Studies in the History of Ethics

Kant's History of Ethics
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1. Did Kant approach ethical theory historically?

Many readers of Kant, especially those under the influence of Hegel, claim that it is a flaw in Kant's philosophy that it is "ahistorical". Sometimes the claim takes the form that Kant did not conceive of *reason* historically (something that Hegel, by contrast, is -- to his credit -- supposed to have done). I have long thought that this sort of charge is doubly mistaken. On the one hand, it exaggerates the historicism of Hegel's philosophy, whose foundation lies in the "thought-determinations" of speculative logic, which Hegel conceives non-historically, as having timeless validity for both thinking and being. This is not a reproach – or at least Hegel would not regard it as such. To him it would mean only that philosophy deals with what is in the highest sense true – with God or the absolute – rather than with what is merely transitory and contingent.[1] On the other hand, to contrast Hegel with Kant in this way also ignores the ways in which Kant's philosophy is historical in its self-conception, ways in which Kant actually anticipates many of the very features of Hegel's philosophy that lead people to describe Hegel as having a "historical" conception of philosophy.

It is certainly true that Kant (unlike Hegel) was not a very knowledgeable historian of philosophy. He came to the study of philosophy from natural science, and later the fields of ethics, aesthetics, politics and religion came to occupy his central concerns, but his approach to philosophical issues never came by way of reflection on their history. He never gave the history of philosophy the prominence in his works that Hegel did, though

this is more a matter of form and presentation than of the substance of his thought. Kant was well acquainted, of course, with the recent tradition of German philosophy: Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten and Crusius, and he seems also to have had knowledge of eighteenth century French philosophy, and of as much of Anglophone philosophy as had been translated into either French or German. But his knowledge of classical Greek philosophy was mostly at second hand (mainly through Cicero's Latin popularizations and via J. J. Brucker's *Historia critica philosophica* (1742-44)), and like many modern philosophers (even including Hegel), he had a woefully inadequate appreciation of the scholastic philosophy of the high middle ages.

In his ethical works in particular Kant's historical references seem at first glance only occasional, not systematic. He sometimes compares or contrasts his position with that of the Wolffians, the Stoics or the Epicureans, but his most conspicuous historical references are in his systematic account, in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, of the way in which previous moral philosophers had conceived of the supreme principle of morality as a principle of heteronomy, in contrast to the principle of rational autonomy through which he proposes to reform the foundations of practical philosophy. But this reference itself looks more like a repudiation of the entire history of ethics than like a historically self-conscious way of conceiving his own ethical theory.

At a deeper level, however, Kant's entire philosophy is fundamentally historical, and historically self-conscious, in its self-conception and its aims. This assertion may have the air of paradox, largely because in the received conception of intellectual history, largely through the malign influence of nineteenth century Romanticism, the historical self-consciousness of the entire Enlightenment period has generally been underestimated,

distorted or outright falsified. Paradox or not, however, the assertion is unquestionably true. Both Prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason* introduce the project of criticism historically, as a project suited to the present "age of critique" and capable of transforming metaphysics from a random groping into a science in the ways that logic, mathematics and physics had, in Kant's view, been radically transformed at crucial stages in their history (KrV A viii-xiii, B vii-xvi).[2] Kant's philosophical reflections on both politics and religion rest on a historical conception of the state and the church, and are self-consciously designed for an age of enlightenment.

It will be the thesis of this paper that Kantian ethics is equally historical in its conception, standing in a similarly self-conscious relation to the history of philosophical ethics as Kant conceived it. It is true that we do not find this history presented explicitly or systematically in any of Kant's published writings on ethics (in them it is adumbrated only in a single footnote, KpV 5:127n). But when we turn to the transcriptions of his lectures on ethics, we find that throughout his career, Kant began his lectures with a brief survey of the history of ethics, which was, no doubt, presented with the intention of providing his students with a routine overview of the history of the subject matter. At the same time, however, we can also see how Kant is using his historical introduction to motivate his own original approach to the topic of searching for a supreme principle of morality. And in this way, we can come to understand Kant's own enterprise in ethics as a projection of certain vital historical developments in ethics, as Kant sees them. If to conceive philosophy historically is to recognize that philosophers, and human culture generally, thought quite differently about things at different times, and to see the historical development of this thinking as a progressively deepening understanding,[3] then

Kant conceived moral philosophy historically, and even of moral *reason* historically. And like Hegel, he saw Christianity as playing a pivotal role in the course of historical development. Or so I will argue below.

2. Kant's taxonomy of moral principles

The best place to begin this argument, however, is not at the beginning (that is, the beginning considered in itself, the historical beginning, which Kant locates in ancient Greek ethics) but rather with what is better known to us (as readers of his published ethical writings), namely, his discussion of previous attempts to formulate the supreme principle of morality. What Kant gives us here is a taxonomy, simpler in the *Groundwork*, more complex in the second *Critique*, with some interesting embroidery in some of his lecture presentations. We may summarize this taxonomy in the following table (cf. G 4:441-444, KpV 5:40, VE: 27:100, 253, 510, 29:621-622, 625-627).

Principles of heteronomy

Subjective
(Empirical)

Internal	External
Physical feeling (Epicurus, [Hélvetius, Lamettrie])	Education (Montaigne, [Mandeville])
Moral feeling (Hutcheson, [Shaftesbury])	Civil constitution (Mandeville, [Hobbes])

Objective
(Rational)

Internal	External
Perfection (Wolff, the Stoics, [Baumgarten, Cumberland])	The will of God (Crusius, the theological moralists, [Baumgarten])

If this systematic account of previous principles of morality counts as a 'history', it does so only when 'history' is used not in the narrative-chronological sense, but in the taxonomical sense (as in Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*). The term seems poised delicately between these two senses in its use in the final brief chapter of the first *Critique* ('the history of pure reason', KrV A852-855/B880-883). Of course this is for Kant a history of *failed* attempts at a moral principle, because all the principles listed in it are principles of heteronomy, which derive morality from something other than the will of the rational being itself. But it is clear from Kant's discussion in the *Groundwork* and even more from his treatment of these principles in his lectures, is the fact that for Kant these proposed principles of morality, though none of them is adequate, form a sort of hierarchy of approximation to an adequate principle. The 'subjective' or 'empirical' principles are farther from being adequate than the 'objective' or 'rational' ones, and the 'external' versions of each kind of principle are less adequate than the 'internal' ones (G 4:441-443, KpV 5:41, VE 27:108-110, 252-255, 29:621-628). Kant therefore presents us in a sense with a kind of developmental hierarchy, not unlike the transcendental progression used to systematize philosophical materials in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling's systems of idealism and natural philosophy or Hegel's logic, philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit.

The 'inner' principles all come closer to the principle of autonomy by displaying the moral goodness of the action as something arising from our own will. Thus an external empirical system depending on civil constitution, since it employs external or coercive motives, is less adequate than one involving education, which aims at

developing inner moral grounds (VE 29:621). The empirical principles all locate the ground of morality in something external to this will – some object or incentive presented to it, for which it has a contingent, empirical inclination. None of them can account for the categorical nature of moral imperatives, whose obligation on the will cannot be undone simply by giving up or deciding not to satisfy some desire (however urgent or central the desire may in fact be to us or our well-being).

The rational principles, in fact, even admit of an interpretation on which they might be compatible with an ethics of autonomy: if we obey the divine will not out of empirical feelings of love or fear, but because God's perfect will commands what we objectively ought to do, or if we seek the perfection precisely of our volition as rational beings, then these principles might get it right in practice about what we ought to do. But on that interpretation they "pass the buck" both about the fundamental reason why we should do it and about the principle on which we are to act. (What exactly is it that God's perfect will wills, and why is it that we are obligated to do that? What does perfection of our volition consist in, and what is it about precisely that sort of volition that makes it obligatory for us?)

The rational principles, when so understood, have an affinity with another set of proposals about the moral principle, which Kant rejects because they are analytic and therefore provide no determinate principle at all for action.

1. Do good and avoid evil. (Wolff).
2. Act according to the truth (Cumberland).
3. Act according to the mean between vices (Aristotle). (VE 27:264, 276-277).

'Do good and avoid evil' is trivial because the concept of a good action is simply that of an action that is to be done, and the concept of an evil action is that of one that is to be omitted. The principle attributed here to Richard Cumberland is actually one that is held, in various forms, by virtually all adherents of the British rationalist tradition in ethics, including Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, William Wollaston and Richard Price.[4] It holds that actions have a real nature, and are involved with real relations to things and to other actions. In virtue of these natures and relations, it is *true* of some actions that they are *right* or *to be done*, and of others that they are *wrong* or *to be avoided*. Presumably Kant's criticism of the principle that one should act in accordance with such *truths* is that this principle actually says no more than Wolff's principle does (for it tells us only to perform those actions of which it is *true* that they are right and ought to be performed). It is curious that Kant should have listed Aristotle's principle of the mean along with principles of the moderns, and curious also, as we shall see in a moment, that Aristotle finds no place at all in Kant's account of the ancient schools of ethics. But his criticism is no doubt that since a mean is defined as the action that is to be done located between two actions that should not be done, it, like Wolff's principle, actually tells us only to do those actions that fall under the concept 'to be done'.[5]

Especially noteworthy, however, is Kant's preference for the principle of moral feeling over that of physical feeling or happiness, because it captures (albeit inadequately) the recognition that practical reason produces the direct desire to do actions that accord with the law, as well as moral feelings of approval regarding such actions. Kant was always attracted by the theory of moral sense, as represented by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith, and consistently makes a place for moral feeling (as a

direct influence of reason on sensibility) as part of his moral psychology (G 4:402n, KpV 5:80, 91-92 TP 8:283, MS 6:399-403). This theme in Kant's ethics should not be underestimated, because it arises from the fact that Kant regards the principle of moral feeling as a genuine *historical* advance in the history of ethics. It, he says, "stems from the feeling for what is good as such. This is an invention of the modern age" (VE 29:623). He thus credits the moral sense school with being the first one to appreciate that ethics is grounded on the inherent worth of good actions themselves rather than on their serviceability to the good ends they seek to achieve. Or in other words, moral sense theory for Kant is the historical origin of the idea that what has essentially moral worth is the good will itself rather than whatever good results it may have (G 4:394)

However, we will not fully understand Kant's view about the essential difference between ancient and modern ethics until we leave behind his taxonomy of principles and consider instead a distinction he makes between two very different approaches to ethics, one of them essentially ancient, the other essentially modern – yet arising in his view out of a development in late antiquity, namely the rise of *Christianity*.

3. Ancient ethics as ideal ethics

It is significant that Kant's historical allusions in his systematization of heteronomous moral principles are mainly to modern moral philosophers. For Kant thinks that conceiving of ethics in terms of a principle of morality is a modern way of thinking about it. "What, then, is the basis of morality? This question has been investigated in the modern age. The principle of morality, or the logical principle, is that from which all moral laws may be derived" (VE 29: 620-621). By contrast, the ancient view of ethics

conceives the basis of morality as an ideal of the highest good. "All ethical systems of the ancient world were founded on the question of the Summum Bonum and what it consists of, and the systems of antiquity are distinguished according to their answers to this question. This Summum Bonum I call an ideal" (*Lectures on Ethics,* Collins 27: 247). "The ancients concentrated the determining of the principle of morality on the question: "What is the highest good?" (VE 29:599).

It is true that Epicurus and the Stoics are mentioned regarding two of the six kinds of principle, but from Kant's lectures we learn (perhaps to our surprise) that strictly speaking no ancient ethical theory was primarily oriented toward the formulation of a *principle* of morality at all. Instead, Kant tells us, ancient ethics was founded on a set of competing conceptions of the *summum bonum* or highest good – yet *not* in the sense in which Kant uses that term, to refer to an end to be produced by moral action (morality of character, or worthiness to be happy, combined with happiness proportionate to that worthiness). Rather, ancient ethical theories were based on the highest good in the sense of the ethical "ideal" – the *ideally best kind of person*.

In other words, Kant regards ancient ethics as an ethics of *ideal being* – what might nowadays be called a 'virtue ethics' – whereas modern ethics, by contrast, as an ethics of moral doing or an ethics of *principles* – an ethics grounded in principles saying *what to do* and *why to do it*. He respects both kinds of ethics, and treats the moral ideal or highest good as still on the agenda of moral philosophy, but regards the ancient kind of ethics, regarded as the *foundation* of ethics, also as unsuited to modernity. The deeper orientation of modern ethics he regards as having arisen through progressive developments that occurred within ancient ethics itself.

There is clearly still a place for ideals in modern ethics, in Kant's view. He endorses Christian ideal in particular, as well as the Stoic ideal of the sage, and even the Epicurean ideal of the virtuous and cheerful heart (though he regarded these two ancient ideals as each one-sided in an important way (R 6:60, KpV 5:111-113). Kant's endorsement of the Christian ideal presents clearly his view about the relation of ideals to principles, for he calls it "the personified idea of the good principle" (R 6:60). An *ideal* is the concept of an individual being (here, an individual human being) that corresponds to (or personifies) an *a priori* concept of reason, or an *idea.* But an idea, in turn, rests on a principle of reason (here, the *good principle*, that struggles against the radical evil in human nature). It would be a topic for another paper to explain why Kant regards ideas, hence also ideals, as grounded on principles, rather than the reverse (but see KrV A298-332/B355-390, KpV 5:57-63). The modern ethical theory, oriented toward *principles*, hence toward what to do and why, is therefore deeper and historically superior to the ancient ethical theory of being and virtue, oriented towards ideals. However, before we inquire after the *historical* ground of this superiority, we need to look at ancient ethics itself, as Kant understands it, and the competing options it offers of the ethical ideal.

Kant distinguishes five different ethical ideals in antiquity, the first three focusing on our natural powers, and the last two involving our relation to the supernatural:

I. The *Cynic* ideal (of Diogenes and Antisthenes), which is *natural simplicity*, and happiness as the product of nature rather than of art.

II. The *Epicurean* ideal, which is that of the *man of the world*, and happiness as a product of art, not of nature.

III. The *Stoic* ideal (of Zeno), which is that of the *sage*, and happiness as identical

with moral perfection or virtue.

IV. The *mystical* ideal (of Plato), of the visionary character, in which the highest

good consists in the human being seeing himself in communion with the highest

being.

V. The *Christian* ideal of holiness, whose pattern is Jesus Christ.

(VE 27:100-106, 247-250, 483-485; 29:602-604).

We may see in this list a hierarchy or progression, with the later items representing higher

or more adequate conceptions of the ideal. But each item on the list also captures in its

conception of happiness something Kant regards as one part or aspect of the truth, so that

the different ideals also complement one another. Though he does not say so, the first

three ideals would seem to correspond to the three predispositions Kant distinguishes in

human nature: animality, humanity and personality. Thus Kant's treatment of all the

ancient ideals, even the Cynic one, is more favorable than critical.

The Cynic ideal is that of innocence, separation from the misery and corruption of

human society, and freeing oneself from the burdens of artificial needs and inclinations.

Thus Kant associates it in the modern world with Rousseau, "that subtle Diogenes" (VE

27:102, 248, 484, 29:603). The Cynics "posited the greatest good in the *abstine*, i.e. the

pleasure of being able to do without, and thus the enjoyment of life under the fewest

possible requirements… Hence their symbol was the club of Hercules, signifying strength

of mind with self-sufficiency" (VE 27:484). I suggest we read Kant's view that Cynicism

captures part of the truth (the least adequate part, as it will turn out) as a limited

endorsement of Kant's claim in the *Groundwork* that inclinations have so little worth in

themselves that it is the universal wish of every rational being to be free of them (G 4:428, 454). Thus Kant says that the Cynic ideal "were it attainable, would be preferable on the system of Diogenes even for the Epicurean, since there is more pleasure contained in doing without than in the burden of all the means acquired for the purpose" (VE 27:484). Another Cynic element in Kant's own ethics is his adoption of the Rousseauian idea that human misery and moral corruption are products of the social condition, giving rise not only to competitiveness and hostility between people but also to the destructive social passions: tyranny, greed and ambition.[6]

Both the Epicurean and Stoic ideals, in contrast to the Cynic ideal, view happiness as a product not of nature but of human art. Among the moderns, Kant occasionally associates the Epicurean ideal with the French materialists Lamettrie and Hélvetius (VE 27:100), but sometimes also with Hume (or else – the lecture manuscripts leave this a bit unclear -- with Henry Home, Lord Kames) (VE 27:102, 249). The former associations tend to provoke condemnations of the ideal from him ("this is, so to speak, the philosophy of rascals"), the latter more favorable associations (that virtue must be taught, and is the possession of the cultivated man of the world).

Given his usual reputation as hostile to our natural inclinations, we might think that Kant would be fundamentally hostile toward the Epicurean ideal of the life of pleasure and fundamentally favorable toward the Stoic ideal of a life guided by reason. In fact, however, a survey of his remarks on these ancient schools both in his published writings and his lectures reveals that he often goes out of his way not only to praise Epicurus, but also in the same connection to criticize the Stoics. One of Kant's consistent themes is that Epicurus is been misunderstood. Epicurus' ideal, he says, was that of "an inner

contentment and a cheerful heart. One must be secure against all reproaches from oneself or others – but that is no philosophy of pleasure, and he has been poorly understood. We still have a letter from him, in which he invites someone to dine, but promises to receive him with nothing else but a cheerful heart and a dish of polenta – a sorry meal for an epicure" (VE 27:250; cf. 27:101). The true ideal of Epicurus, according to Kant, was not the life of bodily pleasure but the cheerfulness of virtue and the self-contentment of an upright character. "Pure mental enjoyment was the pleasure that arises from the performance of virtuous acts" (VE 27:483). This is the true superiority of the Epicurean ideal over the Cynic ideal, since the Epicurean seeks happiness in the exercise of reason and the development of our faculties. It is an ideal of civilization or of the "man of the world," whereas the Cynic places the ideal only in the happiness of nature (VE 27:484).

It is no doubt nevertheless true that Kant regards an ethical ideal that emphasizes rational virtue as closer to the truth than one that seeks happiness in pleasure (of any kind). But more fundamentally he regards the Epicurean and Stoic ideals as each capturing one side of the truth, and in a sense as complementing one another, or – to look at it the other way – as displaying opposed one-sidednesses or deficiencies. The Epicurean seeks to identify a happy state (*Zustand*) with the self-contentment that comes from the worth of our person, whereas the Stoic looks to virtue in our person to produce a happy state. Kant, however, insists that the worth of our state is something fundamentally distinct from the worth of our person. Happiness is the former, while virtue is the latter. The Epicurean and the Stoic systems thus founder together on their failure to draw the distinction.

The confusion of morality with prudence, or ethical reason with pragmatic reason, of which both schools are guilty, is one which Kant regards as a basic human foible: "The human being can be contented or discontented with himself either pragmatically or ethically. But he very often confuses the two. He often thinks he has pangs of conscience, although he is only afraid of a tribunal of prudence" (VE 27:251). This is also, in Kant's view, the typical fault of the self-tormenting repentant sinner -- "a torment which is very ambiguous, and usually only an inward reproach for having offended against prudence" (R 6:24). Thus people still speak of "feeling guilty" when they smoke or overeat; the Kantian diagnosis of this curious tendency is that the self-deceptive burden of moral guilt is less humiliating to them than the honest admission that they have simply behaved foolishly and harmed their own interests.

4. The supernatural ideal

The Cynic, Epicurean and Stoic ideals identify the ethical ideal with *happiness*. The supernatural ideals of Platonism and Christianity, however, resolve the contradiction within and between Epicureanism and Stoicism by breaking entirely with the eudaimonism of the natural ethical ideals. This is, to be sure, anticipated already in the Stoic ideal: "The archetypal idea of Zeno is the sage, who feels happiness within himself, who possesses everything, and who has in himself the source of cheerfulness and righteousness… [He] is ranked above the gods, since divinity had no temptations or obstacles to overcome; but a sage of that kind would have attained to such perfection by his strength in overcoming obstacles" (VE 27:250). In a sense, the Stoics already saw beyond their eudaimonism, and glimpsed the supernatural ideal: "The sect of Zeno, like

that of the Platonists, proceeded solely from the principle of morality… hence the maxim, to wrap ourselves in virtue, as if in a cloak. But to abstract from all enjoyment is contrary to nature, since there are so many needs that call for satisfaction" (VE 27:484).

The Platonic ethical ideal takes this next step explicitly: it is "a mystical ideal, in which the highest good consists in the human being seeing himself in communion with the highest being" (VE 27:250). What Kant refers to as the 'Platonic' ideal seems more to be associated with the philosophy of the later Academy or even with neo-Platonism. "Plato [he says] derived all sources of our understanding from God, and said that all our happiness would consist in raising ourselves above the sensible and uniting ourselves with our source of all in the highest being" (VE 27:105).

The highest ideal of antiquity, however, Kant locates in the Christian ideal of holiness. The transition to this from the Platonic ideal consists in the thought that through communion with the highest being, we may be open to the influence of this being on our life and character. "Plato, in particular, apart from the principle of morality he derived from the power of reason in the human being, assumed also a mystical principle, which he located in the influence of a supreme being on the human mind" (VE 27:484). The highest point in the ethics of antiquity, as Kant sees it, is the Christian ideal of holiness. The chief superiority, however, consists for him in the consequent Christian doctrine that the moral ideal is too lofty for human beings, and that they must therefore depend on divine assistance in order to reach the ideal.

It is this alone that releases the Christian ideal from what Kant thinks is the moral corruption attendant upon ideals in general. For ideals are drawn from human models, and are therefore always attended by deception and compromise, owing to our corrupt

tendency to demand no more of ourselves than what we find in the imperfect human conduct around us. "The ideal of holiness, as philosophy understands it, is the most perfect ideal, for it is an ideal of the greatest purely moral perfection, but such a thing is unattainable by the human being, it is based upon a belief in divine assistance (VE 27: 251-252, 485, 1404). All other ancient ideals, Kant argues, remained imperfect, because they "had no greater moral perfection than that which could come from human nature; but since this was very defective, their moral laws were also defective. So their ethical system was not pure; they accommodated virtue to human weakness, and hence it was incomplete" (VE 27:251).

5. From ideals to principles

The superhuman and supernatural perfection of the ideal of holiness in the Gospel is for Kant the historical route that led to the modern conception of ethics as based on a *principle* rather than an *ideal*. For human ideals are always based on human models; a true model of perfection must therefore rise above what can be given to us as a model for imitation: "All ideals are fictions. We attempt *in concreto* to envisage a being that is congruent with the idea. In the ideal we turn ideas into a model, and may go astray in clinging to an ideal, since it can often be defective" (VE 29:605).

Every ideal, when its rational basis is understood, depends on something more fundamental, an idea of reason, which is generated through a search for what is unconditioned or perfect. The defect in every moral ideal is not only that it is represented as something empirically existing, which would always be defective, but even more fundamentally that it presupposes, and yet at the same time also conceals, the activity of

reason which leads to the concept of perfection that the ideal is supposed to represent. To see to the bottom of the ethical ideal generally is to see that ethics cannot ultimately rest on ideals but on that which serves to criticize every ideal and is presupposed by it as a valid ideal. The moral *ideal*, therefore, must always rest on a moral *principle*. "The ideal is the prototypon of morality. A natural human being can never be the ideal, for he is still subject to weakness. The ancients would seem to have exhausted all possibilities here. But if we ask: 'What is moral perfection, and on what principles is it to be judged? Then we can and must enter on new paths at this point" (VE 29:605). Modern ethics is therefore deeper than ancient ethics, both because it sees through the corruption of ideals and because it perceives their basis in rational principles.

Kant remarks in his logic lectures that in moral philosophy we have not come further than the ancients (VL 9:32). If this is to be consistent with his portrayal of the history of ethics in the ethics lectures, it must mean by this only that the ancient ideals include everything belonging to the *content* of morality, not that there is no significant difference between ancient and modern moral philosophy, or that modern moral philosophy has taken no decisive step beyond antiquity. For it is clearly Kant's view that in *form*, modern moral philosophy certainly does represent a significant advance over ancient philosophy. It has, namely, transformed moral philosophy from a theory of ideals into a theory of principles.[7]

This, then, is the authentic Kantian reply to the recent criticisms of modern moral philosophy coming from those that call themselves representatives of "virtue ethics". The reply is historical, and its substance is that the style of moral thinking favored by "virtue ethics" was well-suited to antiquity but can be now seen as naïve, shallow and no longer

appropriate to the modern world, in which we have come to recognize both the unreliability and imperfection of ideals and models, and the truth that every ethical ideal must be grounded on a principle which guides us in judging any model proposed for our imitation. Kant's own criticisms of virtue ethics are therefore continuous with those of some more recent Kantians, who claim that an ethics of virtues or ideals (or "ethical being") is incapable of dealing with such phenomena of modern society as cultural pluralism, social change, and the need to communicate rationally about what to do between people who have been formed according to very different cultural schemes of moral education.[8]

6. Kant's anti-pelagianism

Kant credits the Christian ideal of holiness, because it represented the ideal as something superhuman and supernatural, attainable only through divine assistance, with being the historical means through which this crucial insight entered into the history of ethics. "In the Gospel everything is complete, and there we find the greatest purity and the greatest happiness. The principles of morality are presented in all their holiness, and now the command is: You are to be holy; but because man is imperfect, this ideal has an adjunct, namely divine assistance" (VE 27:252).

This turn in Kant's thinking may come to us as a surprise or even a shock. Kantian ethics is supposed to be a theory of autonomy, a theory that encourages human beings to govern their own lives through reason and think for themselves. Yet here he seems to be opting for *Schwärmerei* over critique, theological morality over rational morality, the moral passivity he regularly condemns in Pietism over the moral autonomy on which his

own opposed theory is based. Kant seems to be endorsing the Christian (and the specifically Pauline, Augustinian and Lutheran) doctrine that the true morality is one that regards human agency as morally impotent unless assisted by divine grace. Our aim, on this view, should apparently not be human morality or endless progress, but superhuman holiness; moral ideals that depend on our natural powers are misguided and even corrupt; and we are in a state of total depravity unless we are given help from above. Kant seems to be siding with Augustine against the heresy of Pelagius, whose name is universally hated throughout all Christendom merely because he maintained the reasonable and even self-evidently correct position that we should be morally required to do only what lies within our power and should be given moral credit or blame only for what we ourselves have done.[9]

There are indeed a few Christian scholars of Kantian ethics even today who think he should be read in something like orthodox Augustinian terms.[10] But theirs is clearly a minority position in Kant scholarship, and seems motivated more by religious faith (with its characteristically corrupting influence on intellectual honesty) than on a sound reading of the texts. We might also think that the remarks just quoted could be best explained by the fact that they are found in Kant's lecture transcriptions, in which he is arguably catering to the religious beliefs of his audience, which were surely more in line than his own with Christian orthodoxy. My suggestion, however, will be different from both these. I propose to understand Kant's remarks as directed solely to the subject matter that they are explicitly supposed to be about, namely, the *history* of ethics.

There are three principal Kantian claims about ethics, whose progressive recognition in the course of the history of ethics Kant is attempting to present, and also explain:

a. The ethical ideal is inadequately grasped when the highest good is conceived as happiness. Call this Kant's *anti-eudaimonism*.

b. In formulating ethical ideals, human beings are in danger of confusing what ought to be with what they see around them, adapting the requirements of morality to human weaknesses. Call this Kant's thesis of the *imperfection of ideals*.

c. The foundations of ethics are inadequately conceived when they are formulated as an *ideal* to be imitated; instead, these foundations must be conceived as a moral *principle*, which is required even for the proper formulation and criticism of any ethical ideal. Call this Kant's rejection of an ethics of ideals in favor of an *ethics of principles*.

In the history of ethics, Kant thinks that the first form of anti-eudaimonism was the adoption of a supernatural ideal (whether Platonic or Christian) in place of a natural ideal (of Cynicism, Epicureanism or Stoicism). The first recognition of the imperfection of ideals was the Christian ideal of holiness, and the attendant doctrine that human morality is possible only through divine assistance. The Christian ideal thereby also paved the way for the decisively modern turn in ethics, away from an ethics of ideals and toward an ethics of principles. In this way, Kant belongs to a central tradition in thinking about the history of Western culture, which in one way or another regards Christianity as having initiated a revolution in thinking that, when it eventually came to maturity, brought about a decisive separation of the world-view of classical antiquity from the world-view of modernity.

These historical theses might be true even if there is no truth at all in the claims that the right ethical ideal is supernatural, or that the right ideal is that of holiness, or that human morality is possible only through God's supernatural help. The Christian doctrines of supernaturalism and anti-Pelagianism might be merely the initial, mythologized forms in which modern insights were first glimpsed through a glass, darkly. And in fact Kant's own stance regarding the Christian supernaturalist version of all three of these historical claims is (or at any rate, if he is to be self-consistent, ought to be) either outright rejection or else principled skepticism.

Kant does, of course, propose a supernatural theory of human freedom – in terms of a causality in the noumenal world that is supposed to supervene on our actions in the world of appearance. The only legitimate use he can make of this theory, however, consistent with his own critical doctrines about the limits of human cognition, is to use it to show the *logical consistency* of maintaining that we are free and that our actions have empirical causes within the mechanism of nature. This logical consistency, Kant argues, taken together with our rational need to presuppose freedom in every use of reason (even the theoretical use that would be required to raise the metaphysical question of freedom) is all we require to assert that we are both free and our actions naturally determined. If someone were to go on to ask Kant how it is that we are free – what metaphysical account of freedom is the correct one – then the only answer he would be entitled to give, consistent with the critical philosophy, is that he has no idea how we are free or what the correct account is – and that no one else can ever have any idea about this either. Questions about how or where (in what "world") we are free are forever unanswerable. They may torment our reason, but we should resist all attempts to try to answer them.

Whenever Kant suggests any use of the idea of noumenal freedom that goes beyond this – or when his interpreters attempt to foist on him inferences from the theory of noumenal freedom to empirical conclusions about human action or morality (such as that human beings as moral agents must not regard themselves as historical beings, or that the radical evil in human nature can have no ground in human sociability or history, as Kant says it does) – they overstep the boundaries of the critical philosophy, and indulge in invalid inferences whose conclusions for which Kantian doctrine provides no license whatever. To take the idea that our moral freedom transports us somehow beyond the heavens into a realm above the stars in any other spirit than this, however, is flatly inconsistent with Kant's critique of transcendent metaphysics.[11]

On the Augustinian-Pelagian issue itself, Kant thinks that we cannot know whether it is possible for us to undergo through our own powers the moral conversion necessary to adopt a disposition in opposition to our radical propensity to evil and put our lives on a steady path of improvement from bad to better. "How it is possible that a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being surpasses every concept of ours" (R 6:44-45). Kant appears to accept the Augustinian position to this extent, that our innate propensity to evil seems to stand in the way of the possibility that we might reform ourselves through our own effort: "But does not the thesis of the innate corruption of the human being with respect to all that is good stand in direct opposition to this restoration through one's own effort? Of course it does, so far as the comprehensibility of, i.e. our *insight* into, its possibility is concerned" (R 6:50). But it does not stand in the way of our assumption that reform is possible. "For if the moral law commands that we *ought* to be

better human beings now, it inescapably follows that we must *be capable* of being better human beings" (R 6:50).

Kant does not dogmatically deny the doctrine that divine assistance is required for our moral conversion. "Everyone must do as much as it is in his powers to do; and only then, if a human being has not buried his innate talent (*Luke* 19:12-16), if he has made use of the original predisposition to the good in order to become a better human being, can he hope that what does not lie in his power may be made good by co-operation from above" (R 6:52). Kant emphasizes that nothing but good conduct can be regarded as a pre-condition for receiving this aid – to think of some irrational belief state, for instance, or ceremonial expressions of penitence or groveling before the divine being as such conditions would be "religious delusion", "fetishism" and "superstitious counterfeit service" of the Deity (R 6:190-200). "It is not essential, and hence not necessary, that every human being know what God does, or has done, for his salvation; but it is essential to know *what a human being has to do himself* in order to become worthy of this assistance" (R 6:52; cf 6:171-172).

In light of these views, Kant's support of the Augustinian or anti-Pelagian position must be regarded as at best very qualified. There is nothing in his position that is inconsistent either with his critical strictures against cognition of the supernatural or with the foundations of Kantian ethics in the autonomy of reason.[12] He rejects the position of orthodox Augustinian Christianity if it says that apart from divine grace we can do nothing to better ourselves, and especially if it regards belief in specific means of grace (such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ) as a precondition for receiving divine grace. Kant is especially emphatic in rejecting the Pietist idea (with which he was far

more familiar than he would like to have been) that salvation requires an enthusiastic 'born again' experience of the supernatural effects of grace (R 6:53). (The pernicious influence of this religious temper was as evident to him as it is in our own day.) At the same time, however, Kant regards the Christian idea that we cannot comply with the demands of morality solely through our own powers as the unique historical source of pure principles of morality.

Kant is very tempted by the idea that anyone who regards our capacity to obey the moral law as restricted to our own natural powers is bound to form a corrupted conception of the moral principle, one that adapts the demands of morality to human weaknesses by taking what people are observed to do as the proper measure of what they are able to do, and hence the proper standard for what they ought to do. Closely associated with this idea, in my view, is the fact that whether or not it follows from his ethical doctrines or is consistent with his critical epistemology, Kant was always tempted by the thought that no one who thinks of the powers of human beings as solely those grounded in the sensible or natural world can ever fully value rational beings as ends in themselves or think of us as free and autonomous legislators of the moral law.

Though I have argued above that in proper consistency he should not be, he clearly is attracted to the thought that in regarding ourselves as free, we are transporting ourselves into a supersensible world of pure understanding or Leibnizian "realm of grace" (G 4:453). Although above I have castigated interpreters, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic, for drawing invalid inferences from Kant's theory of noumenal freedom that are incompatible with the proper use that can be made of it within the strictures of critical metaphysics and epistemology, I have to admit that Kant cannot be altogether

exonerated from the charge that he draws such invalid inferences himself. In light of the role played by the Christian doctrine of grace in his account of the history of ethics, I suggest that we read these fallacious inferences as expressions of nostalgia toward the development in that history which he regards as most decisive not only in overcoming the ethics of ideals and replacing it with an ethics of principles but also in establishing a conception of the principle of morality that is entirely purified of the corrupting influences that Kant thinks (also on no grounds at all worthy of the name) inevitably flow from any merely naturalistic conception of our moral nature.

Kant's actual position on the Augustinan-Pelagian controversy, then, is a rather subtle one. It is not obviously consistent with his own doctrines, and it is clearly a position that neither orthodox Christians nor many present day Kantians (who are more naturalistic, and not orthodox Christians) could comfortably accept.

7. Conclusion

Kant was, then, a historian of ethics, at least in a small way. More importantly, he saw his own views in ethics in a determinate historical perspective. In treating the history of ethics, moreover, he used inventively many of the same devices employed by other more famous philosophical historians of philosophy, such as Aristotle and Hegel. He saw past views in light of the range of options open to a philosopher, understood contrasting views as one-sided or incomplete, and presented his own view as mediating them or transcending their common defects; he portrayed the history of ethics as a narrative embodying a progression, with successive stages encountering problems or conflicts that motivate progressive changes, some stages anticipating the most decisive changes, and

the progress as a whole leading a toward his own views, for which the history therefore also serves as a kind of philosophical argument.

More specifically, Kant understood ancient ethics as an ethics of ideals, in fundamental contrast to modern ethics as an ethics of principles; and he saw this change as a necessary advance, necessitated by problems internal to any ethics of ideals, whose increasing recognition led first from a natural ideal of happiness to a supernatural ideal of communion with, or assistance by, the highest being. He saw the ideal ethics of antiquity as culminating in the Christian ideal of holiness, and this in turn as leading entirely beyond an ethics of ideals into the ethics of principles that characterizes the modern world.

Within the modern systems, Kant recognizes a kind of hierarchy or progression also, from external principles involving social coercion or education to internal principles involving first empirical desires (for happiness), then the decisive step to the recognition of moral feeling, and finally the step to objective or rational principles, based first externally in the will of God and then in the perfection of the rational will of the human agent. The final step, from merely analytical rational principles to a synthetic *a priori* principle based on the autonomy of reason, Kant understands as the product of an age of enlightenment, in which there arises an entire public whose members think for themselves and test their thoughts through freely communicating with others.

Whether or not we find Kant's historical narrative persuasive, either as historiography or as philosophy, grasping it obviously adds a dimension to our understanding of his ethical theory, and places in a new light a number of Kantian arguments and doctrines that might otherwise surprise and puzzle us – such as his

occasional curious sympathy for the cynical ideal of abstinence, his persistent and perplexing defenses of Epicurus, his ambivalent relation to Christian ethics and Christian anti-Pelagianism, his continual attempts, apparently inconsistent with his basic moral principles, to incorporate Scottish moral sense theory into his own account, and the all too familiar (but sometimes dubious) role of supernatural freedom in grounding his moral philosophy. Kantians ought to try to understand Kantian ethics itself historically, and in so doing they can only be aided by gaining a better grasp of Kant's own historical self-understanding as a moral philosopher.[13]

NOTES

[1] See Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §§ 1, 6.

[2] Kant's writings will be cited according to the following system of abbreviations:

Ak   *Immanuel Kants Schriften*. Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902-). Unless otherwise footnoted, writings of Immanuel Kant will be cited by volume:page number in this edition.

Ca   *Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992-) This edition provides marginal Ak volume:page citations. Specific works will be cited using the following system of abbreviations (works not abbreviated below will be cited simply as Ak volume:page):

G   *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785), Ak 4

      Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals, Ca Practical Philosophy

      Translations below will be taken from *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

KrV   *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, 1787). Cited by A/B pagination.

      Critique of pure reason, Ca Critique of Pure Reason

KpV   *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), Ak 5

      Critique of practical reason, Ca Practical Philosophy

MS   *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797-1798), Ak 6

      Metaphysics of morals, Ca Practical Philosophy

R   *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, Ak 6

      Religion within the boundaries of mere reason, Ca Religion and Rational Theology

TP   *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag richtig in der Theorie sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (1793), Ak 8

      On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it does not work in practice, Ca Practical Philosophy

VA	*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), Ak 7
	Anthropology from a pragmatic standpoint, Ca Anthropology, History and Education
VE	*Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Ak 27, 29, Cited by volume:page number
	Lectures on Ethics, Ca Lectures on Ethics
VL	*Vorlesungen über Logik (Jäsche),* Ak 9
	The Jäsche Logic, Ca Lectures on Logic

[3] Hegel expresses things this way, for example, in *Encyclopedia Logic* § 13.

[4] The emphasis on truth is especially identified with Wollaston, whose views were prominently criticized (though not using his name) in Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, edited by L. A Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 461. It is even a bit odd that Kant should identify this view with Cumberland (even though it is stated prominently in the opening chapter of *De Legibus Naturae* [1672]), since Cumberland is more often thought of as an ethical eudaimonist. The probable explanation is that Cumberland is the only one of these authors who wrote in Latin, and Kant did not read English.

[5] In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant criticizes Aristotle's principle not on the ground that it is analytic, but on the ground that it is *false*, since (he argues) it gives a false account of what virtue is (*MS* 6:404).

[6] See my book *Kant's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 259-265.

[7] In context, what Kant is saying is that although it is fairly obvious that modern ethics has made no substantive advances beyond ancient philosophy, it might seem that modern metaphysics has advanced beyond that of the ancients. His point is that in matters of substance, however, this is not true: the apparent advances are all illusory. Modern metaphysics can be said to have advanced beyond the ancients only in form, by undertaking a critique of our capacities for metaphysical knowledge (VL 9:33-34). The remark, taken in context, is clearly compatible with the claim that in ethics too, there have been modern advances, but only in form and not in content.

[8] See, for instance, J. B. Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 178-200; Robert B. Louden, "Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," ibid., pp. 201-216, and *Morality and Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and *Kant's Ethical Thought*, pp. 331-333, 416-417.

[9] "Where theism forms the principle of any popular religion, that tenet is so conformable to reason that philosophy is apt to incorporate itself with such a system of theology… [Yet] philosophy will soon find herself very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each new principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition…Amazement must of necessity be raised; Mystery affected: Darkness and obscurity sought after: And a foundation of merit afforded to the devout votaries, who desire an opportunity of subduing their rebellious reason, by the belief in the most unintelligible sophisms. Ecclesiastical history sufficiently confirms these reflections. When a controversy is started, some people always pretend with certainty to foretell the issue. Whichever opinion, say they, is most contrary to plain sense is sure to prevail; even where the general interest of the system requires not that decision. Though the reproach of heresy may, for some time be bandied about among the disputants, it always rests at last on the side of reason." David Hume, *Natural History of Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), pp. 53-54. There is perhaps no dispute in the history of Christian theology that better illustrates Hume's point than the universal rejection of Pelagianism, unless perhaps it is the hideous moral monstrosity of vicarious atonement – that piece of primitive savagery, the outrageously repulsive thought that justice might be satisfied by an innocent person suffering for the sins of the guilty -- that lies at the very heart of the entire Christian idea, which one might have thought would to make this religion an object of abhorrence by all decent and reasonable people. Christianity has, however, been saved from this fate by taking its basic idea in a less than literal sense -- as it was, for example by Kant (R 6:73-76). For instance, Christians often emphasize the wondrous generosity and love expressed by Christ in his willingness to suffer death on the cross, and the immeasurable gratitude we should feel for this sacrifice, along with the readiness we should feel to bear our own cross for the sake of others, while leaving shrouded in obscurity the central question of why Christ's sacrifice is supposed to have been necessary on our behalf in the first place. But we should never forget the moral indispensability to Christianity of such indirect and inventive kinds of interpretation, and also bear in mind the attitude decent people ought to take toward Christian doctrines taken literally, whenever the preachers tell us that the Christian scriptures are divinely inspired expressions of literal truth.

[10] See, for example, John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian ethics, human limits and God's assistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant's Critical Religion* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2000).

[11] Some are tempted to argue that if the only coherent conception we can form of our freedom is one that places it in the noumenal world, then this justifies or even requires us to maintain the theory of noumenal freedom as a metaphysical truth, at least so long as we regard ourselves as free at all. But this could not be Kant's reason for being tempted to give the theory of noumenal freedom any status stronger than that proving the bare logical self-consistency of freedom and natural causality. For to argue in this fashion is to employ an indirect or 'apagogic' proof for a synthetic *a priori* proposition about the transcendent. It is the moral Kant draws from the Dialectic in general, and the Antinomies in particular, that no proofs of this kind are permissible in metaphysics. This is one of the main points that Kant emphasizes in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, the Discipline of Pure Reason in Regard to its Proofs (KrV A789-794/B817-822).

[12] Kant's view that our original moral predisposition has not been fundamentally corrupted, that there is something we can do to make ourselves worthy of divine assistance, and that *only our own doing* is what would make us worthy of it, may even be regarded by orthodox Augustinans as itself a form of Pelagianism, or if not that, at least some sort of 'semi-hemi-demi-Pelagianism', whose proponents Christian orthodoxy has usually regarded as equally deserving of burning at the stake.

[13] I wish to thank Houston Smit for critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper.