Voluntarism and the Shape of a History

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This article is concerned with the shape of the story of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophy as told by J. B. Schneewind in *The Invention of Autonomy*. After discussion of alternative possible shapes for such a story, the focus falls on the question to what extent, in Schneewind's account, strands of empiricist voluntarism and rationalist intellectualism are interwoven in Kant. This in turn leads to consideration of different types of voluntarism and their roles in early modern ethical theory.

The Invention of Autonomy[1] is a work of fundamental importance for the study of the history of modern moral philosophy to the end of the eighteenth century. In virtue of its richness and comprehensiveness it is likely to exercise a powerful influence on research and teaching in the subject for a generation or more. Many course syllabi, I expect, will be shaped by study of Schneewind's book. That being so, it seems both appropriate and wise to reflect on the shape of the history that he offers us; and that is the first thing I propose to do – though I will eventually narrow the focus of my remarks to a particular issue: namely, the role of voluntarism, theological voluntarism to begin with, in the story that Schneewind tells.

We face a question of interpretation at the outset. Schneewind tells us in his preface that the book began in an effort to understand the roots of the ethical thought of one particular philosopher, Immanuel Kant; and Kant does receive focused attention, particularly in the last quarter of the book, in a way that no other philosopher does. Clearly Schneewind gives us a story that has a shape in which many strands converge on Kant. Clearly also he thinks this is a shape that can legitimately be found in or given to the history. On the other hand, his stance in the historiographical epilogue to the book suggests to me that he would not claim that this is the only shape that could legitimately be given to the history with which he is concerned. What is not so clear to me is whether he would claim that the shape he gives to the history is the best, the most appropriate or most illuminating shape it could have, or whether his preference for it is grounded more subjectively, or at any rate less historiographically, in a special interest in Kant. I suppose I

[1] J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1998); cited hereafter by parenthetical page references in the text.

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am inviting Schneewind to answer this question. In the meantime I will speculate a bit, for my own account, about whether the shape he has given the history is objectively the best.

How good a story could we tell with its climax in some philosopher other than Kant? In Hume, for example? I suspect it would be harder to relate the whole history of the period to Hume as a climax – not mainly because of weaknesses in Hume's philosophy, but because Hume was much less absorptive and responsive than Kant in his relation to other philosophers. And that in turn may owe something to the fact that Kant was still developing his ethical theory in his seventies whereas Hume's received its fullest development before he was thirty.

But how about ending the story with Bentham? He was surely not a philosopher of the stature of Hume or Kant, but he is a canonical representative of a way of thinking in ethics that still had a bright future ahead of it at the end of the eighteenth century. And there certainly are strands in the history that lead to Bentham. He was by no means the first utilitarian, and there is a history of utilitarianism that goes back well into the seventeenth century, largely in writers of strongly theological (and usually Protestant) views. Schneewind makes this quite clear, but if one told the story with its climax in Bentham, one might have a good deal more to say about the early history of utilitarian ideas, especially in Continental writers of the eighteenth century. A story with this shape might also relate moral philosophy of the period more closely to some of the concrete social achievements of the Enlightenment – having more to say, for example, about Beccaria and the reform of punishment.

Perhaps we should even question whether the end of the eighteenth century is a particularly good stopping point for a period in a history of moral philosophy. If we were to carry the history on to the Berlin of Schleiermacher and Hegel in the 1820s and 1830s, and on to Kierkegaard, Mill and Nietzsche, the perfectionist strand in early modern moral philosophy would certainly get a more robust role in the story, and finish stronger, than in the story Schneewind tells.

I rather doubt that any of these alternative shapes for the history would satisfy me as well as the shape that Schneewind gives it – with the possible exception of the last-mentioned, more perfectionist one. His is before us anyway, and is exceptionally well developed; so let us focus on it. It is natural to compare the shape of his history with what can reasonably be called the canonical shape of the history of epistemology and metaphysics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Rationalism as thesis, Empiricism as antithesis, and Kant as synthesis. Those of us who study and teach the period have lots of cavils about that canonical shape, but we continue to give survey courses that are profoundly influenced by it – largely because of ways in which Kant

takes up ideas and problems and issues from his predecessors and offers solutions that seem to many of us to constitute advances on several important points.

How strongly analogous is Kant's role in the story Schneewind tells? If we abstract from quite a lot of detail, perhaps the following shape could be seen in, or imposed on, his book. Thesis: empiricist voluntarism. Antithesis: rationalist intellectualism. Synthesis: rationalist voluntarism in Kant. I expect Schneewind to be unhappy with this classification of Kant. Not with the rationalist part of it, for it is clear that Kant insists that ethical theory is not an empirical subject. But Schneewind says that Kant stands with 'the antivoluntarists . . . on the central issues' (p. 511). He also makes clear, however, that there are voluntarist aspects to Kant's views (pp. 496, 512, 524); and I believe that when certain distinctions are made about voluntarist positions, the voluntarist aspects can be seen to be of fundamental importance.

We shall come back to that, but there is another glaring problem for my suggestion of a tripartite structure in *The Invention of Autonomy*: there is not an obvious place in the tripartite structure for the third of the four parts of the book. Schneewind's account of the seventeenth century is indeed largely in terms of empiricist voluntarism in Part I and rationalist intellectualism in Part II. And in his account of the German eighteenth century before Kant in Part IV, Wolff is a rationalist intellectualist, and Crusius a somewhat less rationalist voluntarist. But his account of the British eighteenth century in Part III, including such distinguished moralists as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler and Hume, does not at first glance fit my tripartite schema at all. Indeed, I am tempted to say that Schneewind has imposed a less clear-cut shape on it than on the other parts of the book. He has given it the title, 'Toward a World on its Own', and his summary characterization of it is as tracing 'some efforts to show that morality can make do without God, or at least without his active presence, and some of the responses they occasioned' (p. 12).

This is the point on which I find Schneewind's structuring of his material least convincing. A majority of the most important and influential philosophers discussed in Part III were fervent theists. It is true that some of these theists give moral properties definitions and criteria that do not essentially involve reference to God, but that hardly shows that they were interested in morality's making do without God's active presence. I am particularly interested here in Schneewind's account of Hutcheson as defining moral right and wrong in terms of human feelings of approval and disapproval. On this view God's will or command does not directly constitute right and wrong; but it still seems that God is indirectly the voluntary author of moral properties, in that

it is due to God's contingent decision that we have the kind of moral feelings that we have rather than others (p. 338). And in Hutcheson's religious and cultural context, such rootage in God's creative will is surely accrediting (and strongly so) rather than discrediting to the authority of moral feeling, even if Hutcheson does not appeal to that as an argument.

Such reflections lead me to wonder whether Schneewind might have done better to have structured Part III also in terms of the debate between empiricist voluntarists and rationalist intellectualists. Among the rationalist intellectualists, I suppose, would be Clarke, Butler, Price and Reid. Among the empiricist voluntarists would be the sentimentalists: Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith; but this latter classification cannot be made plausible except with the aid of a distinction of types of voluntarism, and perhaps an extension of the term 'voluntarism', to which I now turn.

The distinction I wish to make is between voluntarism in theology and voluntarism in metaethics. It would be simpler in a way to call them theological and metaethical voluntarism; but it would also be misleading, because some of the voluntarism in metaethics is importantly theological too. Schneewind provides the materials for the distinction, and is usually quite sensitive to the considerations involved in it, but does not use it as a structuring distinction.

It is in theology that voluntarism enters Schneewind's story. Voluntarism in theology is an answer to a question about the way in which God makes decisions. Is God's understanding of moral properties (or more broadly, of values and normative properties) prior to God's will? Does God know what is good and right and therefore will it (and sometimes command it)? An affirmative answer to these questions is what is called intellectualism in the present context. Or is God's will prior to God's understanding in these matters? Does God will or command, and then know that what is divinely willed or commanded is good and right by virtue of having been willed by God? An affirmative answer to these latter questions is voluntarism in theology. It is in relation to these theological issues that Kant is clearly opposed to voluntarism.

Voluntarism in theology was increasingly popular from the late Middle Ages into the seventeenth century, perhaps especially among Protestants, but aroused vehement opposition, as richly documented by Schneewind. It was charged with portraying God as an arbitrary ruler, perhaps even a tyrant. This charge can be rebutted, I think, at least on behalf of some forms of voluntarism, if we make suitable discriminations in a spectrum of views from extreme voluntarism to extreme intellectualism. It might be thought that the most extreme voluntarist position is that there are no values and no normative

properties at all prior to God's willing that there be such. But in fact the most extreme voluntarist position adds that in establishing values and norms God's will cannot be guided by reasons of any sort at all – not even by reasons that do not depend on values or normative properties as such – because no reasons are prior to God's norm-giving will in the order of explanation. This has generally been taken to be the view of Descartes.[2] A voluntarism less extreme than that can allow that various features of actual and possible things and situations provide reasons for God's willing, even though none of them constitute values or normative properties that are independent of God's will; and perhaps that is enough to keep God from being an arbitrary ruler. More moderate still is a voluntarism that allows fundamental principles about the goodness or value of things to obtain independently of God's will, while still insisting that facts of ethical obligation or duty all depend on God's will or commands. Something of that sort seems to me, on Schneewind's showing and in fact, to have been the view of Suárez and Pufendorf, and it surely does not imply that God is an arbitrary ruler or decides without good reasons.

We may briefly note a corresponding distinction of types of intellectualism. The extreme is the view, held by Leibniz, that all the decisions of the divine will, optimific as they are, are morally necessary, and determined by God's ethical understanding. More moderate is the view that while God's decisions are in general guided, and in fundamental respects determined, by God's ethical understanding, some things (in matters of religious ritual, for instance) are obligatory or wrong solely by virtue of commands that God has in fact issued but might perfectly well not have issued. I take it that this more moderate intellectualism was the majority view at least until the fourteenth century.

Voluntarism in metaethics is addressed to a different sort of question, not in the first instance about God, but about the nature of ethical properties or concepts. Locke is a particularly illuminating example. It is in him that we see most clearly the connection of empiricism

[2] See especially René Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Antony Kenny, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1985–91), vol. 2, pp. 293–4. The interpretative issue is complicated by texts that seem to deny any priority relation between intellect and will in God. Appealing to the doctrine of the simplicity of the divine nature, Descartes says that 'in God, willing [and] understanding . . . are . . . the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually' (ibid., vol. 3, pp. 25–6; cf. ibid., p. 235). But willing typically seems to take pride of place in Descartes's descriptions of this single thing, to such an extent that I think the view mentioned in the text has been fairly ascribed to Descartes. See the helpful notes of Ferdinand Alquié in his edition of Descartes's *Œuvres philosophiques*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1963–73), vol. 1, p. 264, n. 2 (on a letter of 6 May 1630 to Mersenne), and vol. 2, p. 872, n. 2 (on the sixth section of Descartes's Replies to the Sixth Objections, which was cited at the outset of this note).

with voluntarism (pp. 144–7). Locke's empiricist theory about our acquisition of ideas demands an empirical pedigree for moral ideas. He develops such a pedigree, starting with an identification of good and evil as 'nothing but Pleasure or Pain, or that which occasions, or procures Pleasure or Pain to us', and going on to an identification of '*Morally Good and Evil*' as 'only the Conformity or Disagreement of our voluntary Actions to some Law, whereby Good or Evil is drawn on us, from the Will and Power of the Law-maker'.[3] Thus far, the analysis does not specifically involve God. It is the general idea of the powers and action of a legislator that is being used to define the moral properties of actions. And Locke explicitly recognizes three types of law by which the 'Rectitude, or Obliquity' of actions may be determined: divine law, civil law, and 'the Law of *Opinion* or *Reputation*'. God's legislation determines whether actions 'are Sins, or Duties'; but other ethical properties of actions are determined by human legislation.[4]

Voluntarism in theology and voluntarism in metaethics are obviously not totally independent of each other. Locke's metaethics marks him, I think, as a moderate voluntarist in theology. It might also be thought, conversely, that voluntarism in theology implies voluntarism in metaethics; but that does not follow. I think, for example, it is not clear that Descartes is a voluntarist in metaethics (in the technical sense I am giving that classification). As creator of the eternal truths, Descartes's God creates and determines the essences of all properties, including moral properties; that is the heart of Descartes's voluntarism in theology. But that does not tell us what the essences of moral properties are. Specifically, it does not tell us that their essence consists in some relation to the will of God, any more than it tells us that the essence of triangularity consists in a relation to the will of God. It tells us only that whatever the essences of triangularity and of goodness are, they were bestowed on them by God's omnipotent creative will.[5] We

[3] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford 1975), p. 351 (II.xxviii.5).

[4] Ibid., p. 352 (II.xxviii.7).

[5] I grant that it is tempting to see Descartes as implying something about what the essences of moral properties are when he says, 'because [God] resolved to prefer those things which thenceforth are to be done, for this very reason, in the words of Genesis, "they are very good"; that is, the reason for their goodness depends on the fact that he willed to make them so'. In the context, however, which situates this statement as part of Descartes's general theory of God's creation of the eternal truths, including 'truths, both mathematical and metaphysical', and of the dependence on God of everything, including every '*ratio* [reason or rational basis] of truth and goodness', and which evinces not the slightest wonderment about what we may mean when we talk about good and bad, or right and wrong, it seems at least equally plausible to read Descartes as thinking that the essence of goodness is defined by a *ratio* that has God's creative decision as its cause (perhaps even an 'efficient cause', as Descartes in a sense allows) rather than as its content. I translate here from René Descartes, *Œuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul

need not suppose that Descartes's voluntarism in theology is motivated by any metaethical concern for explaining what the natures or essences of moral properties are.

Once theological voluntarism becomes an explanatory device in metaethics, it is clear that the pivotal device might not necessarily be theological. Indeed that is already explicit in Locke, as we have seen; the grounding of the concepts of sin and duty in God's legislation is for Locke a special case of a broader explanation of moral properties of actions in terms of legislation, human as well as divine. Similarly Kant understands the moral law as legislation by rational will – by our will no less than by God's, but also by God's will no less than by ours (and in a rather more reliably whole-hearted way than by ours). This is one of the points at which Schneewind rightly notes that Kant 'is also deeply indebted to the voluntarists' (p. 512).

Schneewind is also right, I think, in suggesting a further extension of the concept of voluntarism when he speaks of a 'voluntarist aspect of sentimentalism' with which 'Kant plainly agreed . . . although he rejected the sentimentalist account of approval'. On the sentimentalists' view – and this is its voluntarist aspect – 'Moral goodness . . . is not discovered by the moral faculty but constituted by it. The moral sense is then like the Pufendorfian divine will that creates moral entities' (p. 524). This of course is not a theological form of voluntarism; the sentimentalists' moral faculty is a moral sense possessed by humans.

The relation of voluntarism to the will comes under stress in this application also, inasmuch as it is doubtful whether the moral sense, a faculty of feeling, should be considered a function of the will. Let us not worry about that. Let us define the basic idea of voluntarism in metaethics as the view that moral properties have their seat, not in the objects, states or actions to which they are ascribed, but in the valuing faculties of an intelligent being or beings (divine or non-divine), in the sense that they are constituted by some attitude or action of those faculties.

What then is the opposite of voluntarism in metaethics? Shall we call it intellectualism in metaethics? That would fit the emphasis on intellectual apprehension of moral facts in such leading anti-voluntarists as Clarke and Price. But it can hardly escape our attention that the central question in the metaethical context (unlike the original theological context) is not which faculties are involved, but what is the relation of the moral properties to whatever faculties of valuing beings are involved in the valuing of things. It is the question, as I put it before, of whether moral properties really have their seat in the things

Tannery, new edn. (Paris: Vrin, 1964), vol. 7, pp. 435–6, rather than using the translation in Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, p. 294.

to which they are ascribed, or only in the valuing faculties of beings that value them. In terms native to our own philosophical discourse, it is a question of realism versus anti-realism about moral properties, with the voluntarists as the anti-realists and the anti-voluntarists as the realists. Not every sort of realism is at issue here, for realism and anti-realism are not single views but families of views, though this is not the place to discuss their taxonomy. One point that should be made here is that voluntarism in metaethics need not be a sort of anti-realism that entails non-cognitivism. The voluntarist may allow that moral facts constituted by valuing faculties are objectively knowable – just as the phenomenalist may allow that physical facts constituted by perceiving faculties are objectively knowable.

It is my impression that claims about God's will were used in early modern metaethics mainly to explain the nature of obligation and related types of right and wrong; and that certainly seems to me the most plausible metaethical use of such claims. Voluntarism in an extended sense, however, employing claims about valuing faculties more generally, human as well as divine, was at least as often used to explain the nature of good and bad more generally. An example is provided early in our period by Hobbes's view that

> whatsoever is the object of any man's Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill* . . . For these words of Good [and] Evill . . . are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so . . .[6]

Likewise, at the end of Schneewind's story, 'A state of affairs can be good, Kant now holds, only if someone wills or desires it' (p. 496) – though of course, on Kant's view, a will or desire can ground goodness only if it is in conformity with the formal constraints of pure practical reason.

Indeed, I think it is fair to say that one of the most notable developments in early modern, and especially eighteenth-century, moral philosophy was the extension of broadly voluntaristic metaethical strategies from the realm of obligation to that of the goods and ills of human life – their goodness and badness being treated by so many philosophers as having their seat in human valuing faculties (if we count the faculties of pleasure and pain as valuing faculties, as I think we should in this context). This development seems to me strongly connected with what seems to me the most remarkable hole in the story that Schneewind tells, which is the paucity of contributions to our understanding of what the ancients called *eudaimonia* – that is, of what makes human life worth living. Butler has interesting and

[6] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Everyman's edn. (London, 1914), p. 24 (I.6).

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important original things to say about it, though it is not the centre of his moral philosophy. It was a more important topic for seventeenth-century perfectionists, but I doubt that their predominantly neo-stoical reflections offered much news on the subject to readers familiar with ancient moral philosophy. I must note one major exception to that assessment: Spinoza has very interesting and original things to say about *eudaimonia*.[7] But it is as hard to place him in the architectonic of Schneewind's story as to place *eudaimonia* there.

This is another feature of the story's structure about which I would like to ask Schneewind whether it is an artefact of his telling of the story, or whether he thinks there is simply, for good reasons or bad, a lacuna in early modern moral philosophy at this point. I suspect the latter is the case. This would not be the only topic on which Spinoza's ideas were pushed to the margin, or perhaps underground, in the early modern period, coming into their own only in the Romantic movement, which lies mostly outside the period about which Schneewind is writing. And many of the broadly voluntaristic metaethical accounts of good and bad that have been influential in modern moral philosophy leave relatively little that is interesting to be said about *eudaimonia*. Suppose I am well informed about my own psychology and the alternative ways of living that are available to me, consistent with my moral obligations, and that I know I prefer one of the alternatives, and believe I will have more pleasure in it than in the available alternatives. I am surely not alone in thinking it reasonable still to wonder whether it is foolish to believe that the way of life so preferred would be best for me, or whether such a preference rests on misguided values, and in believing that philosophy ought to have some intelligent and substantive assistance to offer for thinking about such questions. But there may be little or nothing intelligently substantive to say about them if the worthwhileness or goodness for me of a way of living simply consists in my wanting it or finding pleasure in it.

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[7] Under the names of *felicitas* and especially *beatitudo*.

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