach, such as Russell's defense of a Hard Virtue Ethics in *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*.³⁵ The mainstream virtue ethical movement is

problem of virtue, but the whole is an attempt to think through a new way to approach doing moral philosophy by recognizing the priority of nonmoral senses of "good."

31. *Virtues and Vices, and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

32. *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

33. By any stretch a voluminous writer before the publication of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre is a relative latecomer to the virtue theoretic scene.

34. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

35. There are elements both of an unconventional approach to virtue ethics in this work, such as his strong defense of the unity of the virtues, and of a conventional approach to virtue ethics, such as a focus on making the case that virtue ethics can be action-guiding.

epitomized in one way by Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics*,³⁶ and in another by two of Michael Slote's works, *From Morality to Virtue*,³⁷ and *Morals from Motives*. Their work has awakened thinkers to a number of overlooked but important issues in moral philosophy, especially by bringing to mind again the importance of dealing in a rigorous philosophical manner with questions pertaining to human nature and the ends of human life. They have also developed a largely successful set of polemical responses to many features of the other moral theories popular today. Many well-fashioned critiques of deontology and consequentialism have been forged in the polemical fires of these and other thinkers who see themselves, or at least are seen by others, as proponents of the virtue ethics movement. A critical evaluation of the contemporary virtue ethics movement considered as a whole is pursued in this book, but claims made with respect to marginal virtue ethics often cannot be applied to mainstream, and vice versa. Care will be taken throughout to specify whether it is virtue ethics considered as a whole, as unconventional, or as conventional, that is under consideration in particular discussions.

The status virtue ethics has achieved in contemporary moral philosophy is itself enough to warrant an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. The fact that this movement does not have the sort of theoretical cohesion evident in the other dominant moral theories, such as consequentialism, deontology, sentimentalism, or contractualism, makes this assessment particularly challenging. This is, perhaps, one reason why no other book-length critical appraisal of this movement has yet to appear. Most criticisms of virtue ethics, and there are many, do not criticize it from a perspective within the Aristotelian tradition, but there have been a few to do so,³⁸ and we will have occasion to reflect on some insights from articles by Peter

36. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

37. Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

38. Though I think it fair to describe each of these three thinkers as Aristotelians, they are Aristotelians of very different types.

Simpson,³⁹ Martha Nussbaum,⁴⁰ and Christopher Miles Coope in the pages to follow.⁴¹



It will be helpful to keep four questions before us as we seek to understand the particular features intrinsic to the contemporary virtue ethics movement. First, what exactly is contemporary virtue ethics? We have already canvassed some of the reasons why answering this question is difficult. There are many varieties of virtue ethicists who look to a variety of sources for their inspiration. Among these varieties, there are significant disagreements about what precisely virtue is, what makes a virtue a good for a human being, and what the connection is between a good human life and the virtues.

Second, does contemporary virtue ethics provide a viable alternative to the two most prominent ethical theories adhered to by contemporary moral philosophers, consequentialism and deontology? We will find that describing itself as such a third, and better, way is one of the hallmarks of virtue ethics literature. The common strategy, and one that certainly seems on the right track, is to argue that contemporary virtue ethics is positioned to answer the central question of ethics—how ought one to live?—in a far more suitable manner than the other two approaches. But does one in fact find the resources within the mainstream virtue ethics literature to answer this question suitably? It is a negative answer to this question that prompts the third.

Third, why is it that contemporary virtue ethics fails to provide the resources necessary to respond sufficiently to the central questions of ethics? It is certainly not my position that either consequentialism or deontology, or sentimentalism or contractualism for that matter, has theoretical or normative advantages over contemporary virtue ethics. Of the alternatives, one must give the nod to contem-

39. Simpson, "Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle."

40. Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?"

41. Coope, "Modern Virtue Ethics."

porary virtue ethics. But, in its attempts to reconstruct facets of the Aristotelian legacy of the virtues, contemporary virtue ethicists have for the most part not made sufficient use of the underpinnings of Aristotle's own account of the virtues. The measure by means of which this judgment is defended is the degree of success that contemporary virtue ethics has had in addressing what have been described in this chapter as the foundational questions of moral philosophy.

This prompts a fourth question: is a virtue-focused approach to moral philosophy viable? I argue that it is, and that its success depends upon an approach that incorporates something more akin to the anthropological, teleological, and normative underpinnings found in the broadly conceived Aristotelian tradition of moral inquiry.