

The Historical Evolution of Western Ethical Thought: From Ancient Greece to Modern Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical trajectory of Western ethical thought across three pivotal periods: Greek (500 B.C.-500 CE), Medieval (500-1500 CE), and Modern (1500 CE onwards). Through systematic analysis of primary philosophical movements and their institutional contexts, this study demonstrates the transformation of ethical frameworks from polis-centered virtue ethics to theologically grounded moral systems, ultimately to individualistic moral philosophies. The research particularly focuses on the shifting loci of moral authority, from the Greek city-state through ecclesiastical institutions to individual reason and conscience, while analyzing the philosophical contributions of critical theorists, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their intellectual successors. Particular focus is placed on the conflict between Greek ethics' hedonistic and stoic traditions, the function of casuistry (the resolution of moral dilemmas through the application of general principles to particular instances) in medieval moral philosophy, and the rise of many theoretical stances in contemporary ethics, such as subjectivism, intuitionism, natural law theory, and utilitarianism. The paper also considers the influence of emerging disciplines, such as associationist psychology and evolutionary biology, on ethical theory development. Despite the unique contributions of each period to moral philosophy, this analysis underscores the enduring value of ethical frameworks from the past, which remain pertinent in today's ethical discourse.

Keywords: moral philosophy, ethical theory, Greek ethics, medieval philosophy, modern ethics, moral authority, virtue ethics, casuistry, utilitarianism

Introduction

European ethics is divided into Greek, Medieval, and Modern periods, and the Greek period continued from the beginning of the ethical study, not before 500 B.C., to 500

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A.D. The Medieval period of ethics might begin from A.D. 500 to A.D. 1500, and the Modern period from A.D. 1500 onwards. Each of these periods has its own characteristic ethical institution. In the Greek period, the Greek city-state developed the background of moral life, and the man who accomplished his duties as a citizen was regarded as good. In the Medieval period, morality was governed by the Church, and ordinary lives were acknowledged as divine; religion played a crucial role. In the Modern period, neither the State nor the Church was so important in moral life, and morality is more concerned with the individual's rights and duties concerning other individuals.

Ethics in the Greek Period

The study of ethics,¹ the results of this development range from the level of custom to the level of conscience. When a person realizes that his conscience shows him the rightness of an action that others regard as wrong, his reflection, if thorough, is likely to lead him to the ultimate problem of ethics: what is it in an action that makes it right or wrong, and what is the standard or test by which we distinguish between good and bad actions? While indistinct ethical ideas existed in many cultures, European ethics originated in ancient Greece in the fifth century before Christ. (Lillie, 2003: 93)

The sophists were a group of wandering educators who focused mainly on preparing young men for the political careers available to all freeborn citizens in Greece's city republics. The sophists lived in an age similar to ours, when there was much skeptical thinking about the value of established organizations, partly because some of these institutions had lasted longer than their worth, and partly because events like this seem to occur frequently in the history of humanity without good reasons. The Sophists posed the moral question of what constitutes a decent existence according to nature and what is a matter of custom or habit. The more revolutionary among them believed that all morality was a product of human convenience and that we name things good simply because they benefit us or the bulk of humanity.

To quote one of the greatest Sophists, Protagoras: "*Man is the measure of all things*"; he determines right and evil, and there is no other standard. (Stace, 1960: 112) Socrates, widely recognized as the father of Western philosophy, shared the Sophists' desire to pose questions about conduct.²

However, he was less specific than most of his contemporaries in his ability to respond to these questions. It was deplorable because he believed that a complete understanding of the essence of goodness was a prerequisite for leading a perfect life. He emphasized his belief in the dictum "*Knowledge is Virtue*". (Lillie, 2003: 94) Socrates' goodness of character appears to have disguised from him the reality that, in the case of most persons, goodwill or the desire to do what is right, together with knowledge of the nature of goodness, is required to secure practical goodness of living. Or it's possible that Socrates was aware of this, and his maxim was just a means to emphasize the value of knowledge that most people consider irrelevant. It is still being

¹ The word "ethics" was originally a plural (meaning the science of morals) but is now generally used as a singular.

² Socrates is widely regarded as the originator of Western philosophy. However, it is Plato's influential writings, including 13 letters and 35 dialogues, that make him, rather than Socrates, the most famous of the ancient Greek philosophers, if not all philosophers. (<https://www.richardfarrar.com/plato-and-object-oriented-programming/>)

determined whether Socrates explicitly declared that morality is a product of nature rather than custom, yet this was probably his position. He quoted the proverb 'Know thyself' with approbation, implying that he realized that understanding human nature is crucial for living a decent life, or that goodwill is natural because it is founded on human nature. (Lillie, 2003)

Plato and Aristotle, two of Socrates' most excellent followers, systematically sought the study of ethical subjects that Socrates thought were vital for virtue. For Plato, this knowledge was metaphysical, primarily the understanding that the world that is real is not the world perceived by the senses we have, but a world of reality, which Plato referred to as 'ideas' and which are ideal types equivalent to the actual things that exist in inadequate forms in the world that we know through perception. The most fundamental of these realities is the 'concept of the good,' which indicates that goodness is intrinsic because it is the most fundamental fact about the cosmos. Aristotle generally accepted Socrates' and Plato's ethical positions. (Lillie, 2003)

However, there was an essential distinction in his philosophical perspective; temperamentally, he was more intrigued by the specifics of moral life than by abstract fundamental concepts. His *Ethics* is an investigation into the moral life as it existed in the Greek city-states of his day, rather than an overview of an ideal community in Plato's *Republic*. Aristotle, too, understood the significance of ethical knowledge. It is likely an indicator of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle's grandeur that, while later schools of ethics claim them as founders, they cannot be identified with a specific ethical school. They stressed the importance of knowing the nature of goodness and the notion that goodness is inherent in all things. Understanding goodness entails comprehending the nature of the cosmos as a whole, particularly the component known as human nature. There were two groups parallel to Plato and Aristotle, and one of the main divisions among the following ethical schools is currently evident. The Cyrenaics expressly believed that a good deed brings pleasure, and this viewpoint, known as hedonism, has lasted as one of the great ethical ideas to this day. On the contrary, the Cynics believed that an excellent life consists of being free of human cravings and satisfaction. Hence, pleasure had nothing to do with goodness.

In later Greek thought, the Epicureans adopted the Cyrenaics' more sophisticated view that pleasure is the only ideal people should strive for. On the other hand, the Stoics, who believed that a happy life consisted of avoiding emotion and pursuing duty logically, followed the Cynics. The Stoics specifically argued that virtue is natural because moral rules are natural laws that are entirely reasonable and thus understandable to human reason. The desire for pleasure, of all things, was the most likely to draw men away from reasonable living, so it was strictly avoided. The Stoics, with their stress on rational knowledge, were real Socratic pupils. The Epicureans and Stoics offer two perspectives on the moral life. The Epicureans believed that good goods satisfied our human impulses, notably the desire for pleasure; this is the underlying viewpoint of current moralists known as utilitarians. The Stoics believed that a good action follows a rational principle; this is the viewpoint of Kant and many modern moralists he has inspired.

Ethics in the Medieval Period

Religion and ethics served as the foundation for philosophy during the Middle Ages. It initially embraced Plotinus' theories before embracing Aristotle's concepts.³ Philosophy's primary objective at the time was to clarify people's understanding of faith and its mysteries.

Philosophy and religion collaborated throughout this time. It was believed that philosophy used reason to assist individuals in understanding their ideas, aiding theology. Christian philosophers' religion also inspired them to develop novel ideas, some of which eventually found their way into Western philosophy. Philosophy and religion helped people live morally upright lives in this way.

Christianity altered people's views on morality and personal worth as it expanded throughout the West. Christianity moved the emphasis inward, in contrast to the ancient Greeks, who connected morality to public life and thought that being a good person entailed being a good citizen. A person's inner life, thoughts, intentions, and spiritual state were now of utmost importance. Heaven became the primary objective for anyone attempting to live a decent and obedient life, and these inner attributes were essential to getting there.

Although Christianity strongly emphasized individual spirituality, moral philosophy was not a topic of much original thought or discussion during the Middle Ages. The Church had determined what was right and wrong based on the Bible. These things could not be questioned. It was a serious sin if someone doubted them or stated they were mistaken. Such individuals received severe chastisement from the Church.

Due to this significant religious conviction, medieval ethics focused more on putting preexisting teachings into practice than investigating novel concepts. Church leaders and religious experts concentrated on using the Bible and church doctrine to help people make moral decisions in their daily lives. At that time, this technique, known as "*casuistry*", became widely used. That poor reputation only developed considerably later, even if the word now occasionally has a negative connotation, such as utilising cunning reasoning to avoid accountability. During the Middle Ages, casuistry was merely a valuable tool for assisting people in living up to moral and religious standards.

The expansion of Christianity throughout Europe resulted in a renewed emphasis on the individual. It shifted the Greek perspective, which had associated the good man with the good citizen and saw ethics as a component of politics. It also meant that more emphasis was placed on the inner component of morality; a man's inner reasons revealed his actual spiritual state and prepared him for the life of heaven, which was every virtuous man's ambition.

However, in general, the Middle Ages did not promote moral speculation or the formation of ethical theory. The standard of right and wrong had finally been established beyond doubt in the revelation of God's law in the Bible as interpreted by the Church, and to raise doubts or ask questions was dangerous heresy, if not impious blasphemy, which the Church had the authority to punish harshly. All that remained for ethics to do was deduce the specific applications of the principles and illustrations offered by the Bible and the Church to individual instances. As a result, casuistry or applied ethics became immensely popular during the Middle Ages. The degeneration

³ <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/38232/1/Unit-3.pdf>

of evasion, which gave the word its contemporary bad connotation, occurred at a later age.

Ethics in the Modern Period

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Church lost control over most of Europe for nearly a thousand years. One cause was an outburst of individualism, emphasizing human freedom and accomplishment. It was primarily fueled by a revival of Greek learning and its evidence of what man could achieve apart from Christian revelation; another was the Church's division and subsequent weakening of authority. Whatever the motives were, and they were far from straightforward as our statement suggests, individual men were no longer willing to accept the priest's decision as the ultimate word in moral concerns. Many in religious circles attempted to locate moral authority in the words of the Bible itself, which had previously been granted to priests and the Church, and for Protestantism, the final moral standard was the teaching of the Bible, with a great deal of freedom of interpretation. More thoughtful people, on the other hand, felt compelled to seek out a standard of excellence and wrongness that was both understandable and acceptable to their reasoning.

The various opinions can be described as follows:

- (a) Some theorists argued that the distinction between right and wrong was purely subjective, dependent on the individual's attitude when making the moral assessment. For example, a guy considers what he likes right, whereas what he dislikes is wrong. We may include in this group everyone who believes that the distinction between right and wrong is only a human convention. This was the position of the more severe Sophists in ancient Greece, and it has since become the view of the most skeptical modern philosophers.
- (b) Some thinkers felt that the distinction between right and wrong was known by direct insight or intuition, and the more radical of them believed this was all that could be stated about it. The moral sense school of Shaftesbury⁴ and Hutcheson,⁵ and the Scottish 'common sense' school led by Reid⁶ in the eighteenth century, maintained a moderate intuitionist position. (Lillie, 2003: 97)
- (c) Some thinkers thought that the distinction between right and wrong is founded on some law, although there were numerous interpretations of what that law was. The Greek Stoics maintained that the moral rule was both a natural and a rational law, a viewpoint shared by St. Thomas Aquinas, the most significant Christian philosopher of

⁴ **The third Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper** (1671–1713). The three-volume book *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* was the product of Shaftesbury's 1711 compilation of his mature writings, to which he added copious comments and commentaries titled *Miscellaneous Reflections on the preceding Treatises, and other Critical Subjects*. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shaftesbury/>)

⁵ **Francis Hutcheson** (1694–1746) was a prominent member of the Scottish Enlightenment, a moralist in Britain, and a supporter of moral sentimentalism. His most important works are the *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions*, *Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, and the *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hutcheson/>)

⁶ Scottish philosopher **Thomas Reid** (1710–1796) is renowned for challenging Hume's theory of causation and Locke's theory of personal identity. A brief essay titled "An Essay on Quantity" about Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* was published in 1748. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reid/>)

the Middle Ages. In the eighteenth century, two schools of thought emerged about the laws that underpin morality.

According to one school of thought, moral law is a law of human nature that can be discovered via research into man's psychological makeup. Butler⁷ is the school's preeminent moralist, but Adam Smith⁸ and Hume⁹ shared similar beliefs. All of these attempted to psychologically examine conscience or the moral sense to discover the foundation of morality. The opposing school of thought emphasized the moral rule as a rational law. The Cambridge Platonists, Clark¹⁰ and Wollaston¹¹, among English philosophers, and Kant, the German philosopher, hold this perspective. This concept was extended by Kant in the modern idealism of Hegel and his followers, who believe that the moral code is a law of logic and, hence, a law of nature because their metaphysical view is that the universe's structure is logical throughout.

(d) According to some thinkers, the distinction between right and wrong is based on the outcome of our activities, notably their ability to satisfy our desires and bring joy to ourselves and others. We can see this viewpoint in the Greek schools of the Cyrenaics and Epicureans, and it has been preserved in the modern age by the great schools of English utilitarians, notably John Stuart Mill and Sidgwick.

In the nineteenth century, the study of evolution in biology influenced more than one form of ethical theory and attempted to provide a solely evolutionary explanation for the nature of good and evil. Herbert Spencer developed the theory that pleasure is the moral standard on evolutionary lines; Hegel in Germany and T. H. Green in England developed the theory of idealism on evolutionary lines; and Westermarck developed the theory that morality merely depends on human likes and dislikes in the modern theory of ethical relativity, making full use of the evolutionary study of sentiment development. Another influence that has significantly impacted ethical research is the analogy of moral goodness to other forms of value. The moral sense school of the eighteenth century made a rather effortless analogy between goodness and beauty. Still, the advancement of economics and the study of art have led men to examine the nature of value more closely. There is an impulse to discover the nature of goodness by looking at its place in the scheme of values. Today, influenced by

⁷ **Bishop Joseph Butler** (1692–1752) was a prominent theological philosopher during the eighteenth century. Butler challenges Hobbes' egoism in his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1729) and Locke's memory-based theory of personal identity in *the Analogy of Religion* (1736). (<https://iep.utm.edu/joseph-butler/>)

⁸ An influential figure during the Scottish Enlightenment, **Adam Smith** was a Scottish economist and philosopher who lived from 1723 to 1790. His two fundamental books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), have earned him the titles of "father of economics" and "father of capitalism." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Smith/)

⁹ **David Hume** (1711–1776) was a renowned essayist and historian. His subsequent publications include *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), his major philosophical works, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740), and *the Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/>)

¹⁰ Shaftesbury was the only ethical scholar to match **Samuel Clarke** (1675–1729) in the generation between Locke and Berkeley. Clarke was the most important British metaphysician and philosophical theologian. He criticised Toland, Hobbes, and Spinoza in all three domains. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/clarke/>)

¹¹ **William Wollaston** (1660–1724) was a well-known English moral philosopher of the eighteenth century. His assertion that an evildoer "lives a lie" is his most well-known (and misinterpreted) statement. (<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/wollaston-william-1660-1724/v-1>)

Bergson¹² and others, the creative side of artistic activity suggests comparable creativity in carrying out good deeds.

Conclusion

The historical development of Western ethical thought, traced from ancient Greece through the medieval period to modern philosophy, reveals the richness and inherent limitations of moral philosophy's evolution. While the progression from Greek city-state ethics to medieval Christian morality and finally to modern individualistic approaches demonstrates intellectual growth, several critical observations emerge.

First, while often presented as progress, the transition from collective to individual-based ethics may represent a pendulum swing rather than linear advancement. The Greek integration of individual virtue with civic duty offered a more holistic framework than is sometimes acknowledged, one that modern ethical theories might benefit from reconsidering.

Second, the medieval period, though often criticized for its theological constraints on ethical inquiry, contributed significantly to the development of applied ethics through casuistry. While the paper rightly notes the later degeneration of casuistic reasoning, its original contribution to bridging theoretical principles and practical application deserves greater recognition.

Third, the modern period's diverse theoretical approaches, from subjectivism to intuitionism, natural law to utilitarianism, reflect the freedom and fragmentation of post-medieval ethical thought. While intellectually rich, this diversity has perhaps come at the cost of moral consensus and shared ethical frameworks that earlier periods maintained.

The paper's treatment of evolutionary influences and value theory in modern ethics points to an essential but underdeveloped theme: the ongoing tension between universal ethical principles and historically contingent moral beliefs. This relationship between absolute and relative ethical claims remains a crucial challenge for contemporary moral philosophy.

Furthermore, while the document effectively traces the historical development of ethical thought, it perhaps understates the continuing influence of Greek and medieval concepts in modern ethical debates. Many contemporary moral discussions still grapple with questions first posed by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, suggesting both the enduring relevance of classical ethics and the possibly circular nature of moral philosophy's progress.

Finally, the emergence of new ethical challenges in our technological age, from artificial intelligence to environmental ethics, raises questions about whether traditional Western ethical frameworks, as outlined in this historical analysis, remain adequate for addressing contemporary moral dilemmas. It could be necessary for ethical discourse in the future to go beyond these historical paradigms while taking note of their advantages and disadvantages.

In conclusion, this historical review offers essential insight into the evolution of Western ethical thought. Still, it also emphasizes how moral philosophy must continue

¹² The French philosopher **Henri Bergson** (1859–1941) was one of the most well-known and significant figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/>)

to advance to meet modern issues while maintaining the knowledge acquired throughout history.

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