Do We Need Ancient Texts for Future Ethics? Well, it all Depends

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1. Introduction

Any look at work in contemporary ethics, that is, moral philosophy or theological ethics, cannot miss the fact that over the last few decades there has been a virtual obsession with ancient ethics. This obsession has not been, in the main, of purely historical interest, but much more in constructive ethical thinking itself. To be sure, there has been a good deal of work recovering and reinterpreting ancient sacred and secular ethics ranging from work in biblical studies to various strands in Greek and Roman thought. From the flood of work in virtue ethics to the retrieval of Stoic and Platonic modes of thought, anywhere one turns, from academic publishers to spirituality sections in bookstores, there will be found claims about ancient ethics as an antidote to the failing of so-called "modern ethics." The trend has caught on among scholars of comparative ethics as well. Some scholars find analogues to Aristotle's ethics in Confucian or Buddhist thought. And there is a renaissance of divine command ethics among theistic thinkers. And, to complete this brief survey, there is also a lot of scholarly work in New Testament studies on the impact of Greco-Roman thought on the moral teaching of the Gospels (was Jesus a kind of Cynic?), the household codes of the Pastoral Epistles, and, of course, Paul's thoughts.

In this situation, one is bound to ask, as this volume of essays does, what does the flurry of work on ancient ethics mean for the *future* of ethics? Over the last several years, I have been involved in and helped to lead an interdisciplinary research program, *The Enhancing Life Project*, funded by the Templeton Foundation, that served as something like a laboratory for answering this question.[1] What follows is *not*, I hasten to add, a report on *The Enhancing Life Project*, since, given its size of thirty-five scholars working together for over three years, it is too grand, diverse, and multifaceted for brief summary. My task in this essay is more focused and personal, namely, to set out what I have learned about the needs for and limits to the use of ancient sacred and secular forms of moral thought for the future of ethics. Call this one scholar's participant/observer account of the state of the debate. But insofar as ethics is—whatever else it is as an intellectual practice—a normative discipline, I will also venture in the last step of my argument some judgments on the question before me, a judgment merely hinted at in the subtitle of this essay.

How then to proceed? I have, first, to explain from my perspective the reason why there has been such concerted effort to reclaim ancient thought in the light of the seeming failure of "modern ethics," a term to be explained below. The second step of this essay outlines a number of themes where ancient thought has invigorated and enriched ethical thinking: moral psychology; the relation of ethics to metaphysics; renewed questions regarding the human good, coinciding with a reclaiming of ethical naturalism; and, time and human fragility as moral realities. The final step of the essay, fully endorsing these advances, returns to *The Enhancing Life Project* and how some scholars made use of ancient ethics. It also notes two insights coming from "modern ethics" that must also, in my judgment, figure in the future of ethics: (1) an affirmation of universal human dignity, and (2) a more complex account of the socio-cultural space of the moral life embodied in differentiated global dynamics. But, first, what is the problem with "modern ethics?"

[1] The Enhancing Life Project (John Templeton Foundation/The University of Chicago/Ruhr Universität Bochum). More information, including details about the individual projects, can be found at http://enhancinglife.uchicago.edu (last visited 30.01.2019).

2. Problems with Modern Ethics

Clarifying what is meant by "modern ethics" requires a full-length study in itself. Granting the impossibility of that task in one essay, we can still clarify three distinctive "features" of modern ethics, the reaction to which is found in the turn to ancient religious and non-religious sources for ethics. What are these features of modern ethics?

First, while he did not know it, Immanuel Kant introduced one distinctive feature of "modern ethics" when in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and *The Critique of Practical Reason* he claimed to have identified and justified the "supreme principle of morality," what he called the Categorical Imperative.[2] In a similar way, English thinkers like David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and, later, John Stuart Mill identified the principle of morality as the "greatest happiness principle," that is, the principle of utility: the greatest good for the greatest number of sentient beings, in Bentham's formulation.[3] We need not engage Kant or the Utilitarians here. The point is that they sought to isolate *one* distinctive domain of human conduct as "moral" and then relate the remainder of life to that normative core, to an "ought" of duty. This is a radical shift from ancient ethics insofar as it constricts ethics to defining, defending, and applying a specific normative principle in situations of choice rather than exploring the human good in any comprehensive, if also ambiguous, sense. This seems to delimit both the scope of ethics and the moral life to the domain of duty. Rather than thinking about the good conduct of human life, thinkers enter into endless battles about whether such duty exists and how to justify it, which are questions that belong properly to "metaethics." Little wonder that some thinkers, like Elizabeth Anscombe, argued that we ought to stop work in ethics altogether since the idea of "duty" is dependent on a divine commander and legislator in ways that no longer resonate with modern culture.[4] Other thinkers, like Philippa Foot, argued that we need to retrieve ancient forms of ethical naturalism, that is, that the human good is linked to the kind of creatures we are.[5]

Second, inquiry into the supreme principle of morality meant that modern ethics had been decisively ahistorical and in fact marked by a bias against tradition. One reason for this bias, as many scholars have noted, is that European and English thinkers were trying to escape the horrors of the decades long wars of religion that destroyed whole populations. New, impartial, and binding standards for social and personal life were needed for the sake of social stability and peace. Yet this bias against tradition has also come under fire by current thinkers. Alasdair MacIntrye in his famous book *After Virtue* charged that modern ethics is little more than a hodge-podge of fragments from long-lost traditions, and that the remedy is to reclaim the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethics.[6] Others, one thinks of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Iris Murdoch, concentrated on refashioning Platonic ethics, while several Christian thinkers turned toward reclaiming the moral wisdom of their specific form of Christian faith.

These first two features of "modern ethics" are closely related to a third and final feature that should be noted. Modern ethics in its different forms shared an aspiration to *universalism*. That is, what is morally right and good applies to all people in all times and in all circumstances. This aspiration had the effect of crowding out the distinctive ways of life and moral discourse—the language games—of particular communities with their own values, norms, and ways of behavior. It also assumed, mistakenly, that it was possible to develop a universally understandable language of morals, cast in terms of rights and duties or utility, which could somehow encompass the vast forms of moral discourse found on this planet. Another impetus to reclaim ancient ethics, especially among religious thinkers, was the appearance of forms of moral *particularism*. The moral particularist insists that the meaning and validity of moral terms and values is always internal to a specific community and that this discourse cannot be "translated" into some abstract moral theory. For Christian thinkers this has meant that one cannot "translate" the Word of God into (say) utilitarianism!

3. Resources in Ancient Western Ethics

The features of "modern ethics" just noted have driven thinkers to search the past for resources to confront current questions. What did they find? Without suggesting any particular logical order to these retrievals of ancient thought—or that any one thinker has addressed them all—we can note several uses of ancient Western ethics. A first domain of ethics in ancient thought that has been retrieved is that of moral psychology. Modern ethics tended to focus on human actions and also moral discourse. In ancient ethics—think of Plato's *Symposium* or St. Paul's woeful cry of moral weakness in Romans 7:19—the moral life was, in good measure, about gaining rational control of one's appetites and emotions. The quality of one's soul (*psyche*) was the focus of the moral life and the search for *eudaimonia*, well-being or happiness. Of course the schools of Greco-Roman thought differed on the meaning of "happiness" (compare the

[2] Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, 51 (4:392); Critique of Practical Reason, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, 35–37 (5:39–41).

[3] David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge; Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation; John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. Roger Crisp.

[4] Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 1–19.

[5] See Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness.

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory.

Beatitudes with the *Vatican Sayings* of Epicurus, for instance). Nevertheless, the rational control of life was basic and that meant the need to explore the various virtues and vices. The explosion of work in virtue ethics noted above in reaction to the psychological "thinness" of modern ethics is a product of this first turn to the ancients. And with this turn, there has also been exciting new work on the emotions as themselves forms of moral knowing, or "upheavals of thought" as Martha Nussbaum nicely put it.[7] By exploring ancients thinkers one could provide a more robust account of human moral consciousness, rather than focusing solely on maximizing utility or following the dictates of pure practical reason. And even those moderns who did explore "sympathy" or fellow-feeling, like Hume, Shaftesbury and others, saw it as non-rational or bound to the norm of utility.

Next, while most of modern ethics, as noted, sought to focus on the distinctly moral phenomenon of the "ought" in terms of duty or utility and thereby to avoid metaphysical or theological reflection within their ethics, not so the ancients. A widespread dictum among ancient western ethical thinkers of virtually every stripe was that one should "live according to nature." The nature in question included human nature, the nature of reality itself and its relation to the divine, and the rational relation between these "natures." Metaphysics was, in Iris Murdoch's famous formulae, a "guide to morals."[8] Of course here too there were differences: Christian conceptions of human nature, creation and reason, e.g. as found among the Alexandrian Fathers, drew on but differed from Stoic pantheistic determinism and Platonic philosophy. What is more, Christian thinkers, drawing on allegorical methods of interpretation associated with readings of Homer and also rhetorical studies, found in scripture ways to read the "book of nature." Here, too, contemporary theologians, like James M. Gustafson or Franklin I. Gamwell, though in different ways, embed their ethical thinking in accounts of reality, in metaphysical outlooks.[9] In part, this return to "nature," and so to metaphysics in morals, has been due to the terror of our ecological crises, which, over the last few decades, has given rise to a host of ecological forms of ethics. Yet even granting that fact, there has been metaphysical speculation within theological and philosophical ethics, often enough spurred on by attention to ancient ethics.

The dictum to live according to nature coupled with a concern for a robust and nuanced moral psychology has led to a third domain in which ancient ethics has been retrieved. In the terminology of contemporary moral theory, this is a concern for "naturalism" in ethics. The idea here is rather straightforward even if modern ethics, especially in its various Kantian forms, rejected naturalism. Put simply, the claim is that if one wishes to understand the "good," flourishing, or well-being of any living being, one must know something about that being's "nature" and thus its needs and capacities. There are worries, of course, by liberal political thinkers about the imposition of some comprehensive conception of the good supposedly rooted in human nature. Nevertheless, in an age of starvation, poverty, child mortality, it would seem that some form of naturalism is needed in ethics. In this light, the idea of a "species nature," and so the good of a living creature, is oddly enough both denied and needed in current thought. Just as it is appears to be needed to address contemporary human problems, it is needed in animal ethics as well, even in Peter Singer's form of utilitarian ethics. However, with advances in biotechnology, the idea that any animal or even a human being has a more or less stable "nature" has been called into question. Further, the massive impact of human action on the planet's environment has led some thinkers, like Bill McKibben, to speak of the "end of nature"[10] and others of the "Anthropocene" as a new geological era.[11] What all of this suggests is that the turn to ancient ethics has sparked renewed debate about the need and plausibility of naturalistic ethics.

A final feature of ancient Western ethics, biblical and non-biblical, that has sparked renewed interest focuses on the fallibility and fragility of human life and with it questions about human time. Ancient thinkers were profoundly aware of the radical contingency of human existence and the ways in which human hopes are easily dashed by the fates, the gods, sin, or even God. Aristotle taught, for instance, that not everyone would attain happiness (*eudaimonia*) insofar as human well-being is not just a matter of virtuous character, as the Stoics claimed, but also material and social flourishing. In the biblical texts, we find in Job, for instance, that ill befalls one as a result of sin; whereas Deuteronomy teaches that a life of covenant fidelity to YHWH is what is required to flourish in this life. Jesus seems to have qualified this equation of fidelity and flourishing (and its inverse) in some of the healing stories, while St. Paul looked for a transformation of the human heart to redress fault and sin (cf. Romans 12). More generally, ancient thinkers debated whether or not virtue alone defined happiness, or in Jesus' case the inversion of Roman virtues (cf. Matthew 5–7), or if the human good was not a matter of pleasure or a mix of virtue and other goods. Certainly, the eschatological outlooks found in the

[7] MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions.

[8] IRIS MURDOCH, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.

[9] FRANKLIN I. GAMWELL, The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God; JAMES M. GUSTAFSON, Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective.

[10] BILL MCKIBBEN, The End of Nature.

[11] For a recent collection of essays on geopolitical concept of the Anthropocene see CELIA DEANE-DRUMMOND, SIGURD BERGMANN, and MARKUS VOGT, Religion in the Anthropocene.

Gospel of Mark and in Paul's letters provide new and different frameworks for thinking ethically: if the end is near or is dawning in the ministry of Jesus, new possibilities for human life open. Little wonder that eschatological discourse has played a large part in contemporary Christian ethics whereas questions about human fault and evil, as well as human fragility, challenge ethical thinking. Stated otherwise, the themes of fault, fragility, and contingency provided a framework to explore the ethical interrelations of the human good, moral psychology, and reality itself.

4. The Future of Ethics?

These summary insights on ancient Western ethics return us, briefly, to exemplary scholarship within *The Enhancing Life Project*. The reason for this return to the *Project* is simple enough to grasp. Insofar as there is an interest among people throughout time and in every culture in enhancing life—and so enriching, deepening, rendering more responsive and vulnerable to others, and also resilient life—then a framework of ethical thinking needs more resources than simple claims about justice, duty, or utility, no matter how important these are. This is all the more the case since too much contemporary thought virtually equates enhancement with biotechnological extension or strengthening of human life against the onslaught of age and death. Scholars in the *Project* thereby availed themselves of ancient insights in order to provide a more nuanced and livable understanding of "enhancement."

Allow me to note a few exemplary research agendas in order to make the point. Maria Antonaccio (Bucknell University) explored environmental sustainability by drawing on a host of classical and modern thought whereas Ruben Zimmermann (Mainz) developed, in light of New Testament texts, an "ethics of surrendering rights," in ways that counter modern "rights talk" as well as ancient ideas of *eudaimonia*. Aasim Padela (University of Chicago) drew on Islamic Law to outline medical objective beyond mere preservation, while Michael Ing (Indiana University) showed how ideas of "vulnerability" are important in Confucian thought about enhancing life. In fact, several scholars (Pamela Sue Anderson (Oxford), Kris Culp (University of Chicago) and Heike Springhardt (Heidelberg) each explored, in different ways, the connection between vulnerability and enhancing life. Martin Wendte (Tuebingen) examined claims about the Christ as healer and physician even as Daniel Sulmasy (Georgetown) explored medically enhancing life at the hour of death. Another physician, Ruth Farrell (Cleveland Clinic), drew on scholarship in philosophy and religious studies in order to provide a broader framework for understanding concerns surrounding prenatal testing. Finally, Guenter Thomas (Bochum) examined the interrelations of faith, hope and love, while my own work examined the forms of freedom implied in multiple levels of goods that must be integrated in order for life (human and non-human) to be enhanced. Many others could be noted, from those working on longevity research, to cell-phone use among youth in Israel, to female genital mutilation in Kurdistan, and asceticism in Jainism as a practice of enhancing life. While not drawing on the same ancient sources or even exploring the interrelated features of ancient Western ethics noted above, each of these projects, and others too, looked to the past for resources to break away from contemporary overly technological forms of thinking about enhancing life. In doing so, each research project opened new and exciting avenues of thought for the future of ethics.

If "the proof is in the pudding," as the pragmatic American mind likes to put it, then one important outcome of *The Enhancing Life Project* was that in the face of the current and future means of "enhancing" life, scholars most look everywhere, including the past, for resources to meet ethical challenges. In this sense, the *Project* vindicated the use of ancient sources for the future of ethics. And yet, in concluding, the individual projects also endorsed, explicitly or implicitly, two insights from modern ethics. First, in ways that broadened and deepened *some* strands of the holy scriptures of the monotheistic religions, the research that comprised *The Enhancing Life Project* unabashedly endorsed the modern insistence on the equal moral dignity of each and every human being. Ancient forms of tribalism or ethnocentrism that constrict the boundaries of moral dignity are simply no longer plausible in a globalized world. In fact, they are dangerous, and, therefore, thinkers must use ancient sources while finding within them openings to a chastened moral universalism. Second, insofar as ethical reflection is always also reflection on human social existence, the future of ethics cannot rely on the social and political theories of the ancient Western world, forms of thought that endorsed, for example, slavery as an economic necessity, or military conquest as a means of governance. The global age requires global modes of thought and analysis, as well as a commitment to human freedom and various forms of democratic governance. Here too, *The Enhancing Life Project* mediated between the wisdom of the past and the realities of the current age. Thus, even in the retrieval of ancient insights and forms of ethical thinking, some modern convictions abide and must abide.

"Do we need ancient texts for future ethics? Well, it all depends." That is to say, we can and must draw on ancient texts in contemporary and future ethics, but only, I submit, if certain modern convictions inform our use of those ancient resources. In this way, the work of ethics is a fully hermeneutical enterprise, that is, the work of ethical interpretation of human life, which seeks to orient life intelligently and in ways that in fact respect and enhance life's integrity.

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